

Wenke Wegner

Virtual encounters with Holocaust survivors: A round of perspectives

It is 9 in the morning and small groups of tenth-grade pupils are standing among the *For real?* exhibition architecture in the courtyard of the *Kulturweberei* cultural center in the Brandenburg town of Finsterwalde. Four youngsters sit on swivel chairs under the lilac-colored exhibition pavilion, each wearing a VR headset. Others read texts on the inflatable columns and take notes on clipboards. Another four watch a video on a tablet placed on a table. Others sit in a circle on the ground, engaged in discussion. Still others leaf through books laid out on a second table. A video runs on a screen set into the rear wall of an automotive trailer, watched by a different group of pupils. Suddenly a bell rings. The little groups stop their discussions, remove their VR headsets and scribble their last notes. Then each one migrates to the next station and begins working on a new task.

The scene described here could be a snapshot of the workshop for pupils developed to accompany the exhibition *For real? Virtual encounters with Holocaust survivors*. The heart of the workshop is a 60-minute series of different stations, similar to a circuit training. Groups of four pupils visit each station for ten minutes. They are exposed to multiple perspectives on the exhibition's core component: the volumetric interviews with Holocaust survivors.

But let's start from the beginning.

The *For real?* exhibition was shown in three different constellations between August 2023 and September 2025. Two of these took a mobile form at outdoor locations: the first in autumn 2023 with the above-sketched pavilion set up at seven sites in the state of Brandenburg, and the second in summer 2025 with a truck that visited locations throughout Germany. Between these two tours, in the winter of 2024/2025, the exhibition was held in stationary form with additional content in the Brandenburg Museum in Potsdam. The workshop for pupils was developed for the initial mobile version in Brandenburg. Following that six-week tour, it was expanded and adapted for the two

subsequent exhibition formats. Around 3,000 pupils took part in its 90-minute sessions over those two years.

Why school classes? How do young people relate to survivors of the Holocaust, and what should a workshop for them be like?

Right from the start, school classes from the 9th grade up were one of the exhibition's main target groups. This was due in part to recent election results and the mood of German society in general, and to a need for innovative extracurricular education about the injustices of National Socialism. Also of relevance was the special relationship between schools and Holocaust survivors since the 1970s. Eyewitnesses of the Nazi period began visiting classrooms around that time to talk about their experiences of persecution, extreme violence and the murder of their family members. From the 1970s to the 2000s, this striking educational opportunity was available to many pupils whose teachers made the effort to organize such meetings. As the survivors aged, ever fewer of them have been able to visit schools over the past two decades and talk about the horrendous events they lived through and the ongoing enormous consequences for their lives. Today, most young people know about Holocaust survivors at most from the media. Live meetings with eyewitnesses at schools or libraries are essentially a thing of the past. The *For real?* exhibition seeks to address the end of this eyewitness testimony and the loss it represents for the teaching of history.

The project team used virtual reality (VR) as the means for grappling with the history of National Socialism, but formulated a special approach to the exhibition's design and outreach. The intent was not to present VR as a new and shiny thing ("digital first, doubts later"), but to take an experimental tack and encourage debate on its use for teaching history. One important aim was to consider – expressly together with young people – whether volumetric interviews can replace live meetings with survivors, and in fact whether they might offer something above and beyond both live meetings and two-dimensional media.

Underlying concept and educational aims

The exhibition's experimental and research-oriented approach enabled the workshops to engage openly with the question of whether the VR experience can make a meaningful contribution to a future, digital culture of remembrance.

In consultation with the project team and advisory council, the following *educational aims* were defined for the workshops with school classes:

- broadening knowledge of the history of National Socialism
- gaining an understanding of volumetry and VR technologies
- grasping the occasion for this project (volumetric interviews with Holocaust survivors – why this technology, and why now?)
- considering the extent to which the interview’s technical apparatus (its dispositif) influences the results
- making connections to local and family history, such as sites of Jewish history, pre-1933 and post-1945 Jewish history, and local or regional memorials about Nazi crimes

The greatest practical challenge in designing the workshops had to do with the limited number of VR headsets, which for the pupils were the (presumed) main attraction of the exhibition. Each workshop was to offer 24 to 30 participants a chance to use one of four headsets to try out the VR application. At the same time, it had to accommodate schools’ scheduling considerations and not exceed 90 minutes. In light of these limiting conditions, the design took the form of a *Parcours*, or series of different stations. That made it possible to show different perspectives on the volumetric interviews and encourage thought in all manner of directions.

