TESTIMONIES IN HISTORIOGRAPHY AND ORAL HISTORY

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Introduction

Testimonies are always inescapably mediated through the cultures which form them – the ways in which they are articulated and received are inevitably related to varying forms of cultural expression (Jones 2019; Woods 2021). This chapter therefore explores some of these "cultures of testimony", emphasising the changing ways in which testimonies have been used and communicated historically, and analysing a variety of social contexts, from the academic and the juridical to the everyday. Since certain groups tend to use specific formulas and strategies for testifying, collective identities and a sense of belonging may often build upon the articulation and recognition of individual testimonies and eyewitness reports. From this perspective, testimonies are frequently central to the formation of collective memory.

In this connection, the valorisation of testimonies and their growing social and political relevance during the second half of the twentieth century are also deeply intertwined with post-war societies" responses to the history of the Holocaust. Trials of Nazi war criminals, especially the trial of Adolf Eichmann which took place in Jerusalem in 1961, led to a new public interest in the Holocaust, as well as a more widespread recognition of the suffering of eyewitnesses and survivors. Increasing interest in the history of the Holocaust since the 1970s, including the creation of new forms of representation such as Holocaust literature, the TV series *Holocaust*, oral history projects such as the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, and the related formation of a new memorial and commemorative culture, have all combined to grant testimonies a new significance during the past half-century.

However, although the history of the Holocaust and its aftermath have undoubtedly been central to contemporary understandings of testimonies at the beginning of the twenty-first

century, other groups of victims have also relied on testimonies in their political campaigns for the recognition of genocides, atrocities, the abuse and violation of human rights, and various forms of regime repression. In so-called "post-heroic" societies, experiences of victimhood are shared, and the acknowledgment of victim status becomes contested (Hansen et al. 2021). This phenomenon is reflected in the shifting memory and museum landscapes of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, where testimonies and their attributed authenticity have been turned into key tools for memory politics, truth and reconciliation commissions, state education and public history.

This new appreciation of witness reports and the aura of the witness must also be considered within the context of new media and media formats, such as television, broadcast interviews, and new technological possibilities for video and audio recording (Jones 2014; Keilbach 2012). However, these novel forms of mediated histories are also (and crucially) related to a new social understanding of the self and the role of the individual in history which began to take shape from the late 1970s onwards. Oral historians and grassroots initiatives such as the history workshop movement became interested in exploring "history from below", placing novel emphasis on new kinds of first-person historical accounts and "ego-documents"[1]; their findings unearthed fresh evidence for previously untold stories. Furthermore, these original approaches demonstrated that history could be experienced and told in different ways, leading to fresh insights into the significance of multi-perspectivity and the narrative construction of memory and history.

In the sections which follow, we address the ways in which historians have dealt with testimonies, the significance of the oral history movement in creating a new understanding of testimonies, why "authenticity" has become such a prominent theme in the evaluation of testimonies, and some of the methodological and ethical considerations which historians should bear in mind when they use testimonies in order to create new narratives.

Testimonies, Sources, Documents and Evidence

For an understanding of how historians use witness reports, the differentiation between the juridical, historical, religious, and moral witness is a very good starting point (Assmann 2007). According to this distinction, the religious witness is associated with Greek martyrdom and, in the Christian-Jewish tradition, with the confession of faith in the face of imminent danger to life. Secondly, Assmann anchors the historical witness in the ancient tradition of the messenger who reports a catastrophe as a survivor (*superstes*). These witnesses do not have to be "survivors", they can also be "still-living" persons. Assmann is therefore able to tie historical witnessing closely to the German concept of the "contemporary witness" and to the praxis of oral history. Finally, Assmann adopts Avishai Margalit's concept of the "moral witness", which is strongly linked to the testimony of Holocaust survivors, who embody an experience of suffering and can testify to the deeds of a "radically evil" regime (Margalit 2004, 147, 78). However, this ideal-type differentiation of various figures of witnesses and testimonies obscures the inter-discursive relationship between the historical and the legal concept of the witness, which is very important for the ways in which historians use testimonies (Saupe 2009; Saupe 2012).

If we consider the long and tangled history of witnessing, the first thing we notice is that scepticism towards eyewitnesses is as old as their invocation itself. Thus, Thucydides (c.454-396 BC) already noted in his introductory methodological remarks in *The Peloponnesian War* that his research had been laborious "because eye-witnesses did not report the same specific events in the same way, but according to individual partisanship or ability to remember" (Thucydides 1998, 14). For Thucydides, who was presumably inspired by juridical oratory and forensic rhetoric (Plant 1999), personal observation and credible eyewitnesses were more important than ear-witnesses. For the Greeks, certain knowledge was only possible

through observation, while the realm of hearing was assigned to the realm of *doxa*; uncertain opinion and hearsay (Blumenberg 1957). Nevertheless, Heraclitus (c.550-480 BC) apparently regarded seeing and hearing as equally important, as long as they were direct sensory impressions and based on "authentic" experiences: "The things of which there is sight, hearing, experience, I prefer." Moreover, what mattered more was the ability to skilfully and adequately express what was perceived in a "cultivated" language: "Eyes and ears are bad witnesses, if they have barbarian souls" (Heraclitus B107; for other ways of interpreting this fragment, see Clements 1999).

