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Remembering for the future, and the future of remembrance

A culture of remembrance is not an easy task. It takes a communal effort and cannot be achieved without reflection. Which is why we must take the time, again and again, to reflect together on the future of remembrance.

In doing so, five key questions arise. The first is obvious: **What happens when the eyewitnesses are no longer here?** Katja Petrowskaja's 2014 novel *Maybe Esther* centers around the 1941 massacre of Kyiv's Jewish population by the German military in Babi Yar. It was the largest massacre of the Second World War in Europe. Following the death of her aunt, the narrator realizes that she stands on the brink of forgetting: "History begins when there are no more people to ask, only sources." In other words: when the witnesses are gone, we are left with the historians.

We, too, stand on the brink of forgetting when it comes to the Holocaust survivors who are still here, but will not be for much longer. As in Petrowskaja's novel, there is a strong urge to gather any clues and testimonies that might still be obtainable. The next generation will face new problems. After 80 to 100 years, communicative memory undergoes an irreversible shift. The events of the Holocaust are moving from lived memory to abstract history. Soon, answers to our questions will only be found in books, films, reference works and archives.

Several survivors of the Holocaust are involved in the impressive project *For real?*. Some of them, over the course of their lives, have become professional witnesses. Here I would like to add the voice of Margot Friedländer, who always had these words for her listeners and especially for young people: "I say to you, be human. We are all the same." These eyewitnesses have played an especially important role in three areas: in schools and educational work, at memorial sites, and at memorial events. Their authentic voices will be gone in the near future, and the presence of embodied experience and emotions will vanish forever along with them.

This passing of witnesses is not unexpected, nor are we unprepared for it. In fact, we have long been preparing for it and developing new types of relevant technology. The French historian Annette Wieviorka referred to the period starting in the 1980s as the "era of the witness".

Here one must ask, however: why did this period only arrive 40 or 50 years after the war?

A change took place in the 1980s and 1990s. The children of the witnesses became adults, and the witnesses themselves, the survivors, became grandparents. They stepped back somewhat from their working lives, had time to reflect, and felt compelled to record their history for the generations to come. This development was amplified by the media. The TV mini-series *Holocaust* was aired in the USA in 1978 and the following year in Germany. Whereas the televised trial of Adolf Eichmann had shocked Jewish families around the world in 1961, it was the *Holocaust* series that triggered something of an emotional earthquake in non-Jewish families too, 18 years later, and deeply affected the new generation.

An early development in the mid-1980s was the founding of the Fortunoff Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, which was directed by my academic mentor Geoffrey Hartman. Hartmann, who had fled Frankfurt on a *Kindertransport* to England, gave one of the archive's first taped testimonies, as did his wife, Renée, who had been liberated along with her sister from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. In the 1990s, Steven Spielberg founded his own archive, which now has around 50,000 video testimonies. However, it is still not entirely clear how this extensive collection can be actively used and maintained. With VHS cassettes in need of conversion to digital media, these archives must deal with the issue of long-term preservation.

At Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation at the University of Southern California, a new technology with a new data storage format has been in use since 2012. The foundation's Dimensions in Testimony project aims not only to replay recorded content, but also to enable conversational interactions with individual eyewitnesses far into the future. Holocaust survivors who participate in this experiment are filmed and interviewed over the course of a week. That is an extremely strenuous endeavor for the now quite elderly individuals, who nevertheless approach it with great strength of will. All the data thereby acquired are entered into a large storage system, algorithmically sorted and processed by AI to produce the right answers to questions that viewers or users might pose.

The technology behind these simulated conversations is intended to enable encounters with eyewitnesses at any time in the future as well. The eyewitnesses are shown as images on a screen that move, speak and can answer questions in classrooms or other settings.

That brings us to the next question: **Why is there unease about the culture of remembrance?** When talking about the future of a culture of remembrance, we also need to consider critiques of current developments in remembrance culture. Criticism comes from different sides. For one thing, some historians have no use for a culture of remembrance. Annette Wieviorka's reference to the "era of the witness" was by no means only positive. As a Jewish historian, she viewed the figure of the witness in part as competition for the work of historians. With their embodied experience and authentic voices, eyewitnesses can claim a problematic authority in her view, which can easily overshadow the scholarly work of historians.

The practice of witnessing has also contributed to widespread societal use of terms such as "remembrance" and "identity", which usually have no place in historical research. Many historians therefore draw a clear line here. They downplay remembrance, because, as is often said, one can only remember that which one has experienced oneself. Faced with the paradigm of witnessing and remembrance research, they pose in its stead the paradigm of learning and scholarly historical consciousness. And categorically exclude the possibility of collaboration between the two.

Many of the specialists at memorial sites distance themselves from remembrance activities "from below", but also from state-mandated remembrance events "from above". These include the annual memorial activities on and around January 27. The more time that elapses since the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp, the younger the eyewitnesses of that history were at the time. One speaker at the 2023 memorial event in the German Bundestag was Rozette Kats, who was taken in by a family in the Netherlands at the age of three. Some Bundestag memorial events now also include members of the next generation, such as Marina Weisband in 2021. Nevertheless, many Jewish people in Germany no longer feel represented by these official forms of remembrance.

