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Oral History as part of today's research – a citizen science study of the family history of natives and migrants and their relationship to Nazi history

Inka Engel

Inka Engel, University Koblenz-Landau

inka.engel@gmail.com

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Oral History as part of today's research – a citizen science study of the family history of natives and migrants and their relationship to Nazi history

Inka Engel¹

Due to its history, Germany bears a special responsibility never to forget the crimes of the Holocaust and to actively combat anti-Semitism and racism. The critical examination of the Nazi past is deeply rooted in German culture of remembrance and is intended to sensitise future generations to the values of democracy, tolerance and humanity. This responsibility is reflected not only in the maintenance of memorials and the funding of educational projects, but also in the obligation to stand up for human rights worldwide and to resolutely oppose hatred and discrimination. The experience of the Holocaust shows that the defence of fundamental democratic values must never be taken for granted. In modern immigration societies such as Germany, it is becoming increasingly important to make visible the historical backgrounds of both German and non-German family histories. This examination is based on mutual respect and appreciation of different experiences, which are considered an indispensable part of living together in solidarity in a democratic society. The focus is on two central perspectives: on the one hand, German history, which, as a formative collective narrative, shapes the identity of mainstream society, and on the other hand, the individual experiences of migrant families, which are strongly influenced by political, cultural and historical conditions.

This entails two major tasks: On the one hand, future generations in Germany must actively reflect on the crimes of National Socialism not only in public discourse but also within their families. On the other hand, it is crucial that migrant families also recognise that the crimes committed against the background of Nazi ideology are an important part of the shared historical memory of the society to which they now belong.

Oral history is an important method for introducing personal experiences and memories into scientific discourse. In the context of the Holocaust and Nazi history, it serves to record the stories of contemporary witnesses, who convey an unadulterated perspective on historical events. In the #weitergedenken project BEFEM: Remembering May Change, But Never Be Lost, oral history is used in an innovative way by not only collecting the perspectives of survivors and other witnesses, but also by comparing the experiences of migrants in connection with Nazi history. The citizen science method actively involves citizens in research, which represents an expansion of the previous understanding of oral history and the culture of remembrance. The article uses the

¹ Inka Engel, University Koblenz-Landau

results of the BEFEM project to show an alternative to the use of video recordings of interviews in current oral history projects.

The concept and significance of Holocaust oral history in Germany

In German, the term *oral history* has become established not only because of its US-American origin, but also due to a lack of alternatives for a suitable translation. The literal translation as '*mündliche Geschichte*' was discussed without result; the translation as '*remembered history*', which is particularly appropriate in the context of the Holocaust, was considered insufficiently differentiated.² The word's apparent focus on a historical discipline is rather misleading in all translations and also in the English original, since other scientific disciplines in particular work with oral history. Furthermore, as Annette Leo, for example, criticises, the term leaves open the question of whether it refers to a research discipline, a method, a political movement, a scientific network or a type of source.³ In this article, oral history is considered a methodological tool for expanding knowledge and generating insights. The method is also incorporated into the consideration of the emergence of narratives of Holocaust remembrance culture and is thus the theoretical frame of reference of the project presented. As an interdisciplinary research field, Oral History explores testimonies of Holocaust survivors through both historiographical and social science perspectives.⁴

As Annette Leo points out, it remains unclear whether oral history should be considered a method, an academic discipline, a political movement or a source.

'Remembrance interviews with contemporary witnesses and the meticulous documentation of their answers using recording devices.'⁵

In this text, oral history is seen not only as a method or as a historical archive, but also as a social science tool for analysing memories and collective identity.

The influence of oral history on Holocaust remembrance culture

The discourse on Holocaust oral history symbolises, among other things, the debate on the representability of the Holocaust, the commercialisation of an aura of contemporary witnesses, their instrumentalisation, the advantages and disadvantages compared to documents, the discussion about the necessary respect for the boundary between

² Cf. Herwart Vorländer, „Mündliches Erfragen von Geschichte“, in: *Oral History. Mündlich erfragte Geschichte*, ed. Herwart Vorländer (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1990), p. 7 ff.

