

**Paper presented at the 7th European Social Science History Conference,
Feb. 26 – March 1, 2008**

Panel: ORA21: Mauthausen in Transnational Memories and Narrations, 26 Feb., 16:30



LUDWIG BOLTZMANN INSTITUTE FOR HISTORICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE, c/o UNIV. OF
VIENNA, SPITALGASSE 2-4/ I. HOF, A-1090 VIENNA

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Life story Interviews and the “Truth of Memory” –

Oral History and Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy of History

This paper is based on experiences with life story interviews gathered in the framework of the Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project (MSDP), one of the largest oral history projects in Europe conducted with survivors of a single concentration camp. In 2002 and 2003 more than 800 life story interviews have been conducted in Europe, Israel, and America.

The significance of the interaction between interviewees and interviewers in the narrative life story interview is an important and widely discussed topic in oral history. Especially with regards to the question of the validity and the “truth” of memories produced in life story interviews, this relationship is of central meaning as it influences the way of narrating and hence memory itself. Therefore, the situational context of the interview has direct effects onto what is remembered at all, onto which memories are narrated and which are not, which memories are regarded as important by the interviewee, how the narrative strands of memory are put together and how they are assembled into an overall picture – all this is highly influenced by the situation in which the interview takes place.

At this stage we are already confronted with a central issue of philosophy of history, namely how an event of the past becomes an “historic event” through the process of memory. According to Walter Benjamin the perception of the past, and hence to a certain degree the construction of the historic fact,

have to be seen as a constant process which is eminently shaped by the political, societal, and economic constellations not so much of the past, but actually of current society where memory is actually situated. Thus, when asking for the “historic truth”, one always has to keep in mind that memory consists of constant actualisations of the past from the perspective of the present. Repeatedly, Benjamin pointed to this very feature of the remembered pieces of the past as well as to the necessity to reflect upon this when dealing with history.¹

However, this is not only valid for oral history, but to a similar extent also for what may be called “history of facts”, indeed for dealing with the past in general. Thus, it has become standard in most branches of today’s historical research to consider the double construction of the source and the object of history. This means that the historic fact is referred to as changing continually and as being (re-) constructed discursively, whereby the central role of the recipients is always crucial.² However, the processes of perception and cognition which constitute memory cannot be transposed exclusively into the subjective sphere. Instead, the mediation taking place between the cognitive subject and the object to be recognised is crucial. That an event or an experience of the past should be capable of being actualised at all, that they can be passed on to the present where they find some connecting point, depends not only on the remembering individual, but implies that this event or experience represents a past problem, which has not yet been solved in current society and hence recurs, maybe with somehow changed features, in the current societal constellations.³ These constellations have a lasting effect on the way the historian questions the past and therefore how he/she interprets it; they are particularly important in oral history, where memory takes place in the “here and now” of the interaction between interviewer and interviewee.

It can be assumed that the memories of the historical witness are aimed not so much at the remembered past, but much more at the receiving present. This means that memories are not simply the

¹ See Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, in: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, 1938-1940, Cambridge/Mass. 2003; Walter Benjamin, *Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian*, in: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, 1935-1938, Cambridge/Mass., London/Engl. 2002. See also Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk* (=Gesammelte Schriften V), Frankfurt am Main 1991.

² See Gerhard Botz, Brigitte Halbmayr, Helga Amesberger, „Zeitzeugen- und Zeitzeuginnenprojekt Mauthausen“ („Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project“ – MSDP). *Genese, Projektstruktur und erste Ergebnisse*, in: *Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes (DÖW)* (ed.), *Jahrbuch 2004*. Schwerpunkt Mauthausen, Wien 2004, 31 f.; Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, Karoline Tschugnall, „Opa war kein Nazi“. *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis*, Frankfurt am Main 2002, 35.

³ See Benjamin, *Eduard Fuchs*.

communication of the past, but to a high degree the expression of the past in the present. Hence, life stories are always filtered by all which has happened between the time of actual experience and the time of narrating. Thereby, events and experiences having taken place ever since the past to be remembered function as distinctive layers.⁴ When interpreting an interview, the historian has to recognise which and how many of these layers have to be permeated in order to get access to the past event in question. What we get to know is an idea of the past sedimented in the present according to the historical, social and political constellations of current society.