One of them is Max Czollek. He criticizes an image of Judaism that focuses exclusively on survivors of the Holocaust. Many Jewish people in Germany are offended by memorial ceremonies that reduce the image of Jews to dead Jews and their status to victims. They see themselves as extras in a "memory theatre" (Michal Bodemann) that disregards their many voices and ignores their current concerns and needs. They have no use for remembrance as a means of reconciliation, and reject the illusion that Germans might make amends.

Criticism also comes from non-Jewish German citizens. The standard argument against the German culture of remembrance has to do with

its ritualization. Repetition and ritualization are important pillars of memory, but routine iteration can often hollow them out. However, an astonishing degree of variation has in fact entered official state memorial programs for January 27. In 2023, the memorial, which was introduced in 1996 under federal president Roman Herzog, was extended to all groups of victims of National Socialist persecution and violence. The focus was on people persecuted for homosexuality – and subjected to state repression for long after 1945. Paragraph 175 of the German legal code, which criminalized sexual relations between males, was not repealed until 1994. Still without a lobby or set place in the official culture of remembrance are those individuals who were marked with a black triangle and stigmatized as “asocial”.

There are two main days of Holocaust remembrance in Germany: a state memorial on January 27 and decentralized memorials on November 9. Responsibility for the former lies with the government, and for the latter with the residents of individual cities. Independent of their political affiliations, residents jointly organize their cities’ memorial events. The German culture of remembrance therefore consists at its core of these two elements – one from above and one from below – which complement each other. The practice of remembrance, in other words, is not delegated to state bodies. It needs citizens who make it their own. One feature of Germany’s culture of remembrance is that it not only lies in the hands of politicians and well-educated specialists at memorial sites, but is also maintained in very substantive form by unpaid local initiatives and art projects.

Another reason for the unease about the German culture of remembrance is its fixation on victims and the corresponding disappearance of perpetrators. The fear is that individual German responsibility for the crimes has been ebbing away as a result. A 2002 book by Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall, entitled *Opa war kein Nazi* (“Grandpa wasn’t a Nazi”), addresses this tendency. The title struck a huge chord, although it is now more than 20 years old. Over the past ten years, a different trend can be observed, which takes the opposite direction and might be titled: “Grandpa was a Nazi, and Grandma too”. This line of inquiry is of ever greater interest to second and third post-war generations. Whereas the parental generation pulled back from such questions, the grandchildren are examining their history in part due to assuming responsibility for the materials in their family archives.

For younger generations, the internet has become a low-threshold medium of remembrance offering considerable space for discussion. One interesting impetus appeared in 2021 under the hashtag #meinNazihintergrund (#myNazibackground). Launched by Moshtari Hilal and Sinthujan Varatharajah, it prompted a series of reflections by the third and

fourth generations. Among other things, these voices criticized a failure by descendants to critically examine the Nazi legacy in the form of inherited property originally acquired from “arianization” or forced labor.

Of note is that the term “background” has switched sides here. For once, it is not assigned to or imposed upon groups who have migrated to Germany, but instead refers to the majority population. And that brings us to my third question, which is: **To whom does this history belong?** As Raul Hilberg once put it, in Germany the Holocaust is family history. Under conditions such as these, can immigrants even enter into this history of guilt?

Harald Welzer, for example, rejected the possibility and asserted that National Socialism and the annihilation of Jews could not play any role for pupils with a migration background simply on account of their family or national origin. According to Welzer, Germans define their belonging to the nation by rejecting its Nazi past. A German citizen of Turkish origin would then find it difficult to assume full membership in this type of collective.

A counterexample would be the author and educator Burak Yılmaz, who pursues an entirely different approach. Growing up in a Turkish-influenced milieu in Duisburg-Obermarxloh, he experienced a very high degree of discrimination. He witnessed the frequent exclusion of Muslim pupils from school excursions to Auschwitz, for example, for fear they might not behave in accordance with the site’s rules. Shocked by this, he proceeded to organize trips for Muslim pupils to Auschwitz himself. His book *Ehrensache: Kämpfen gegen Judenhass* (“Matter of honor: Combatting antisemitism”) is a striking account of his life and work.

With many waves of immigration, the German nation has acquired a multitude of voices. The collective “we” has changed markedly over recent years. What does that mean for the German culture of remembrance? Will the Holocaust as an anchor of German remembrance remain an intra-German affair? How will those who arrived later address it? Are migrants even able to assume remembrance of a national history of guilt which they themselves have nothing to do with? What memories will the migrants themselves bring – and what roles are played by their experiences in their countries of origin? How do they approach their new historical context, and will their memories, too, find a place in the society that has taken them in?