³ Cf. Annette Leo, „Der besondere Charme der Integration. Einführende Bemerkungen zu diesem Band“, in: *Den Unterdrückten eine Stimme geben? Die International Oral History Association zwischen politischer Bewegung und wissenschaftlichem Netzwerk*, ed. Annette Leo und Franka Maubach (Wallstein Verlag, 2013), p. 7 f.

⁴ Cf. Julia Obertreis, *Oral History* (Steiner, 2012), p. 7.

⁵ Leo, „Der besondere Charme der Integration. Einführende Bemerkungen zu diesem Band“, p. 9.

fiction and reality (in movies)⁶ and the big question of the necessity and at the same time the danger of a culture of remembrance.

However, contemporary witnesses are still omnipresent as certifiers, as mediators between the past and the present and as living places of remembrance, and it is hard to imagine the mediation of history – especially in the media – without them.⁷ While at the beginning it was diaries, poems, memoirs and court testimonies that brought individual witnesses into the public eye, today these satisfy the ‘cultural desire for direct encounters with the past’⁸ and shape a collective and, above all, communicative memory of the Holocaust through oral traditions and their fixation.⁹ Holocaust oral history brought about a change in perspective on traditional source categories and a changed sense of history:

‘The paradigm shift lay in the positive turn to a subjectively appropriated past – the pathos of the ‘historical process’ passed over to the category of ‘remembrance’.’¹⁰

It should be noted that collective memories always serve a purpose at a particular point in time and that the method of dealing with them also points to the future.¹¹ In Holocaust oral history, different realisations of memories are more important than the clear reconstruction of factual events. Therefore, event and memory should not be evaluated against each other, but interpreted symbiotically with each other.

‘Their value as sources lies not primarily in opening up new insights into the ‘history of facts’, but in making visible the process of narration and remembrance of traumatic events.’¹²

Holocaust Oral History thus serves as a

‘call for greater tolerance, as a warning to prevent further genocides, and for the education of future generations.’¹³

⁶ Cf. Moshe Zuckermann, *Zweierlei Holocaust. Der Holocaust in den politischen Kulturen Israels und Deutschlands* (Wallstein Verlag, 1998), p. 14 f.

⁷ Cf. Sabrow, Martin. „Der Zeitzeuge als Wanderer zwischen zwei Welten,“ in: *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Norbert Frei (Wallstein Verlag, 2012), p. 25 ff.

⁸ Ibid., p. 26.

⁹ Cf. Jan Assmann, „Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität,“ in: *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, ed. Jan Assmann and Tonio Hölscher (Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 1988), p. 9 ff.

¹⁰ Judith Keilbach, „Mikrofon, Videotape, Datenbank. Überlegungen zu einer Mediengeschichte der Zeitzeugen,“ in: *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Norbert Frei (Wallstein Verlag, 2012), p. 309.

¹¹ Peter Novick, *Nach dem Holocaust. Der Umgang mit dem Massenmord* (Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003), p. 8 f.

¹² Heidemarie Uhl, „Vom Pathos des Widerstands zur Aura der Authentischen. Die Entdeckung des Zeitzeugen als Epochenschwelle der Erinnerung,“ in: *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Norbert Frei (Wallstein Verlag, 2012), p. 235f.

¹³ Jan Taubitz, *Holocaust Oral History und das lange Ende der Zeitzeugenschaft* (Wallstein Verlag, 2016), p. 292.

The aim was to use oral history to break the collective silence about the Holocaust in society at large and to create a narrative of a public culture of remembrance that would process the past. The intention was to create a counterweight to the documentary writing of history and the sanitised ritual of distancing in politics. Accordingly, institutions and individuals had high expectations of the survivors and their authenticity and authority from the outset. James E. Young, however, aptly describes that it is not the factuality, but the actuality (truthfulness) of the survivors in their narratives that is crucial.¹⁴ Consequently, oral history only serves as a primary source of Holocaust events to a limited extent. Harald Welzer goes a step further when he explains that eyewitness reports should be treated methodically as something that can only ascertain

‘how a narrator attempts to convey their perceptions of the past to a listener.’¹⁵

