

## **New paths of memory: An introduction to the project *For real?***

We are among the last generations privileged to meet in person with survivors of the Holocaust. This was clear at the launch of the project *For real? Virtual encounters with Holocaust survivors* – and made every possible meeting all the more valuable. Ruth Winkelmann attended the start of the mobile tour through Brandenburg and the opening of the stationary exhibition at the Brandenburg Museum. Her striking life history moved countless individuals, also and especially young adults. Kurt Hillmann spoke with young people in Cottbus for hours – openly, powerfully and with unfailing clarity. And Margot Friedländer, one of the best known voices among Holocaust survivors, visited the exhibition in Potsdam, spoke with the curators – and tried out a VR headset herself. These were moments of deep connection and intensity for us all.

Kurt Hillmann and Margot Friedländer are no longer living. Their voices and urgent appeals remain with us, however – also in projects whose innovative technologies enable new forms of encounter. The exhibition *For real?* asks one of the key questions of our time: how can memories of the Holocaust be passed on when the eyewitnesses are no longer here?

Combining volumetric capture, VR technology and a comprehensive educational concept, a new form of remembrance has been successfully developed and tested in prototype form. *For real?* began as a mobile exhibition that toured the state of Brandenburg and brought encounters with Holocaust survivors to market squares and other public spaces. It then took a fixed exhibition form at the Brandenburg Museum, and subsequently embarked on a country-wide tour with stations in both eastern and western Germany. The huge response, with over 1,500 pupils in Brandenburg alone, shows that young people in particular are keenly interested in the history of National Socialism and seek ways to relate it to the realities of their lives today.

This is confirmed by the 2023 MEMO youth study in which more than 82% of young adults surveyed reported special historical interest in the period under National Socialism. And yet there are considerable gaps in knowledge. For the first time since the MEMO studies began, the 2025 Gedenkanstoß (Call to Remember) study shows that a majority of adult respondents seek closure with the NS period. This development

Fig.1: Ruth Winkelmann at the opening of the exhibition in Potsdam, August 2023 (© Nadine Redlich)

Fig.2: Visitors at the exhibition in Potsdam, June 2024 (© Nadine Redlich)





Figs. 3 and 4: Visitors in and at the exhibition truck in Zwickau, June 2025 (© Corinna Mehl)

clearly indicates a need for remembrance work to embark on new paths. Not to replace previous ways of promoting historical awareness, but to keep the confrontation with Nazi history alive. In order for remembrance to foster responsibility.

The *For real?* project takes an innovative and arresting approach to this shift, one that combines new technological possibilities with the ethical dimensions of teaching history. It dares to step into the future of a culture of remembrance. Its focus is not on the technology, but rather on the voices of the survivors: their experiences, emotions, admonitions. It is about the history they had to endure, which must not be forgotten. It is about the courage of those who speak out despite all they have lost. And it is about our responsibility to listen.

*For real?* asks not only how we remember, but also why we have to remember. At a time when antisemitic and racist tendencies are again on the rise, grappling with the survivors' experiences is an essential component of education in a democracy. As the survivors themselves say, it is not about assigning blame, but about assuming responsibility. Responsibility for ensuring that history is not repeated.

This innovative technological and curatorial form of remembrance culture not only offers a new way of learning about the injustices of the Nazi period. It also enables history to be experienced emotionally here



and now. It opens spaces for empathy – especially for young people, whether they live in urban centers or small towns. *For real?* represents a future-oriented model of remembrance for after the era of eyewitnesses, which is direct, accessible and eye-to-eye. It reaches out to the next generation – offering history as a source of strength.

This volume is the first comprehensive documentation of the *For real?* project, and also takes its ideas further. It places a special emphasis on the connection between technological innovation and educational responsibility: how can digital formats promote empathy and historical understanding, without reducing complexity or fostering the unexamined impression of an ‘authentic’ encounter?

It serves as a guide to the exhibitions, introduces the associated educational approaches, and provides a systematic evaluation that paves the way for subsequent ventures.

In addition to coverage of the *For real?* project in practice, this volume offers further perspectives from education, research, technology, art and practice. These include scientific articles on aspects of a digital culture of remembrance, the teaching of history and political science, and the use of immersive technologies to convey first-hand accounts of the National Socialist period. Among its authors are Aleida Assmann, Christina Brüning and Björn Stockleben. And finally, its case studies of

art-based approaches – with theater work, comics and documentary VR – prompt far-ranging reflection on future developments in remembrance culture.

The articles and essays are accompanied by compilations of responses from the many different individuals involved in the project. Holocaust survivors, exhibition attendees, educational specialists and workshop participants all have their say. They open doors to debate, and invite the above-mentioned skill so essential to the future of a culture of remembrance – the ability to listen – to be applied yet again.

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