All these questions are of great relevance and currently the object of intensive debate in politics and the media under the rubric of “renewing the German culture of remembrance”. Asked whether memories of the Holocaust are relevant for children from immigrant families,

Max Mannheimer gave a very simple answer. And in fact, his response applies to all schoolchildren, whether born in Germany or not. He said, “You do not bear guilt for what has happened in history, but you do bear responsibility that it does not happen again in this country.”

Now I come to my fourth question: **What is the relationship between democracy and a culture of remembrance?** People and parties on the far right of the political spectrum assume that the purpose of national remembrance is to strengthen the country and the pride of its citizens. They view the special case of German negative remembrance as an assault on the nation’s honor. They consequently oppose any “cult of guilt” or “pride in sin”, and refer to a “memorial of disgrace” (*Denkmal der Schande*) in the center of Berlin. In other European countries, such as Italy and Spain, we are also seeing dangerous currents of re-nationalization by which fascism is once again becoming socially acceptable.

National pride and xenophobia are thereby becoming very closely interlinked, at the cost of values such as diversity, empathy and solidarity. The frontal attack on democracy by right-wing radicals is clearly evident in how the culture of remembrance is distorted and undermined. The fact that self-critical remembrance has proven itself a means of strengthening German democracy is a thorn in the flesh to the political right.

Many parts of Europe are again seeing the rise of politicians who explicitly welcome the fascist past in this sense and openly support discriminatory and exclusionary policies against minorities. The magic words by which they mobilize masses of people at elections include honor, order, pride and greatness. One looks in vain for ideas such as responsibility, solidarity or historical truth.

With his interpretation of the first article of Germany’s *Grundgesetz*, Heribert Prantl shows how patriotism for the country’s Basic Law can be compatible with a culture of remembrance. For this lawyer and author, the first sentence can only acquire its full meaning by means of remembering the crimes of National Socialism. “Germany’s path to its Basic Law leads through the abyss. It passes forced laborers and members of a ‘master race’. It begins with the response to atrocities and crimes. It begins with the great, eternal admonition of Article 1: ‘Human dignity shall be inviolable’...”

Here it is especially clear what remembrance has to do with the future. The Basic Law’s first article develops its full meaning only in light of its full historical weight. As such, the Basic Law, which has recently been highlighted in connection with its 75th anniversary, acquires its meaning only when one remembers the stories it is intended to put an end to for

all time – the stories of the victims of antisemitism and racism. In this sense, remembering for the future means “Never again!” and that in turn means to be aware, on an individual level, of new forms of injustice – with the knowledge of past injustice and suffering serving to sharpen one’s eyes for current violations of fundamental rights and for discrimination that resumes under different historical conditions.

Which brings us to the final question, which is: **What keeps memory alive?** What does the history of the Holocaust still have to do with us today? Is this a history that now lives only in reference works? History does not just sink chronologically into an ever-deepening past. As “remembered history” by means of our engagement, it can also become part of a shared horizon of knowledge and memory – and therefore also part of the present. The answer to the question “What keeps memory alive?” is actually quite simple: attention and interest, empathy and engagement. That, however, has always been based on learning and knowledge. And that is precisely why historical research and education should not stand in opposition to remembrance, but instead form its premise. To remember historical events is to take them on as part of one’s own identity, history and experience. And that leads us back to the idea of witnessing.

Elie Wiesel, who survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald, once said: “Whoever listens to a witness becomes a witness.” A few young people have taken Wiesel’s sentence literally and founded the non-profit organization ZWEITZEUGEN e.V. Their project uses a relay system to extend the witnessing capacity of Holocaust survivors who can no longer be active themselves. The *Zweitzeugen*, or secondary witnesses, contact the survivors, visit them in Israel, and bring their stories back to German schools. They recount them to their fellow pupils, who write letters to the survivors and paint pictures for them. Relaying these stories creates a living contact, an encounter and an indelible image of the person whose story one engages with.

There are many more ways to take on the role of a secondary witness. Digital formats open ever new possibilities. One example comes from Susanne Siegert, a Leipzig resident born in 1992 who has built up her own form of remembrance using channels such as TikTok, Instagram and a podcast entitled “keine.erinnerungskultur”. The Jewish historian Marianne Awerbuch took part in the debate on Berlin’s Holocaust memorial around the year 2000. Her conclusion was: “The entire country is a memorial!” That is Siegert’s experience as well. The largest subcamp of the Dachau concentration camp lay hidden in a forest just 15 kilometers from her school. Upon hearing of this, she and another history student began organizing tours on the grounds of the former camp and sharing the circumstances and life stories of its forced laborers on social media.

When the eyewitnesses are gone, therefore, we are not left only with historians, as Katja Petrowskaja thought. The concept of witnessing has changed multiple times and has also been expanded by the survivors themselves. Who will witness for the witnesses? According to Elie Wiesel, all those who listen to a witness can become one themselves. Margot Friedländer expressed this legacy of the Holocaust survivors even more powerfully. She gave the young people around her a clear mission: “You should become the witnesses that we soon no longer can be!”

Literature

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