For people not only remember, but they remember that they remember. The vanishing point lies in the present and the function of the narrative.¹⁶ In this process, memories do not exist in a socially neutral space, but are automatically influenced by social, temporal and context-specific dimensions.¹⁷ Oral history reflects the need for self-interpretation and requires authentication.¹⁸ Memories sometimes collide with those of other survivors, with media impressions, and fade over time.¹⁹ They become blurred with the memories of others and become a collective memory that is stored and told as one's own experience.²⁰ The fact that remembering can also be seen as contrary to, even anti-historical, historiography was therefore hotly debated, particularly during the peak phases of Holocaust oral history.²¹ Aleida Assmann distinguishes between legal, religious, historical and moral witnesses.²² Assmann adopts the term ‘moral witness’ from Avishai Margalit²³ for those survivors who have experienced suffering at the hands

¹⁴ Cf. Taubitz, *Holocaust Oral History und das lange Ende der Zeitzeugenschaft*, p. 33 ff.

¹⁵ Harald Welzer, „Das Interview als Artefakt. Zur Kritik der Zeitzeugenforschung,“ *BIOS – Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History* 13, Nr. 1 (2000): S. 293, <https://doi.org/10.3224/bios.v32i1-2.20>.

¹⁶ Cf. Harald Welzer, „Vom Zeit- zum Zukunftszeugen. Vorschläge zur Modernisierung der Erinnerungskultur,“ in: *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Norbert Frei (Wallstein Verlag, 2012), p. 33.

¹⁷ Cf. Nicole Justen, *Praxishandbuch. Umgang mit ZeitzeugInnen* (Wochenschau Verlag, 2014), p. 23 f.

¹⁸ Cf. Sybille Steinbacher, „Zeitzeugenschaft und die Etablierung der Zeitgeschichte in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland,“ in: *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Norbert Frei (Wallstein Verlag, 2012), p. 153.

¹⁹ Cf. José Brunner, „Medikalisierte Zeugenschaft. Trauma, Institutionen, Nachträglichkeit,“ in: *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Norbert Frei (Wallstein Verlag, 2012), p. 96.

²⁰ Cf. Jolande Withuis, „Zeitzeugen des Zweiten Weltkriegs in den Niederlanden,“ in: *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Norbert Frei (Wallstein Verlag, 2012), p. 159.

²¹ Siehe dazu Saul Friedländer, *Memory, History and the Extermination of Jews of EU*. Indiana University Press, 1993.

²² Vgl. Aleida Assmann, „Vier Grundtypen von Zeugenschaft,“ in: *Zeugenschaft des Holocaust. Zwischen Trauma, Tradierung und Ermittlung*, hrsg. vom Fritz Bauer Institut (Campus Verlag, 2007), S. 34 ff.

²³ See Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Harvard University Press, 2004).

of an evil regime,²⁴ but who often find it difficult to fulfil the requirements of a legal witness in the true sense of the word. Instead, the survivors convey historical proximity, immediacy, intensity and empathy – which seem to be indispensable as a dimension of today's culture of remembrance and the historical interest of the general population.

The project presented here therefore takes the position that memory cannot be planned and that the cultural and individual processing of historical experiences is the focus of oral history and its research. Although it can be said that oral history and contemporary witnesses have strongly influenced the culture of remembrance and continue to do so, this was/is by no means temporally overarching or globally uniform. In addition to the historical development and the consideration of different perspectives, which should lead to a reflective approach to working with Holocaust oral history, a local factor must also be taken into account.²⁵ Currently, the interviewees are mostly witnesses who were children during the Second World War. Childhood memories are therefore mixed with quasi-current memories in the interviews or sometimes compared. Sometimes the memories may be of a scene, or they may be of a story that was only told and then stored in the memory as a personal memory.²⁶ The interviewees' answers will reflect the past events in such a way that they harmonise with their current self-image, with a time lag of sometimes more than eighty years. Depending on the point in time, proximity to one's own twilight years, situation and counterpart, the stories may be coloured differently and the answers may vary.²⁷

Holocaust oral history

The aim of the Holocaust oral history archives, which is to be maintained by distributing the interviews, is still a global examination of the Holocaust and the associated intention of not forgetting what happened. The different ways of accessing the interviews not only make them interesting for scholars in different disciplines, but also help to spark a general interest. The extensive digitisation expands the scope of ritualised remembrance.²⁸ The presentation of the interviews in social media, alongside classic television and cinema, also influences the culture of remembrance²⁹ and shapes collective memory, identity and the construction of a sense of tradition.³⁰ As the direct

²⁴ Cf. Achim Saupe, „Zur Kritik des Zeugen in der Konstitutionsphase der modernen Geschichtswissenschaft,“ in: *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Norbert Frei (Wallstein Verlag, 2012) p. 71 ff.