The cultural significance of testimonies in contemporary memory cultures conceals the fact that the classic introductions to the study of history and theories of historiography and history from the nineteenth and twentieth century do not devote very much space to reflection upon testimonies and eyewitnesses and their value for historians. For example, E. H. Carr's influential monograph *What is History?* (1961) begins with a chapter on "The Historian and His Facts", but the word "testimony" is never mentioned, and the term "eyewitness" appears only once. Robin George Collingwood's *The Idea of History* (1946; Collingwood 1994), which implies a comparison between historiographical and detective work in a short fictitious parable inspired by the novels of Agatha Christie, uses the words testimony and witness quite often, but downplays their value. In Germany, Johann Gustav Droysen in his *Historik* (*The Principles of History*, 1857 / 1977), which was ground-breaking in its hermeneutical approach to history, very rarely employs the terms "witness" (*Zeuge*) or "testimony" (*Zeugnis*), which he uses solely in the sense of historical relics. His intention was rather to reconstruct complex historical facts on the basis of 'sources", "materials", "traces" and "conceptions". Droysen's lectures made a major disciplinary intervention, not solely in terms of the development of the "historical-critical method", which he explained very clearly, but with regard to historical thinking in general. Nonetheless, this academic progress cannot be ascribed to historical

scholarship alone. Droysen's approach to history was informed by changing legal practice; namely, the "free evaluation of evidence" and the judicial recognition of "fully valid circumstantial evidence" which, after long discussions, were institutionalised in German legal procedure at the beginning of the 19th century. Paradoxically, this entailed a subjectification of the legal process, in that the discretion of the judge was now recognised (Stichweh 1994, 289). Confessions, as well as the witnesses themselves, thus lost some of their significance; they became just one of various forms of evidence. Applied to historiography, the free evaluation of evidence in court had its counterpart in the academically controlled, intersubjectively verifiable privilege of interpretation enjoyed by historians. In Germany, these interrelations between criminal law, legal practice and historical thinking not only influenced Droysen's *Historik*, but were also discussed at two conferences of experts in German studies, the "Germanistentagungen" which took place in 1846 and 1847 (Saupe 2009, 78-93).

R. G. Collingwood's *Idea of History*, which was based on a series of lectures held in the 1930s, written in the early 1940s, and posthumously published in 1946, is quite close to Droysen's conception of history in terms of its understanding of witnesses and testimonies. For Collingwood, history was a distinct form of knowledge, which made significant disciplinary progress in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Collingwood 1994). During this process, historical thought became "autonomous", as Collingwood claimed, and historians acquired their own "authority" in a practice that he grasped as the "re-enactment of past thought". The distinction between testimony and evidence was crucial to his differentiation between "scissors-and-paste" history, "critical history", and "history proper" (Couse 1990; Ahlskog 2016). Whereas in "scissors-and-paste" history, testimonies were based on trustworthy eyewitnesses and belief in authorities, critical history tried to interrogate testimonies with the aim of extracting facts from the sources; "a word indicating simply that it contains the statement without any implications as to its value" (Collingwood 1994, 259). In

contrast, Collingwood pointed out, "history as a science" was based on an ongoing interpretive procedure of question and answer. Historians now dealt with "statements" from the past, even when they related to material and archaeological remains. Furthermore, these statements were now used as evidence in an imaginative and inferential re-enactment of the past.

Not least because Collingwood conceived this approach as an interrogation rather than a hermeneutical conversation, it brought him to the notion that "belief in testimony […] stops where history begins" (Collingwood 1994, 308). This type of formulation helps us to understand why subsequent generations of oral historians and witnesses testifying and reporting what they saw, heard, experienced, and suffered, were regarded critically in the historical disciplines when the "era of the eyewitness" commenced (Wieviorka 1998), and oral history (and memory studies) emerged as a new field of research in the late 1970s. The problematic status of witnesses and their trustworthiness and credibility, and now, at the end of the twentieth century, their subjectivity and agency, had to be re-assessed.

A different picture can be found in Ernst Bernheim's *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode* ("Handbook on Historical Method"), which was first published in 1894, with several new editions following in subsequent years. This "introduction to historical method" stands for an empiricist, if not positivist approach to history, in which testimonies are construed as evidence and are therefore the main object of historical-critical inquiries and "source critique". Consequentially, Bernheim compared the method of "inner critique of sources" (*innere Quellenkritik*) with the practice of "examining magistrates" (*Untersuchungsrichter*), and also began to consider findings from the "psychology of testimony" (Stern 1903/1904; Stern 1939). This strengthened his positivist, criminologically-inspired methodological thinking. The witnesses and their powers of recollection were now called into question still further on the basis of empirical research. The reliability of eyewitnesses and the truthfulness of testimonies, and methods of establishing historical facts from single, serial, or contradictory pieces of

evidence constituted one of his main interests (Bernheim 1903, 237ff, 355ff, 407ff). Bernheim was also famous for his differentiation between two kinds of sources, "remnants" (*Überreste*) and "tradition", which was – in retrospect – part of the problem that historians of the nineteenth and twentieth century had with all forms of subjectivity: "Tradition is all that has remained of the incidents, passed through and reproduced by human conception; remnants are all that have been immediately preserved of the incidents." For Bernheim, first and foremost, historical work was the attempt to draw facts out from sources, and secondly, to present them in a coherent interpretation. Or, as his contemporaries, the French historians Charles Seignobos and Charles Victor Langlois, put it in their book *L'Introduction aux études historiques* (*Introduction to the Study of History*, 1897): "*L'histoire se fait avec des documents*" ("History is made with documents."). As important as memoirs and other subjective accounts of history were, they were also suspect, because of their bias and boundedness. Like Leopold von Ranke, Bernheim subjected historical testimonies to a critical post-mortem examination as to whether the narrators could really have perceived events as they claimed. Nevertheless, the quasi-legal questioning of witnesses via the historical-critical method was rarely able to appreciate the performative act of testifying and the authority that it lent to the witness.

The reception of the psychology of eyewitness accounts amongst historians was not limited to Germany. For the French historian Marc Bloch, the critical method inspired by this new research field was the best "weapon against slander, suspicion, and distrust" in an era "poisoned like no other by lies and false rumours," as he put it after the outbreak of World War II (Bloch 2000, 151). In his *Souvenirs de guerre* (*Memories of the War*, 1914-1915,) and *L'étrange défaite* (*The Curious Defeat*, 1940), Bloch himself had written about what he had observed during the two World Wars. With this new scientific approach to the psychology of eyewitness accounts, he hoped "to cleanse our image of the past of the errors obscuring it with a more adroit hand" (Bloch 1921).