The workshops began with a greeting, a brief round of participant introductions and an introductory dialogue about the topic (15 minutes). The class was then divided into groups of four and informed about the structure and sequence. The groups moved on their own through the exhibition’s six (or seven) stations, supervised by three outreach personnel. In addition to technical assistance with the VR headsets, the personnel provided content-related input at the stations such as surprising pieces of background information in order to promote discussion. When the groups completed their 60-minute circuit through the stations, a 15-minute evaluation was held with everyone together.

Station sequence and structure

The workshop contained three stations already in the exhibition (the VR experience, the exhibition texts, and a “making of” video of the interviews at the volumetric studio) plus three temporary stations. For classes of more than 24 pupils, a book table was added as a seventh station. The book table later became a set part of the exhibition.

Each group of pupils followed a map of the workshop circuit with the following stations:

1) The survivors' interviews in a VR application

The pupils used the VR application to view the survivors' testimonies and get an idea of its technical execution and VR aesthetic.

2) Discussion of VR expectations and/or previous experience

Participants discussed any previous experience with VR headsets. They reflected on different contexts: how does using VR technology to meet Holocaust survivors differ from using it for entertainment (gaming) or information and education ("our school's Job Information Fair had a VR headset showing an Amazon warehouse").

3) "Making-of" video

This video showed technical details of the interview production process at the volumetric studio ("a round room with 36 cameras, the survivor sat in there all alone and answered questions, the poor thing had to be powdered so light wouldn't reflect off any surfaces").

4) Exhibition texts

Participants selected two survivors and read their biographies to learn more about the individuals they were "meeting" in virtual reality.

5) Book table

Here the young people looked at written or pictorial forms of testimony and considered the qualities of each medium.

6) Raw interview material

Pupils viewed unprocessed interview material on a tablet to compare its effect with that of the rendered version. This also revealed some of the difficulties in communicating with the quite elderly survivors during the interviews.

7) How does memory work?

The task here was to describe one day from a previous summer holiday. Participants 'failed' and could thereby see how the experiences described by the survivors differed from those of their own. Certain aspects were examined in greater detail: the Holocaust survivors were talking about drastic – as opposed to commonplace – experiences, and have also described them a large number of times.

Content and methodological modifications

After the tour through Brandenburg, the exhibition was held two more times: first in the “Brandenburg.Studio” wing of the Brandenburg Museum, and then with a truck at outdoor locations throughout Germany in 2025. This offered a rare opportunity to evaluate, further develop and improve on the exhibition’s architecture, its approach to visitors and its educational concept.

During the initial tour in Brandenburg, many pupils quickly lost interest at a few of the workshop stations. The outreach personnel had to work intensively to keep them involved. For the second tour, therefore, the making-of video was redone. Initially in the form of an image film, it now took an explanatory approach with voiceovers and clearer shots and scenes.

Many pupils had never heard a Holocaust survivor talk before and thus had no means of comparison with the interviews in the volumetric studio. The “Expectations/Previous experience” station was therefore replaced by a station showing two interviews with the survivor Ruth Winkelmann. She describes the same experience in both instances: one at her own home in 2021 and the other at the volumetric studio in 2022. The pupils could see how the production setting and atmosphere affected Winkelmann’s body language and the qualities of the interview overall.

Outreach expertise: Incorporated early on

The outreach aspect of the exhibition benefited greatly from the fact that outreach and educational specialists monitored and co-curated the project from the start. This type of early involvement is rare for an exhibition context.

The overall design of the exhibition took the needs of school classes into account. How much space and how many seats would they require? What design elements would appeal to younger visitors? How should the texts be written in order to be easily understood by different target groups?