²⁵ Cf. Irina Scherbakowa, „Der Zeitzeuge in der russischen Geschichtskultur der Gegenwart,“ in: *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Norbert Frei (Wallstein Verlag, 2012), p. 272 ff.

²⁶ Cf. Maurice Halbwachs, *Das kollektive Gedächtnis* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991), p. 21.

²⁷ Cf. Marta Ansilewska-Lehnstaedt, *Pole jüdischer Herkunft. Selbstdeutung polnischer Kinderüberlebender des Holocaust* (Metropol Verlag, 2019), p. 72 f.

²⁸ Cf. Brunner, „Medikalisierte Zeugenschaft. Trauma, Institutionen, Nachträglichkeit,“, p. 96 ff.

²⁹ Cf. Taubitz, *Holocaust Oral History und das lange Ende der Zeitzeugenschaft*, p. 143 ff.

³⁰ Cf. Lutz Niethammer, *Kollektive Identität. Heimliche Quelle einer unheimlichen Konjunktur* (Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2000), p. 314 ff.

memory will fade with the death of the contemporary witnesses, alternatives to the Holocaust oral history are being sought today to close the gap in the communicative memory³¹ that is currently emerging. In addition to interviewing subsequent generations, fictional elements of authentication are used in factual formats, contemporary witnesses are re-enacted and, in recent years, their biographies have been shown in feature films, some of which are dramatised.³² The preservation of Holocaust survivors as holograms, which stimulate human communication in question-and-answer situations with VR glasses, is the latest example of this.³³ In the future, the question of the lasting canonical significance of Holocaust oral history,³⁴ the necessity of and the possible need to encourage it in the culture of remembrance – with attention to the need for identity verification and as an imperative against the dynamics of forgetting³⁵ – must be asked, especially after the death of the survivors. Holocaust oral history has moved from a place in communicative memory to a place in cultural memory³⁶ as a symbol and code of the survival of the Holocaust.³⁷ It remains uncertain whether the death of the eyewitnesses will also be accompanied by a collective forgetting of the individual stories³⁸, whether this will strengthen the enclosure of the Holocaust in the public consciousness³⁹ and the loss of relevance and social energy⁴⁰ due to the reduced pressure of a commitment to the appreciation of the suffering⁴¹ of only a few survivors. A corresponding scientific examination of the (Holocaust) oral history topic is available in abundance, to the extent that it has been named as a separate scientific discipline. However, the question of an adequate, institutional commemoration of the Holocaust, along with the discussion about the presentation of the (un)specific identity of the

³¹ Cf. Astrid Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen*, second edition (J.B. Metzler, 2005/2011), p. 3.

³² Cf. Rainer Gries, „Vom historischen Zeugen zum professionellen Darsteller. Probleme einer Medienfigur im Übergang,“ in: *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Norbert Frei (Wallstein Verlag, 2012), p. 59.

³³ Cf. Axel Doßmann, „Hologramme erzählen vom Holocaust,“ Talk with Massimo Maio, Deutschlandfunk Kultur, 27.01.2021, Podcast, 8 Min., 26 Sek., available at: https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/zukunft-der-erinnerungskultur-hologramme-erzaehlen-vom.2156.de.html?dram:article_id=491575 [Last accessed: 12.08.2021].

³⁴ Cf. Keilbach, „Mikrofon, Videotape, Datenbank. Überlegungen zu einer Mediengeschichte der Zeitzeugen,“, p. 305 ff.

³⁵ Cf. Aleida Assmann, *Geschichte im Gedächtnis. Von der individuellen Erfahrung zur öffentlichen Inszenierung*, second edition (C.H. Beck Verlag, 2007/2014), p. 25 ff.

³⁶ Cf. Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, fifth edition (Verlag C.H. Beck, 1999/2010), p. 76 ff.