Based on the psychology of testimony, Bloch argued that there is "no good eyewitness", and that there existed "hardly any account" which was "correct in all its details". Nevertheless, he reflected on the assumption that a "sincere witness who thinks he is speaking the truth deserves to be believed". Whether psychological research indicated that the witness was to be distrusted precisely in describing small and superficial details, or in synthetic statements that attempted to depict an "ensemble of the physical environs where the action he is relating took place", remained unclear. Bloch, however, went beyond psychological research when he inquired into how misperceptions and errors could turn into false reports, rumours and legends, and thus influence collective moods. From individual perception, Bloch wanted to progress to collective psychology, but he also stated that in the field of collective consciousness, experimental studies were practically unfeasible. Rather, he conceived World War I as a laboratory of social psychology, in which the practices and social logics of misinformation and disinformation could be studied.

Formative for Bloch's emphatic claim to truth was a comprehensive crisis of testimony during the First World War, in which rumours, false reports, and propaganda played an important role (Raulff 1995, 207-217). Similarly to Droysen and Collingwood, but in contrast to Bernheim, Bloch turned against the concept of "sources" and replaced it with the concepts of testimony and "traces", which he conceived as "witnesses against their will" (Bloch 2002, 71). With his focus on the truthfulness and credibility of testimonies, he was also able to reflect on how perspectivity influenced records. In a revealing way, this was simultaneously connected with a new interest in problems of historical probability (Raulff 1995, 184f.).

In sum, these very different positions attempted to "objectivise" what had been reported from the past. Subjectivity, or what might today be termed "personal" or "existential authenticity", was widely disdained by idealistic, materialist, hermeneutic, empiricist and

positivistic approaches to history. Generally speaking, the subjectivity of the witness was seen as a problem.

Victim testimonies and historiography after the Holocaust

After the Holocaust, the historical-critical questioning of the witness, which had focused on the investigation of individuals acting as "perpetrators", and with facts and structures justifying or leading to an action, in keeping with the term's epistemology, now faced hitherto unimagined problems. In the face of the victims of history, and particularly in the face of a survivor, the historical-critical method feels feeble and inadequate.

Thus, in Germany after 1945, the concept of the "*Zeitzeuge*" emerged, the "witnesses of their time" or "contemporary witness"; a quasi-untranslatable term which can be used for victims, bystanders and perpetrators alike. This figure entails, firstly, a renunciation of the legal semantics of testimony. Secondly, these "witnesses of their time" do not have to be eyewitnesses to an event or prominent historical actors. The figure of the contemporary witness thus served as a heuristic that integrated divergent sections of the population, and thus put their various experiences into perspective, including the narratives of perpetrators and tacit supporters as well as those of the victims (Saupe 2012).

Witnesses of the Holocaust did not only report crimes; they often testified to an emotional experience and experiences of suffering which were inaccessible to others. During the Eichmann trial, these experiences formed part of the trial, giving the broader public an insight into what had happened to the European Jews, thus supporting the creation of a collective memory (Yablonkah 2004). In other court cases, and particularly in German trials against Nazi perpetrators, survivor testimonies were often reduced to reports of indictable offences. Different experiences, national contexts and legal procedures have to be borne in mind when explaining the different uses of witness reports.

To some extent, the different juridical approaches to Holocaust witnesses had their counterpart in historians' use of testimonies – or rather, their attitudes towards how best to write a history of National Socialism and the Holocaust on the basis of "sources" or "testimonies". This can be seen, for example, in the controversy about the "historicisation of National Socialism" that took place between Saul Friedländer and Martin Broszat, which started in 1985 with Broszat's publication *Plädoyer für eine Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus* (*A Plea for the Historicization of National Socialism*; Friedländer/Broszat 1988). In this debate (a series of letters published in 1988), Broszat understood historicisation as a need to integrate the history of the Third Reich into theories of long-term modernisation processes and the history of everyday life under National Socialism. Furthermore – and this was the core of the ensuing debate – he emphasised a difference between the methodological approach of German historians, and interpretations by Jewish victims: while he claimed for himself and a younger generation of German historians a critical and rational historical understanding, he saw Friedländer as being influenced by a "mythical memory" that resulted from the recollection of the Holocaust within the Jewish community (Broszat 1988, 343). Friedländer argued that Broszat's plea for historicisation was close to a relativisation of the Holocaust, and, amongst other critical points, downplayed the role of German-Jewish historians after 1945. Generally, Broszat's statements had no real sense of multi-perspectivity, asserting that that Jewish historians were too much influenced by the Holocaust, while German historians of a younger generation were able to distance themselves from National Socialism and were therefore able to write impartially. Ten years later, Friedländer convincingly demonstrated that a history of the Holocaust which combined witness testimonies and official records was entirely practicable, using what he called an "integrated approach" (Friedländer 1997/2007).

Conversely, historiography in the last third of the twentieth century referred increasingly to court records. This was inspired by micro-histories and histories of everyday life, which drew attention to marginalised individuals and groups (Ginzburg 1980; Farge/Foucault 1982), and focused on new types of source material such as "ego-documents" (Schulze 1996). Particularly when it came to the process of coming to terms with the crimes of National Socialism, historians had to deal with legal procedures and court records. Thus, historians were invited to appear as experts in the trials of Nazi war criminals, as did Helmuth Krausnick, Hans Buchheim and Martin Broszat during the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial in 1963 (Wojak 1999). Later, historians used files of Nazi trials to engage both with the crimes of the Nazi regime, and with the process of coming to terms with the Nazi past in Germany and elsewhere. This was also reflected methodologically, especially when it came to the challenges of how historians should use testimonies given in the context of legal proceedings (Finger/Keller/Wirsching 2009; Stengel 2019). Last but not least, historians were also invited back to court to counter Holocaust deniers such as David Irving (Evans 2001).

