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Alexander Prenninger

(alexander.prenninger@sbg.ac.at)

Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Historical Social Science, Vienna

[The Verbalization of Experiences in Context Specific Narratives](#)

An analysis of the life stories and the social structure of concentration camp survivors based on oral history sources cannot be done without reference to what Maurice Halbwachs described as “the social frameworks of memory”. How individual experience is transformed, interpreted and given meaning depends 1) of nationally, culturally and otherwise differentiated “collective narratives” and 2) of the changes of such collective narratives over time.

In this paper I want to present some basic assumptions underlying the “Mauthausen Survivors Research Project” (MSRP), which started recently and is conducted by a group of researchers at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute, Vienna, including Gerhard Botz, Regina Fritz, Heinz Berger and me. My presentation is mainly based on the project outline developed by this group. Although based in Austria, the project has a strong inter- and transnational perspective with partners in about 20 different countries, mainly in Europe, but also in Israel and the United States. The MSRP’s major sources are interviews conducted with survivors of the Mauthausen concentration camp. The so-called “Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project” (MSDP), conducted in the years 2002/2003, resulted in a collection of c. 860 interviews consisting of c. 90 % audio and 10 % video interviews from 23 different countries. The MSDP was one of the largest oral history projects on survivors of one single concentration camp. The interview sample reflects roughly the national and political proportions among the prisoners of Mauthausen, the hierarchy in the camp and the gender proportion. The sample also included long-time “forgotten victims” as gypsies, homosexuals, “asocials”, hostages and prisoners of war. Two groups, women and Jews, are overrepresented according to their proportion among the prisoners mainly because of the long neglect of these groups in research on Mauthausen.

Our approach is based on the assumption that the memories of Mauthausen survivors have become part of collective narratives of many national, political, cultural groups in Europe (and beyond). It is certainly not for sure that these memories always and everywhere show the same patterns and structures. On the contrary, rather we have to presume that these memories are extremely different as they were pre-structured by the different national, cultural, social, political, gender-specific etc. contexts. However, despite these large differences it is our hypothesis that there are common features not only within such group memories but also between them. This overarching frame can be described as the “European concentration camp memory”, a collective memory clearly distinctive from the universal and global Holocaust memory.

Concentration camp memory and Holocaust memory are referring to two different sorts of persecution. Concentration camp survivors and Holocaust survivors therefore are forming different “communities of experience”. The notion which I prefer to the fuzzier concept of collective memory was introduced by Karl Mannheim in 1924 in his long-time unpublished treatise “A Sociological Theory of Culture and of Its Knowability”. According to David Kettler, who published the manuscript in 1980, “Mannheim distinguishes between two spheres of intellectual activity, the communicative and the conjunctive. The former is the area of general scientific explanation; the latter is the realm of the interpretation of meanings.” Conjunctive experience is bound to the horizon of small groups – so-called communities of experience. The nexus between the conjunctive and the communicative knowledge is given by so-called “frame groups”, which constitute themselves partly through social contact, but mainly through equal ideology resp. philosophy of life. These sub-groups of society, as we would say today, are exactly what Halbwachs described as the frameworks of memory: the result, the sum, the combination of individual memories of many members of the same group.

The Mauthausen Survivors Research Project combines therefore a twofold approach on the individual and the collective memories of Mauthausen: The approach concerning the “communities of experience” is focussing the identification and comparison of these group memories. Analysis should therefore result in finding “clusters” of narratives of Mauthausen survivors. The formation of such group memories was coined, first and foremost, by the manifold national and international organizations of survivors founded after liberation and return. These local, regional, national or supranational associations have become decisive for the public representation of concentration camps until today. The associations, however, did only represent a small percentage of survivors: the political prisoners. The collective narrative therefore overestimated specific aspects of the camp experience like resistance and solidarity at the expense of other aspects as daily life and death of the prisoners, collaboration and, particularly, other groups of prisoners persecuted for racist or non-political reasons. A second example would be what Pieter Lagrou described as “patriotic memory”: the inclusion of the memory of the concentration camps in the “founding myths” of European states in 1944/45 as part of rebuilding a

national identity and the challenge of these “master narratives” since the 1960s/70s through the emergence of a Holocaust memory and other “forgotten” victim groups

Our approach concentrates on the individual narratives. Similar to collective narratives, we presume that these forms of self-(re)presentation are varying along stages of live and historical situations of those who remember. However, despite the huge variety we can identify some structural parallels between these narratives on two levels and with three distinctions.

- 1) Concerning levels, we distinguish between the whole interview as an entity on the one hand and its units or sequences on the other. The narrative as a whole resembles what we call a “puzzle”: a collection of different narrative sequences assembled together in a more or less organized narration, sometimes even without organization.

As our intention lies not in homogeneity or typical patterns of narration but in variations and contrasts we focus on the “logics of presentation” following hereby Michael Pollak’s analysis of the “limits of the speakable” and Sigrid Wadauer’s research on autobiography as “specific regular combinations of the spoken and the unspoken”.

- 2) By now, we can identify two different logics of presentation on the level of narrative units which we call “keys” and “peaks”. Peaks are here understood as culminations within narrative sequences referring to experiences like imprisonment, deportation, arrival in the camp, hunger, thirst, death etc.
- 3) In contrast, “keys” refer to explanations giving an answer to questions like “Why me?” – Why did I come to the camp?, Why did I survive?” The keys are varying along the status of the survivor within the camp as well as after the camp. Whereas political prisoners rather tend to rationalization, like the struggle for a just cause (communism, the fatherland etc.), survivors of racist persecution are deprived of this strategy. If a general “guilt of survival” can be found instead, will be part of the research.

Our aim is therefore both to analyze the modes of speaking about the camp experience as well as the conditions of speaking within specific “communities of experience”. By the combination of the individual and the collective, in our opinion, we can overcome some of the theoretical inconsistencies of “collective memory”, like the fuzzy dichotomy of cultural and communicative memory as presented in various forms by Jan and Aleida Assmann, the intentionality of these two shapes of collective memory, or a general mysticism or mist of Hegelian *Weltgeist* included in the whole concept of collective memory.

To summarize, the project is based on the combination of both a fact oriented and a memory oriented approach. The double character of narratives of camp survivors will be analyzed both on the collective

and the individual level. Commonalities and differences will be analyzed by inter- and transnational comparison.

CV:

Alexander Prenninger, M.A., historian, researcher at the Dept. of History, University of Salzburg, and the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Historical Social Science, Vienna (Austria); research projects: rituals of commemoration in concentration camp memorials, life stories and narrations of Mauthausen survivors, attitudes of young immigrants concerning National Socialism and the Holocaust, publications: “Nationalsozialistische Berufsschädigungen” (co-author, 2004), “Mercy or Right: Development of social security systems” (ed., 2005); exhibitions: “Narrating Mauthausen” (Mauthausen Memorial, 2003).