The relationship of the past and the present is of crucial importance for the culture and politics of remembrance e.g. in Austria, because there, the Shoah is in some specific manner always part of a family's story on the part of both, victims and perpetrators and their respective descendants. Due to decades of denial, renunciation and repression of the National Socialist past and the responsibility for it from the part of an Austrian majority, the way of passing on history becomes crucial. Thereby (transgenerational) transmission of memory becomes important. It implies the adoption of the narrated stories by the listening part of the interview community. Harald Welzer consequently characterises the interaction between interviewee and interviewer in life story interview contexts as a "temporary community of memory"⁵, a term which seems to be very helpful when it comes to considering the impact of the interviewer's presence onto memory and the narrated life story. An interviewer takes over a mediating function between society and the memories which may have been held back for a long time. Thus, a "temporary community of memory" is established and some form of mutual affiliation and togetherness develops in the course of envisioning the past. This implies that in a life story interview, e.g., the interviewee and the interviewer construct memory together in a mutual process.

The task of the interviewer is in the first place to support the interviewee in the process of remembering and to initiate the narration by asking open questions. Somehow memory can be seen as a sort of constant translation, namely of the past into the present. Expressing experiences verbally and linguistically is in itself a process of translation, not only in terms of language use which may differ

⁴ See Alexander von Plato, Some Remarks on the Interview, in: IKF, DÖW (eds.), Manual for Interviewers, 2002, 20.

⁵ Welzer, Moller, Tschugnall, „Opa war kein Nazi“, 35.

considerably from its use in the respective past. But narrating experiences of the past may give them a structure and specific shape which they would not have had originally. Moreover, the contexts in which memory actually takes place, add another dimension to this process of translating the past into the present. The past comes into current life in transformed and changed shape. We have but translations of the past, the “language of the past” being in a continual process, which begins already with the initial “coding of the experience” in the past.

When we interview a historical witness, we cause him or her to construct a life story which has to correspond to minimal cognitive requirements; mostly it has a beginning and an end. When we ask for the narration of a life story we expect some linear development – corresponding to the tradition of narrating. But unarticulated memory may actually work differently, not that linear, but intermittingly, by images more than words. In an interview these images are transformed into a more or less cohesive picture of the past, which implies that the interviewee has to correspond to at least a minimum of specific skills concerning the construction of an intelligible narration.

However, we do have the possibility to leave space to the interviewees to develop their memory and to construct their own story the way they see it. In the MSDP-interviews we asked in an open way, the very first question being e.g. “Could you please tell me your life story”, followed by the explanation that the interviewee could begin wherever he or she wanted to. This would allow also some form of intermitting narration, which would be not so linear but perhaps circular, and thus would correspond more to the way the human mind works. Furthermore it allowed for situating the respective experiences and pieces of the past within a wider framework of the interviewees’ life experiences. We asked in a way which caused interviewees to envision certain events and incidents, to describe relatives and friends, but also perpetrators and daily routines in the concentration camp.

As to the question of the truth or validity of memory, our interviewing method also allowed for critical questions at the end of the narration. So, if an interviewee talked about things or events which the interviewer could not believe, or which did not correspond to the known historic facts, the interviewer could go into such discrepancies and try to work them up. The question of how to deal with “false memory” is a central one.

When e.g. a survivor in the interview denies that his relatives were also persecuted or even murdered, whereas this was known beforehand either from other interviews conducted when the survivor was younger, or by some other sources like transport lists of concentration camps; and when this very survivor refuses to further go into the matter, the question of how to deal with such diverging memories becomes central. On the one hand, the interests of the interviewee have to be protected e.g. against denigration from the part of political or racist opponents (“We always said that he’s a liar”), or concerning questions of restitution and compensation payments, or simply concerning the acceptance of the survivor’s personality. But on the other hand “false memories” point to the contextualisation of the past in the present, i.e. that the position of the present within the narration is crucial; the omission or denial of bad experiences may also be a hint for this present situation. Therefore, whether an event told in the interview really has taken place exactly the way the interviewee told us, or whether it has taken place at all, is less relevant when it comes to analyse the process of memory itself. We could also be confronted with a narrative intending to cover bad experiences or specific events the interviewee cannot or does not want to address openly, or which he/she has forgotten; we may also be confronted with something the survivor did not live through personally, but of which he/she became a witness, which he/she had heard about, or maybe even with a film sequence which the survivor has saved as “own” memory in deeper layers of consciousness. We always have to be critical of such things when interpreting life story interviews and try to find out what “false memories” stand for, what they hide etc. In the end they can tell us a lot about the relationship between the past and the present on the individual as well as on the societal level. This does not mean that we should give way to a mere subjectivity in the interpretation of history, but that oral history gives us the possibility to reflect onto so-called “historic facts”, which, to a certain degree, are also subjectively constructed and interpreted, but generally considered as objective and “authentic”. In being aware of these problems concerning the process of remembering and interpreting the past, oral history is in opposition to the installation of an undialectical and fixed image of the past and thus corresponds to a major demand in Benjamin’s philosophy of history.