This development might lead to the assumption that juridical reasoning in historiography was on the rise. But this was not the case. In the first place, a juridical understanding of truth in the sense of the historical-critical method had come under fire as simplistic historicism, and as a perspective that highlights power asymmetries. One outcome of this is that in introductions to history today, source criticism has become much less important than contextual knowledge based on theory and methodology. At the same time, the new interest in the subject, which has been observable since the 1970s, also means that the *what* of the account is of less interest than the *how* of the account. The focus has shifted towards socially contextualised processes of recollection, a concern with historical traumas, or the testimony of a story of survival. As we shall see, both oral history and work with Holocaust testimonies has contributed to this trend (Taubitz 2016). Geoffrey Hartman, for example, stressed that

survivors' accounts were not limited to "*verités de fait* (factual truth) or positivistic history". In this vein, Alice Hoffmann has distinguished between "reliability", the inner consistency of a story, and "validity", the congruence of an oral report with primary sources, to show that despite deceptive memories, a report can nevertheless be considered truthful (Hoffmann 1996). James E. Young argued that "actuality" (and its historical experience), rather than "factuality" (Young 1990, 158-171), was key when it came to interpreting evidence. Lawrence Langer also regarded aspects such as partial discrepancies in recollections unimportant:

> One preliminary issue remains, and that is the reliability of the memory on which these testimonies must draw for the accuracy and intensity of their details. […] Since testimonies are human documents rather than merely historical ones, the troubled interaction between past and present achieves a gravity that surpasses the concern with accuracy. Factual errors do occur from time to time, as do simple lapses; but they seem trivial in comparison to the complex layers of memory that give birth to the versions of the self […]. (Langer 1991, XV)

Statements like this one reflected the distinction between history in the mode of experience, recollection, memory, subjectivity and authenticity on the one hand and history and faithful, veracious accuracy on the other – a distinction which would also loom large when it came to the development of the youthful discipline of oral history.

Oral History as Testimony

Beyond the juridical sphere and the sub-discipline of Holocaust studies, twentieth- and twenty-first-century historians have most commonly engaged with personal testimonies within the

overarching context of the "oral history" movement, conducting an extended interview or series of interviews with eyewitnesses who personally experienced the periods or events under consideration. Since the concluding decades of the twentieth century, oral history methodologies and approaches have thus presented historians with unparalleled new opportunities to elicit "life (hi)stories", "autobiographical testimonies", or "memory narratives" which can shed fresh light on the history of the recent past.[2] Although the oral history movement was explicitly intended from its inception in the postwar period to give a voice to those who had previously been "hidden from history", especially women, the working classes, and other marginalised minorities (Abrams 2010, 4), and although survivors of traumatic events, including war and genocide, have typically held a privileged position in the "moral hierarchy" established around such forms of witnessing (cf. Assmann 2006), testimonies pertaining to narrators whose views or actions appear more intrinsically problematic (including perpetrators, political elites, and right-wing extremist activists) are also well-represented within the annals of oral history research. Indeed, some of the most seminal and thought-provoking explorations of ethical and interpersonal considerations during the oral history interview and subsequent interpretative process have been penned by those scholars who were forced to confront their personal antipathy towards interviewees whose actions or worldview they perceived as morally repugnant – for instance, Katherine Blee's analysis of the women of the Ku Klux Klan, or Daniel James's encounter with an unabashedly right-wing Peronist during his sojourn in an Argentine meat-packing community (Blee 1991; Blee 1998; James 2001). Moreover, because "best practice" in oral history can take many forms, rather than having solidified into any particular dogma, the sub-discipline is still constantly evolving to meet fresh challenges, incorporating any number of different interdisciplinary approaches, including those gleaned from psychology, sociology, anthropology, literature, linguistics, cultural studies, and even the performing arts.[3] The flexibility of oral history's interpretative

frameworks can therefore provide a valuable model for practitioners working with testimony in other contexts, as well as calling into question some of the more entrenched attitudes towards testimony which have emerged in recent years – for instance, "dismissing perpetrator testimony because it is self-serving or an affront to victims and their testimony, downgrading individuals' accounts for being overly subjective or, conversely, granting individual testimony the leading role in understanding the past because of its power to engage" (Woods 2020).

This section begins by giving a brief account of the oral history movement's historical origins and its most salient characteristics in the present day. We then move on to consider two current debates as case studies, focusing on modern German history; namely, the value and pitfalls of engaging with perpetrator testimony, and the perception in certain contexts of "the eyewitness as the enemy of the historian". The section then concludes by reflecting on some of the ethical and practical considerations which historians working with oral history testimonies need to take into account on a regular basis.

Although the oral history movement developed somewhat differently in different countries, its roots generally lay in the history workshop and labour history movements, as well as drawing on earlier studies in folklore and ethnology which had tended to privilege the spoken word (Abrams 2010, 4-5; Thompson 2000). We can therefore see the movement as part of that broader postwar historiographical revolution which led scholars to turn their attention away from mainstream political history, shaped by the actions of elites, and to focus instead upon the social and cultural history of everyday life and "ordinary people" (cf. Lüdtke 1995; Niethammer 1980). Feminist historians also saw the oral history movement as providing an opportunity to address some of the fundamental problems of power imbalance and unequal authority which existed within the academy, not only because this new method allowed historians to seek out the personal voices of those, including women, who had rarely been

included in the elite-dominated and predominantly patriarchal historical record, but also because it promised to establish a relationship of greater reciprocity and intellectual equality between historian and narrator.[4]

Nevertheless, this postwar "renaissance of memory" as a source for "people's history" did not find universal favour with the contemporary academic establishment (Perks and Thomson 2006, 1-3). Indeed, many of the most celebrated early practitioners and pioneers of oral history, such as the American broadcaster Studs Terkel and the English pastoralist writer Ronald Blythe, worked either on the margins or completely beyond the confines of the traditional academy, and the left-wing credentials of many of those budding oral historians who did hold university positions did not endear them to a more conservatively-minded historical establishment (Abrams 2010, 4-5). This state of affairs initially led oral historians to present a "defensive" face to the world, as they attempted to counter prevailing criticisms regarding the potential subjectivity and fallibility of their narrators' testimonies. Prominent oral historians such as Paul Thompson, Ronald Grele, and Trevor Lummis took the lead in characterising oral history as primarily "reconstructive", arguing for its worth in terms of recovering "new" historical facts which other types of primary evidence could never have supplied (e.g. Thompson 2000, Grele 1998, Lummis 1998). Using this paradigm, oral history could be hailed as granting fresh insight into the histories of social groups which had previously been marginalised, or illuminating the history of dictatorships through the memories of their citizens, whose recollections could be used as a crucial corrective to the evidence hoarded in state-manipulated archives, preserving memories of repression or state terrorism which might otherwise be lost for good (Perks and Thomson 2006, 334). This fundamentally defensive or corroborative stance regarding the value of oral history testimonies also led oral historians to try to give their research a veneer of social-scientific legitimation through strategies such as only using statistically representative samples of interviewees, or only using material which

could be cross-referenced and tested against other sources (Abrams 2010, 5-6). In this way, they hoped that the historical establishment's suspicions regarding the allegedly unverifiable and unreliable nature of the human memories which underlay these novel sources might ultimately be allayed.[5]