³⁷ Cf. Zuckermann, *Zweierlei Holocaust. Der Holocaust in den politischen Kulturen Israels und Deutschlands*, p. 11.

³⁸ Cf. Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen*, p. 7.

³⁹ Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Dialektik der Ordnung. Die Moderne und der Holocaust*, second edition (Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1989/2002), p. 11 ff.

⁴⁰ Uhl, „Vom Pathos des Widerstands zur Aura der Authentischen. Die Entdeckung des Zeitzeugen als Epochenschwelle der Erinnerung,“, p. 244.

⁴¹ Cf. Novick, *Nach dem Holocaust. Der Umgang mit dem Massenmord*, p. 346 ff.

victims⁴² is not answered uniformly in current research discourse either. Rather, the form of the culture of remembrance will always be re-aligned with existing demands, external circumstances and emerging needs. It thus remains a matter of constant negotiation and is always in motion.

The BEFEM project as an alternative to traditional video recordings

The BEFEM project (citizen science research into the family history of locals and migrants and their relationship to Nazi history) is an innovative way of conducting oral history without resorting to traditional video recordings of interviews. Instead, the citizen science method is used to collect and analyse the stories of locals and migrants in relation to their experiences during and after the Nazi era and how they remember it. This offers an alternative to traditional approaches to oral history, in which visual documentation of interviews plays a central role.

Citizen Science as Part of the Culture of Remembrance

Citizen Science, is an interdisciplinary field of research that promotes the active participation of laypeople in scientific projects.⁴³ In the context of oral history, citizen science offers an opportunity to expand research while promoting democratic participation in scientific processes. Not only do citizen scientists bring their own perspectives to research, but they also have the opportunity to decide which specific topics should be researched and how the results should be presented. This represents a departure from traditional, hierarchical research approaches in which the scientific community has control over research design and methodology.

The advantage of involving citizen scientists in the BEFEM project is that the research is supported by a broad base and the results do not only benefit scientific experts. Instead, the findings are shared with the public and help to enrich and develop the culture of remembrance. In addition, citizen scientists can actively shape collective memory through their own stories and experiences. The project is particularly successful in getting non-scientists excited about the interviews. By involving volunteers in the research process – whether it's collecting, transcribing or interpreting data – a collaborative research experience is created.

Citizen science can be categorised according to the level of participation. At the lowest level, known as the crowdsourcing level, members of the public simply contribute data without being involved in any further processes. At the cooperative level, they actively

⁴² Cf. Zuckermann, *Zweierlei Holocaust. Der Holocaust in den politischen Kulturen Israels und Deutschlands*, p. 122.

⁴³ “Ten Principles of Citizen Science,” ECSA (European Citizen Science Association), 2015, <http://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/XPR2N>

participate in certain project phases, such as data collection or analysis. In the collective stage, citizens decide together with scientists on the direction and implementation of the project. The highest level, the citizen-led stage, allows citizens to initiate and lead projects independently, with scientists acting in an advisory capacity. This differentiation shows how citizen science can range from purely supportive participation to full ownership. The project described here can be categorised as level 3 of participatory research, the collective stage.⁴⁴ This stage emphasises the co-determination and active participation of citizens not only in the formulation of questions, but also in the collection of data.

The project process

The BEFEM project is based on three central pillars: a quantitative survey using an online questionnaire, a qualitative survey using oral history, and the transfer of the topic and the results at various events, workshops, a cinema series and a travelling exhibition that presents both the research results and family memorabilia to the public.

Quantitative results of the project

The survey was addressed to everyone living in Rhineland-Palatinate and included a total of 43 questions, including multiple-choice, single-choice and open-ended questions. The aim was to obtain answers from as large and diverse a group as possible in order to make well-founded and generalisable statements about how the topics of National Socialism and the Holocaust are dealt with. By January 2024, 466 people had taken part, ensuring a high degree of representativeness for the region.

The survey shows a differentiated picture of the knowledge and attitudes of people in Rhineland-Palatinate regarding National Socialism and the Holocaust. It is clear that despite a broad knowledge of central events such as the Holocaust, there are major gaps in knowledge regarding the everyday life of people under National Socialism and the attitudes of the population at that time. Familial engagement with these topics is often rather limited, and the question of the extent to which these historical events still influence society today is not sufficiently reflected upon by many respondents.