It was only with the advent of the "cultural turn" in the humanities and social sciences that oral historians began to gain more confidence, developing "post-positivist" approaches to such questions of memory and subjectivity (Perks and Thomson 2006, 3-8; cf. Samuel and Thompson 1990). Now, the fact that oral history testimonies or "memory stories" were inherently fluid and contingent need no longer be perceived as an intrinsic failing, but rather as something to be celebrated, providing historians with a unique form of knowledge (James 2006, 85). No longer were accounts of oral history predicated upon, and an assertion of, the movement's rights against "the worldwide professional old guard" and their "disparaging comments about young men [*sic*] tramping the streets with tape recorders" (Thompson 2000, 79-80). Rather, as pioneering oral historians such as Alessandro Portelli and Luisa Passerini had begun to emphasise, oral history testimonies were "credible… with a *different* credibility… The importance of oral testimony may often lie not in its adherence to facts but rather in its divergence from them, where imagination, symbolism, desire break in" (Portelli 1991, 51; cf. Passerini 1987). When it came to the claims of authenticity, oral history was now concerned less with "the telling of the truth", and more with "the truth of the telling", focusing on the ways in which people articulated subjective experiences about the past "through the prism of the present", influenced by their current cultural environment, personal experiences, and prevalent political discourses (Abrams 2010, 6). Thus, as Mary Fulbrook has asserted, while oral historians do not suggest that such testimonies can ever tell us "how it really was", they do tell us a great deal about the ways in which the narrators desired to present themselves in different contexts, including their inner conflicts and ambivalences (Fulbrook 2011, 16).

From the late 1980s onwards, such reflections were also complemented by shifts in oral historians' perceptions of the function of the historian *qua* interviewer, and their own role in the process of research and analysis. Taking on new ideas from the social sciences, including postmodern anthropological approaches to the complex authority relations inherent in creating an oral "text", reflexivity and intersubjectivity began to be seen as crucial elements in the relationship between the interviewer and the narrator (James 2006, 86; Yow 2006). From this perspective, the fundamental interdisciplinarity of oral history allowed any number of nuanced, multi-faceted approaches to be used when analysing the testimonies in question, treating the fallibility and subjectivity of narrators' personal memories as an opportunity rather than a problem, and encouraging interviewees to think about the past from their own viewpoint and reflect upon what they felt about it in the present (Abrams 2010, 22-3; Abrams 2014; cf. Göpfert 1996). In this sense, every interview can be seen as a three-way interaction or "cultural circuit" between "the respondent and him or herself… the interviewer and the respondent and… the respondent and cultural discourses of the present and the past", in which personal memories of events and public representations of them can inform one another, with broader cultural discourses and pressures shaping the narrator's testimony either consciously or subconsciously (Abrams 2010, 59). Examples might include veterans of the First and Second World Wars moulding their memories in accordance with prevailing discourses regarding masculinity and heroism, or even recounting episodes from popular films as if they had personally experienced them (e.g. Thomson 2006; Welzer et al. 2002, 127-8), but they might equally encompass a Holocaust survivor's attempt to process the pain and trauma of her experiences by recasting the events surrounding the death of family members in ways which lessened the pain of loss and survivor's guilt (Roseman 2006).

Whatever the context, the interviewer should be aware that narrators will generally strive in their testimonies to attain "composure", moulding their narrative in such a way as to

sustain their current discourses of selfhood. Meanwhile, researchers also need to be reflexive, acknowledging their own active, creative role in the process of creating meaning out of memory. No piece of oral testimony will ever be identical to another, and the interaction between the same narrator and another interviewer (or the same interviewer at a different point in their life) might create a very different testimony (Abrams 2010, 54-77). It is only through embracing the "dialogic [and] relational, discursive and creative" nature of these testimonies (Abrams 2010, 16), fully grasping the intersubjectivity between the interviewer's subject position and that of the narrator, that we can appreciate the worth of oral history testimony as a unique type of source, which involves the active creation of memory in the moment, whilst also telling us a great deal about the narrator and the ways in which they seek to position themselves and their narratives in the social world (Abrams 2010, 23, 53).

It is in this context, however, that the subjectivity of some narrators' testimonies can still seem to present historians with an ethical conundrum – namely, when it comes to considering perpetrator testimonies, or the testimonies of those (such as youthful Hitler Youth leaders, or former pupils of Nazi elite schools) who are perceived as balancing on the cusp between innocence and implication (Roche 2015; cf. Rosentahl 1986; Stargardt 2005; Rosenbaum 2014). As Sibylle Schmidt has recently observed, because testimonies (including oral histories) have often been used not only in the service of eliciting historical truth, but also for purposes of ethical learning and political emancipation, granting the figure of the eyewitness a certain moral authority, it can often seem morally problematic and "conceptually contradictory" to lend perpetrators' testimony any credence (Schmidt 2017, 87; see also the chapter by Sue Vice and Ute Hirsekorn in this volume). Moreover, as Roger Woods has noted, "when it comes to perpetrator testimony, any benign notion of a community of memory, in which individual autobiographical memories are networked with others like a family so that they confirm and

support each other, loses relevance and needs to be set aside in favour of what has been called a 'memory cartel' that produces more calculated and self-serving testimony" (Woods 2020, 12). Thus, there seems to be an ever-present danger that, in allowing a narrator who may have been a perpetrator to put forward their viewpoint, and accepting their "epistemic authority", we risk doing further violence to their victims, allowing them to be violated and dehumanised in memory as they had once been in fact (Schmidt 2017, 99-100; Jones 2019, 264-8).[6]