The generational differences and the differences between locals and immigrants raise important questions about how remembrance culture can be passed on and maintained in different population groups. It is crucial that the memory of Nazism is not only preserved in theory, but also actively integrated into everyday life, so that future

⁴⁴ Muki Haklay, "Citizen Science and Volunteered Geographic Information: Overview and Typology of Participation," in: *Crowdsourcing Geographic Knowledge: Volunteered Geographic Information (VGI) in Theory and Practice*, ed. Daniel Sui, Sarah Elwood and Michael Goodchild (Springer, 2013), p. 105-122, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4587-2_7.

generations are able to learn lessons from the past and recognise the dangers of authoritarian and inhuman ideologies.

Qualitative results of the project

The decision was taken not to record the interviews on video in order to preserve the personal character of the conversations and to focus on the oral narrative as a form of oral history. This encouraged the interviewees to engage more intensively and reflectively with their memories and experiences. Citizen scientists played a central role in data collection and analysis, not only as interviewers but also as active participants in the process of processing the families' memories.

The interviews were conducted with families from different social and cultural contexts. Among the families interviewed were five German families without an immigrant background, three families with international roots (from the United States, France and Kosovo) and two Jewish families from Rhineland-Palatinate. The social classes of the families vary according to the generation. The women of the war generation, 80% of whom live without their descendants in the former family homes, see themselves primarily as housewives. The next generation of children is predominantly active in manual (20%), agricultural (25%) or educational (50%) occupations. In the generation of grandchildren, 80% of those surveyed are students or already have a university degree. The interviews were deliberately selected to represent a wide diversity of family histories and perspectives. Within the framework of this project, citizen scientists were actively involved in conducting these interviews, thus enabling a formal collection and processing of oral history.

What do families remember?

The stories of the war generation, especially from German families without Jewish members, focus on personal experiences of the war and their impact on the family. It was emphasised that they only learned about the Holocaust after the war. It is particularly striking that only a few reported on well-known Jewish families from their home towns. The post-war generation, born after 1960, received little information about the Holocaust from their parents. The stories revolved mainly around the loss of family members, the war experiences of the soldiers and the survival of the family. The Holocaust itself was hardly discussed at school. It was only between the ages of 20 and 40 that many began to consciously engage with the topic for the first time, often prompted by the television series 'Holocaust' and other cinematic representations of the Nazi era. Some interviewees began to do their own research to learn more about the role of their parents or grandparents during the Nazi era, but there was no direct confrontation.

The grandchildren's knowledge comes mainly from school and media sources, including visits to concentration camp sites, which were more frequent than for their parents. This generation often engages in heated discussions about the topic within the family. One important difference is the more pronounced emphasis on contemporary racism, especially among younger family members with a migrant background. In this context, reference is made to racist acts of violence in recent years, such as the NSU murders and the attack in Hanau. Greater sensitivity to anti-Semitic incidents was also noticeable in the interviews.

The question of perpetrator-victim attribution shows interesting differences. The German war generation did not make any direct connection to perpetrator roles within their families. However, the male family members who served as soldiers were present in the narratives. In the narratives of the grandchildren, however, 60% of the respondents also see their family members who fought as soldiers in the role of perpetrators. It was also striking that only two people from the generation of grandchildren stated that they had friends or acquaintances from Jewish communities, apart from those who are themselves of Jewish origin. This suggests that contact with Jewish communities in the region is limited. 90% of respondents from all generations see an increasing establishment of right-wing and anti-Semitic positions in Germany, with the AfD in particular often being mentioned as a reference point.

How do migrant families remember?

For migrant families, the topic of National Socialism was usually a marginal topic in their countries of origin, little known through school education or stories from great-grandparents. Instead, their family histories were shaped by their own experiences of war and persecution in their home countries. The family stories emphasised their Muslim religion and cultural background, with the refugee movements of 2015 and the flight of people from Ukraine also being discussed. In the families of the first generation of guest workers, the uncertain employment situation in Germany played an important role. For the third generation of immigrants, the high level of racism in Germany was a significant obstacle to actively participating in society.

Do families with a Jewish background remember differently?