Yet, at the same time, oral history can provide us with valuable information when it comes to gaining a fuller understanding of the social structures surrounding not only those perpetrators whose acts were aided and abetted by state dictatorships, but also those from extremist subcultures or racial hate groups, which tend to be secretive and highly transient. Memory narratives of this kind can provide historical opportunities, so long as the researcher also scrutinises them carefully, paying close attention to the ways in which such testimonies are fundamentally shaped by public censure, laced with deceptive information, disingenuous denials of culpability, and dubious assumptions regarding political motivations (Blee 1998, 333-4).

Such tendencies are also prevalent in the testimonies of populations who were more generally party to genocide or to extreme state violence against minorities. For example, as studies of "ordinary Germans" during the Third Reich have shown, there is a widespread tendency for narrators to "depoliticise" their memories, severing recollections of personal actions from their political context (e.g. Rosenthal 1990; Rosentahl 1991; Bergerson 2004; Philipp 2010; Roche 2021, 394-410). Strategies employed by narrators in this context include distancing oneself from National Socialism and its crimes, often demonising representatives of the Nazi state such as Party officials, the SS, or a "small group of madmen" at the top of the regime's hierarchy, and blaming them entirely for the crimes of the Third Reich, as well as portraying Hitler as an all-powerful dictator who created a totalitarian system of government

in which it was impossible for individuals to resist injustice or fail to obey orders (Philipp 2010; cf. Jarausch and Geyer 2003, 29-30; Moeller 2005; Assmann 2006; Fulbrook and Rublack 2010, 265-6). Eyewitnesses rail against the "stolen years" which Nazism allegedly took from them, presenting themselves either as anti-Nazi heroes or as victims of the regime, claiming that they "never knew anything" about the Holocaust, and clearly differentiating themselves through "othering" from those in the community whom they claim were the "real" "150-%" Nazis (Philipp 2010, 469-70; Welzer et al. 2002, 54-5, 82-5).[7]

Such reservations have also led to oral history testimonies generally being treated with more suspicion in Germany, not least because eyewitnesses' recollections of the twentieth century have been extensively commandeered by documentary film-makers such as Guido Knopp, who appear to be more interested in generating media-driven affect and creating emotive stimuli than engaging with more sober and analytical historical interpretations (Roche 2015, 570; Jarausch and Sabrow 2002; Wievorka 2006, 130-1; Sabrow 2012) . These anxieties have led professional historians to have frequent recourse to the image of "the eyewitness as the enemy of the historian" (*der Zeitzeuge als Feind des Historikers*), deriding the ZDF television documentaries in which such narrators appear as a form of "historical pornography" (Kansteiner 2012, 343). In this context, scholars fear that these contemporary witnesses have become mere "artefacts of the media consumer society" (Classen 2012), peddling comforting narratives of victimhood which seek to absolve both the individual narrator, and German society at large, from its moral responsibilities towards the true victims of Nazi persecution. There seems to be an underlying fear here that, by giving those narrators who were neither victims of the Holocaust nor persecuted by the National Socialist regime the opportunity to indulge in a form of "retrospective self-victimization" that "reduce[s] personal agency to a morally innocent muddling through the constraints of dictatorship and war", and portrays the Second World War as a conflict "that Hitler had started but everyone lost", Germany's claim

to moral credibility in the present may be undermined (Jarausch and Geyer 2003, 338; Föllmer 2013, 1108; Moeller 2001, 3).

Nevertheless, even in this rather fraught context, oral historians have begun to attempt to engage with these testimonies on their own terms (cf. Roche 2015), and the huge database of interviews collected by the ZDF media archive has subsequently provided fresh material for new research projects, just as it will enable research into these narrators' life histories to continue, even after all those who experienced life in the Third Reich at first hand have died (cf. Steinbacher 2012; Philipp 2010). Thus, while this brief case study can only shed light on one small facet of the contested memory landscape which European historians have recently begun to map (cf. Welzer 2007), it can be seen as emblematic of the ways in which varied national contexts and political trends can impact oral history cultures, affecting the amount of trust and authority invested in this form of testimony within different states and societies. As oral historians embark upon their research, then, they should ensure that they are familiar both with the most significant frictions and tensions which pertain to the cultural context within which they are working, and with the political soil in which their narrators' lives are necessarily embedded.[8]

This reflection aptly brings us to the final part of this section: namely, an exploration of some of the key ethical and practical considerations with which any oral historian should be familiar before embarking on their research. The following account draws in particular upon Valerie Raleigh Yow's *Recording Oral History* (2005), a seminal guide which we have found invaluable during our own research.[9]

In general, the available handbooks tend to advise interviewers to cultivate an attitude of interpersonal empathy during the interview, in order to ensure that the encounter is a communicative success, although differences in ideology between interviewer and narrator

may sometimes be less than conducive to this (as mentioned above; cf. Abrams 2010, 10, 61; Yow 2006, 66). Nevertheless, as Herbert and Irene Rubin have put it: "You don't have to be a woman to interview women, or a sumo wrestler to interview sumo wrestlers. But if you are going to have to cross social gaps and go where you are ignorant, you have to recognise and deal with cultural barriers to communication. And you have to accept that how you are seen by the person being interviewed will affect what is said" (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, 39). Above all, the interviewer needs to be honest about their role in the process, "accepting" the informant, and giving priority to what they wish to tell, rather than what the researcher wants them to say (Portelli 2006, 39). From this perspective, it may well be helpful for the historian to document their own interview experience self-reflexively, identifying places where they could have listened or intervened more effectively, or instances where the interview relationship broke down (cf. James 2006).

Careful planning, including preparation of a suite of open-ended questions which will elicit as wide a range of relevant information from the narrator as possible, is also crucial – after all, if the interviewer places the recorded testimonies and/or transcripts in an institutional repository, they may subsequently be useful to other researchers who may be interested in very different aspects of their narration. The interviewer should avoid slang, specialist academic terms, emotionally-laden language, and leading questions, whilst also being aware of the ways in which background reading may influence them to stay with their original hypotheses, rather than framing new ones as they hear the testimony. Non-threatening topics should be explored first, but the schema of questions should not be inflexible – one must be ready for the emergence of unexpected tangents. In general, the interviewer should guide the narrator through the process, explaining why they are interested in certain lines of enquiry, and showing willingness to listen without immediate judgement, even when they cannot fully empathise.

Above all, the interviewer must remember to be aware of the power relationship which invests them with more social authority than the narrator, and that race, class, gender, age, status, ethnicity, and relative levels of education may all have an impact on interpersonal relations during the interview process. They therefore need to foster an atmosphere of encouraging, non-critical listening based on mutual support, which will be crucial both for a productive interview and for the narrator's self-esteem.[10] When reflecting on the interview process, questions such as "What am I feeling about this narrator?", "How does my own ideology affect this process? What group outside of the process am I identifying with?", and "What are the effects on me as I go about this research? How are my reactions impinging on the research?" can also be helpful for orientation purposes (Yow 2005, 169).

Ultimately, the oral history interview is much more than the creation of a source, since the testimony which emerges is the unique result of a collaboration between two persons which can never be identically replicated. It allows for the building of complex interpersonal relationships, and the creation of multifaceted historical documents embedded within the purview of wider social forces. As such, oral history methodologies represent a great opportunity for those interested in eliciting or analysing historical testimony – but one which also involves great responsibility, both to one's narrators, and to one's readers.

Authenticity and accuracy

As we have shown, authenticity is one of the key concepts relating to historians' use of testimony, even though its valuation and problematisation has its own history. In the long run, a broadened understanding of history has led to a new valuation of the personal experiences of different social classes and actors, and therefore subjectivity, expressions of existential authenticity and the construction of the self have become a genuine research interest.

Nevertheless, this new interest has always been problematised by concerns regarding the truth of the telling, the verification of facts, and the accuracy of the historian's narration.

Christopher R. Browning's book *Remembering Survival* has made it clear that a critical evaluation of sources, methodological concerns, and respect for those giving accounts can be entirely compatible with reconstructing events based on survivor testimonies (Browning 2010). Using oral history interviews conducted at different times, survivors' testimonies in court, and conventional archive material, the book reconstructs the story of life in a forced labour camp in Poland. Browning emphasises a now almost classic distinction between "authenticity" and "factual accuracy", between well-meaning sincerity and truthfulness on the part of the witnesses, in contrast to the accuracy he believed should be sought in the interpretation of the witness accounts:

> For the most part, the emphasis is upon the "authenticity" of survivor accounts. In contrast, the issue of "factual accuracy" in survivor accounts is generally deemphasized. Indeed, to intrude upon the survivors' memories with such a banal or mundane concern is deemed irrelevant and inappropriate, or even insensitive and disrespectful. […H]owever, I am concerned not only with "authenticity", but also with "factual accuracy". (Browning 2010, 8)

Browning goes on to emphasise the moral obligation to use the reports of witnesses for the reconstruction of historical events as well. Otherwise, he argues, historians fail to describe scarcely documented events from the Holocaust (see also Ginzburg 1992), and ultimately also – at least in the case that he researched – allow the reasoning of German courts to go unchallenged, which (in this instance from 1972) cast doubt on the credibility of the survivors'

testimonies, and thus saw the court justifying the acquittal of a Nazi perpetrator who was responsible for numerous murders (Browning 2010, 1-3).

The differentiation between authenticity and accuracy in the literature on Holocaust testimonies remains ambivalent. Often, the notion of authenticity has a slightly pejorative undertone: while Browning, for example, recognises positions that are interested in the difference of personal histories as recounted and experienced, in narrative constructions and collective memory or trauma, he implies that they in fact miss the essential point. Contrary to the psychology of testimony and voices from the field of oral history and memory studies, he is able convincingly to demonstrate that testimonies given by the same people over a long period of time in different contexts do not diverge as greatly as is often claimed.

Browning responds to the "horror and disbelief" (Saul Friedländer's *Fassungslosigkeit*) produced by reports of the Holocaust with an unembellished, chronological description of "what was the case". This is the source of much of the moral strength of his book (Fulda 2013). In literary terms, his narrative employs a realistic narrative style interspersed with his reflections as a historian. In certain passages, Browning adopts the role of an examining magistrate retroactively convicting the perpetrators – including Walther Becker, who was acquitted by a German court – in order to bring justice in retrospect to the surviving witnesses. But his reasoning is modelled less on a cross-examination than an attempt to lend plausibility to the many different and sometimes contradictory survivor accounts. One way he does this is by linking the various versions, rather than pitting them against one another. And despite Browning's concern with reconstructing events as accurately as possible, he does also appeal to the moral force of the accounts of Holocaust survivors who sought, repeatedly and at different points in time, to articulate the "indescribable".

Going beyond Browning, we can therefore say that the authenticity of the witness stems not only from the fact that they can bear witness to events, but also from what followed; their

repeated testimony in different contexts. Witnesses acquire authenticity through their whole life story, even maintaining this through the various versions of the self that they might chart over time.

As we have seen, from the 1970s onwards, oral history and memory studies attributed a new value to testimonies that granted a new relevance to subjectivity and privileged "the truth of the telling" in contrast to "the telling of the truth". Contrasting juxtapositions between "authenticity" and "accuracy" overlook the fact that the attribution of authenticity, generally speaking, always possesses two dimensions: object-related authenticity – in the sense of something being materially genuine, verified as genuine, or represented adequately – and subjective or existential authenticity – as an expression of being true to oneself or in connection with an individual, rarely describable experience.