Jewish families particularly emphasise the family knowledge that enables them to pass on in-depth knowledge about the Holocaust within the family. In these families, it became clear that they referred much more to the creeping and systematic exclusion by National Socialism than families of 'German origin'. Their stories, for example, addressed the exclusion of the grandmother under National Socialism when she 'simply disappeared'. In particular, the 'metaphor of packing a suitcase' as a symbol of

deportation appeared in the reports. These family stories significantly influenced the perception of Germany's responsibility and led to a strong demand for continuous political education. Jewish identity and personal family experiences shape the perspective on history and create a particular sensitivity for the process of coming to terms with the Holocaust. The constant struggle for recognition of their own victims within the family is a central element of their culture of remembrance.

Involving citizen scientists

In the BEFEM project, citizens were actively involved in a variety of ways to promote a direct exchange between science and society and to incorporate the perspectives of the population into research.

Inclusion in the oral history survey

As part of the BEFEM project, a particularly in-depth and sustainable involvement of citizens in the **oral history survey** was realised, in which they were actively involved not only as narrators but also as co-creators of the entire process. This qualitative part of the project enabled citizens to get involved at different levels and share their perspectives and experiences in an open dialogue. The entire oral history process was designed to offer citizens a wide range of opportunities for participation and reflection:

Involvement in the design and development of the project

From the outset, citizens were involved in shaping the project. They took part in workshops where they contributed suggestions on the topics and issues that were particularly important to them. This helped to develop the interview guides, which not only focused on the history of National Socialism but also on the transmission of memories and experiences in their families. This ensured that the interviews were not conducted solely from an academic perspective, but that the needs and perspectives of the citizens were also integrated into the research process.

Conducting the interviews

The citizens took an active role in conducting the interviews. There was an opportunity for citizens to act as interviewers themselves and ask their own questions of the witnesses. This fostered a sense of ownership and engagement with the project. Citizens without an academic background were also involved in conducting interviews, which led to more authentic narratives and a broader diversity of perspectives. They were also able to share their experiences of conducting interviews with others and learn from their approaches, which strengthened the interactive nature of the survey.

Involving citizens in the transcription and evaluation

After the interviews were recorded and transcribed, it would have been theoretically possible for the citizens to participate in the evaluation and analysis of the interviews. Citizens who had a particular interest in analysing oral history interviews had the opportunity to receive targeted training in qualitative research, especially in transcription and categorisation of data according to Mayring.⁴⁵ They could have worked through the transcribed interviews in regular meetings, where citizens could have reflected not only on their own experiences but also placed the narratives of others in the context of their own family history. Unfortunately, this offer was not taken up sufficiently, so that a comprehensive discussion and reflection on the memories of National Socialism and the personal effects on the collective memory took place in a different way, for example in a parallel series of Holocaust films in the municipal cinema.

Reflection and feedback

It was particularly important that the citizens were not only included as passive participants, but also as active reflection partners. After each interview, the participants had the opportunity to exchange their own experiences in family discussions and to discuss how their family stories differed or resembled other narratives. These reflection processes enabled the citizens to recognise the significance of their own experiences in the larger context of society and to question how they themselves could contribute to the culture of remembrance.

Presentation of the results and exhibition

The citizens were not only involved in collecting stories, but they also actively contributed to the design of a final travelling exhibition that made the research results publicly accessible. Some citizens took on a leading role and helped to exhibit the interviews and stories of others and to present them to a broad public. They participated in selecting topics, photos and other materials that reflected the interviews and their significance for collective memory.

The travelling exhibition, with audio stations presenting the interviews, is not only a powerful form of culture of remembrance, but also a central contribution to citizen science. The inclusion of original objects from the families of the survivors – such as letters, photos or everyday objects – enables citizens to actively participate in the research and preservation of these stories. Through personal involvement and access to such exhibits, history becomes tangible and takes on a new dimension of authenticity. This participatory approach not only promotes historical understanding, but also

⁴⁵ Philipp Mayring, *Einführung in die qualitative Sozialforschung* (Beltz, 2002), p. 85.

strengthens social awareness of the responsibility to actively shape and carry forward the culture of remembrance.⁴⁶ Citizen science thus becomes a vibrant tool for connecting past and present and promoting empathy in the long term.

Overall, this deep and diverse involvement of citizens in the oral history survey has created a unique participatory research project that has not only produced a valuable collection of testimonies but has also raised awareness of the importance of memory in society. In this way, the citizens actively contributed to keeping the history of National Socialism and its effects on the present alive and anchoring it in the broader public.

More than just a video: how citizens can enrich the oral history process

Videos of Holocaust oral history interviews often reach only a limited, intellectual audience, as they are often presented in an academic or documentary context. Their language, length and depth of content require a high level of prior knowledge and interest in historical, political, ethical and social issues, which makes it difficult to reach a wider audience. In addition, they sometimes lack emotional appeal or narrative elements that could appeal to a wider audience. In an increasingly visual and fast-paced media world, this content competes with more accessible, often more superficial formats, which further limits its reach. New approaches, such as creative mediation formats or interactive media, are therefore needed to bring the universal messages of oral history to a wider audience. Engaging citizens in the oral history process and in intensive, participatory engagement with the interviews goes far beyond simply recording interviews on video, as it offers several important advantages for the quality and depth of the project. The active participation of citizens – whether it is in developing the interview guidelines, conducting the interviews or analysing the conversations – makes it possible to develop a deeper understanding of the meaning and context of the narratives. Citizens can actively engage in the reflection process, incorporate their own perspectives and thus actively shape the memory instead of just observing it.⁴⁷

Increased reflection and critical discussion

By actively participating in the evaluation and analysis of the interviews, the citizens develop a critical awareness of the complexity of memories. While in the case of purely film recordings often only the conversation itself is documented, the detailed analysis of the content enables the citizens to also deal intensively with the underlying topics –

⁴⁶ Lisa Pettibone and David Ziegler, „Citizen Science: Bürgerforschung in den Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften,“ in: *Bürger Künste Wissenschaft: Citizen Science in Kultur und Geisteswissenschaften*, ed. Kristin Oswald and René Smolarski (Computus Druck Satz & Verlag, 2016), p. 65, <https://doi.org/10.22032/dbt.39056>.

⁴⁷ Aletta Bonn, Wiebke Brink, Susanne Hecker, et al. *Weißbuch Citizen Science Strategie 2030 für Deutschland* (SocArXiv Papers, 2022), p. 13, <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/ew4uk>.

such as discrimination, family histories and collective memory. This allows them to delve deeper into social and historical contexts and recognise their relevance to the present. Video recordings offer this form of interactive and critical engagement only to a very limited extent.

Promoting dialogue and exchange

The project enables citizens not only to tell their own stories, but also to reflect on and discuss them with others. This dialogue leads to deeper connections between different perspectives and fosters understanding of how memory is passed down in different contexts. The exchange across generations, cultural backgrounds and personal experiences offers a much richer and more nuanced account of the past than a simple presentation of an interview in a video format could. The interactive component enhances the learning process and makes it more sustainable for all participants.

Collective knowledge production and empowerment

Involving citizens in research creates a sense of responsibility and empowerment. They are not just passive consumers of knowledge, but active co-producers of memories and history. This form of citizen science not only promotes individual engagement, but also strengthens collective awareness and shared responsibility for the preservation of history. By helping to shape the entire process – from data collection to analysis and presentation of the results – the project becomes a collaborative effort that has a much deeper value for citizens than the mere documentation of interviews.

Insights into subjective meaning and contextualisation

An important advantage of the oral history approach is that it enables citizens not only to view the interviews from an external perspective, but also to place them in their own context and question the meaning of the narratives. In this way, they can view the interviews from different angles – be it in relation to their own family history, the experiences of immigrants or the impact on society as a whole. This process leads to deeper reflection and a better contextualisation of the memories, which is often lacking in purely cinematic recordings.

Conclusion

The use of citizen science methods makes it possible to conduct research in a democratic and participatory way, in which the perspectives of citizens play a central role. To summarise, the active involvement of citizens in the oral history process and the associated interactive and reflective examination of memories represents a significantly

richer, deeper and more sustainable form of memory culture than would be the case with the mere recording of interviews on video. The participatory model promotes a deeper understanding, strengthens the sense of community and makes it possible to preserve and pass on knowledge about the past in a way that keeps the social relevance of memory alive and carries it into the future.

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