The attribution of authenticity to historical representations (not only to witnesses, but also to memoirs, historical novels and films, etc.) is, above all, tied to mediated (self)representation and must be understood as a result of media effects (Saupe 2016; Jones 2014). It always involves a relationship between representation and that which is independent of representation, which gives rise to the impression of immediacy. This has led to a paradoxical definition of the term, insofar as "that which is represented is presented as something that has not been represented" (Strub 1997, 9). The authentic is perceived as "something that has not been represented" because it is associated with immediacy. The constitutive process of communication and reception via a particular medium recedes into the background.

As Hanno Loewy and Bernhard Moltmann have remarked: "There is no such thing as authentic memory." Rather, they add, "authentic memory only [exists] as an alienation of the actual event, as pain, as the experience of rupture, as the ongoing disruption of a discourse that erroneously believes that it can catch hold of the past" (Loewy/Moltmann 1996, 7). This link

between authenticity, pain and suffering can be generalised. As Helmut Lethen argues, pain is a "certain indicator" of authenticity because in the expression of pain, humans appear as "unmasked beings" (Lethen 1996, 221). This is perceived as proof that this expression is genuine. To this extent, the rise of authenticity as a concept is not only an expression of ongoing individualisation; it is also closely tied to traumatic experiences, psychoanalytic discourse, and processes of victimisation.

Conclusion: Where Next?

As we have seen, testimony – both as a concept, and as a construct upon which collective identities may be based – has a rich and chequered history. Historians' methods and motives for engaging with testimonies – whether those of survivors, "ordinary people", or those created in a courtroom context – have varied widely, and their modes of engagement have ranged from utter scepticism to wholehearted endorsement, and everything in between. We will close our essay with a few reflections on what the future might hold in store for historians' use of testimony.

As the shadows of the Holocaust lengthen, and the very last survivors of the Shoah pass away, we are swiftly entering the period of "post-memory" (cf. Hirsch 2012). Scholars, educators, and interested citizens alike will be challenged with finding new ways of keeping survivor testimonies "alive", or of supplementing them with accounts by survivors' descendants. From this perspective, it is possible that the term "testimony", and historians' engagement with it, will become more multivalent and multifarious than ever before. And, as new genocides and atrocities suffered by groups such as the Rohingya and the Uyghur peoples pass into the realm of historical enquiry, their testimonies will also form a crucial part of this discursive tapestry. Meanwhile, as pandemics and climate change affect more and more of the globe, survivors of these more or less "natural" disasters will add their voices to the chorus of

witnesses to human desperation, suffering, and survival. At the same time, as long as legal procedures and mechanisms of state justice persist, the study and analysis of legal testimonies themselves will also remain a crucial part of the historian's standard toolkit, sustaining and revivifying the link which courtroom forensics and the "forensics of history" have shared since time immemorial.

Meanwhile, oral history, as it comes of age and is fully accepted into the disciplinary mainstream, will face new challenges and cultural impetus. Questions of "authenticity", ethics and subjectivity necessarily become both more pressing and more contested in an era of "fake news", social media echo-chambers and rising populism. For example, does the very idea of a subversive "history from below" risk being appropriated by those who cry "victimhood", "marginalisation" and "cancellation" simply because they are not being given the free rein which they so desire to peddle a new politics of hate?

At the same time, new social movements and technologies can potentially provide scope for further freeing and therapeutic uses of oral history – whether in conserving the voices of those who suffer racial or gender-based oppression and those who are involved with social justice initiatives (such as the protagonists of the Black Lives Matter protests and LGBTQIA+ activists), or by bringing new meaning to the lives of the elderly in nursing homes. Even those who desire to comprehend the anatomy of activism on the extremes of the political spectrum, including the Alt-right, may find new, ethical yet distanced ways to engage with these new interlocutors, just as Katherine Blee did in her analysis of the women of the Ku Klux Klan three decades or more ago.

One thing, however, is certain: historians' uses of testimony will continue to be rich, multifaceted, and multi-perspectival – and the historiographical methodologies associated with testimony are likely to evolve in surprising and fascinating new ways, even before the decade is out.

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[1] Ego-documents are sources in which self-perception and representation of the historical subject are expressed in his or her environment. This can take place in voluntary or involuntary form, that is, in direct texts such as autobiographies, diaries, and letters, or in

statements not planned for transmission in an administrative context, such as criminal trial records – see e.g. Schulze 2010.

[2] On the different terminologies which may be used for the narratives co-created by the narrator and the interviewer, see e.g. Thompson 2000, xi-xii.

[3] The best synoptic overviews of oral history's practical and theoretical development can be found in Abrams 2010, and the reader edited by Perks and Thomson (2006), which contains many of the most foundational texts on oral history.

[4] This promise could not necessarily be realised in practice, but it remained an important ideological factor in many early feminist oral histories (Abrams 2010, 71-4; cf. Anderson and Jack 2006).

[5] For further examples of oral historians writing in this defensive or corroborative mode, see Tonkin 1992, Ritchie 2003, Yow 2005.

[6] See further Sabrow (2012) and Uhl (2012), who suggest that perpetration is incompatible with providing legitimate historical testimony as a *Zeitzeuge* ("contemporary witness").

[7] Such mechanisms of exculpation often date back to immediate postwar discourses devised to get around the Allied "denazification" programme, but similar attempts to distance and evade moral responsibility can be found in the aftermath of other criminal regimes (cf. Dack 2016; Müller 2016; Schulte 2018).

[8] For a current project which is investigating such questions in more detail, see Mary Fulbrook and Stephanie Bird's work on 'Compromised Identities: Reflections on Perpetration and Complicity under Nazism' (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies/compromised-identities-reflections-perpetration-and-complicity-under-nazism).

[9] N.B. These observations are by no means intended to replace such a guide, but merely to highlight a few areas of good practice. It is also crucial to obtain relevant ethical and legal

permissions from the narrators themselves, and from the institution or body which is funding and/or supporting the research.

[10] The information in this paragraph and the one above summarises key points from Yow (2005), Chapters 3 and 4; p. 115 also provides a handy "checklist for critiquing interviewing skills".