Pupils' input in the conception stage

The outreach to school groups worked well in part thanks to early collaboration with pupils from Potsdam who helped select the content for the VR application. In March 2023, a 10th-grade class at the Voltaire School watched raw footage over the course of two days (five interviews for a total of five hours of video material) and made a preliminary selection of moments that should appear in the exhibition. These moments formed the basis for the segments ultimately rendered for the VR application. The fact that pupils were not only a key target group but also helped develop the exhibition's content generally elicited a murmur of approval among workshop participants.

The school class from Potsdam helped develop the outreach program in yet another way. It served as a test group for how the exhibition's primary recipients would respond to the content of the survivor interviews, which questions they would ask about the material, and how much of an introduction to the topic would be needed.

The class also contributed to the design of the VR space. One pupil's suggestion to furnish the virtual space for the survivors like "a comfortable living room with flowers and photos on the walls" was discussed at length by the exhibition team. In so doing, it became clear that this type of (seemingly) realistic design would inhibit important aspects of media-related education. The team decided to model the virtual space on the already "abstract" architecture of the volumetric studio, which highlighted the special environment of the interviews and prompted discussion: Shouldn't talks with Holocaust survivors be held in a pleasant, non-stressful setting? Is it a real interview if the only questions asked are those we already know the survivors can answer "well"? Ethical questions of this type were met with strong interest on the part of many pupils.

Feedback from pupils

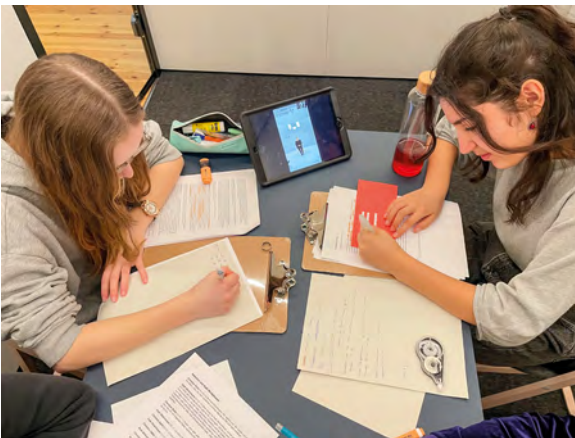
When asked in the concluding part of the workshop which station was the "best", most pupils said the one with the VR application. Some, however, emphasized the qualities of other stations after trying out the VR headset. The book table and its range of options was a real discovery for many participants. "I can decide for myself how fast I want to read something and whether to go back and look at other parts." Others were intrigued by the look behind the scenes: "It's a chance to see what goes into an interview like that, also what can go wrong."

Depending on previous experience with the medium and on willingness to engage with the survivors' stories, participants' responses to the VR application ranged from "boring" or "the quality was really bad, I was distracted by all the technical bugs" to strong emotional involvement such as "That was very real. When someone says that kind of thing in an empty room like that, it really gets to you." Many pupils were struck by the near-real impression and by the immersive experience itself. "It was cool how real that looked. When Kurt Hillmann leaned forward I actually leaned back a little." Others described how it was easier to concentrate when "sitting alone in a room with a survivor and having to listen without any distractions."



Fig.1: Wenke Wegner explains the VR technology at the *Lost in "Metaverse"* public conference by the German Ethics Council, Erfurt, November 2023 (© Johanna Schüller)

Fig.2: Pupils from the Voltaire School formulate questions for the survivors' interviews, Potsdam 2023 (© Wenke Wegner)



Overall, the comments that pupils left on the feedback wall indicate an eagerness to engage with questions about the medium, and an interest in the range of topics presented.

Conclusion: Successful outreach, productive further development – and an opportunity for historical-political education

From an outreach and educational perspective, this project was nearly ideal. Outreach was a pillar of it from the beginning, in contrast to many other projects. As the curator for education and outreach, I could be there from the start, engage intensively with the historical and media-related material, and help develop the exhibition's content and form. Pupils could also be involved in the process and material could be tested on the target group. The educational team could undergo comprehensive (and paid!) preparation. In addition, team members could attend a workshop on how to deal with potentially difficult or dangerous situations involving people with far-right views in public spaces.

As the person who conceived the workshops for school classes, I could conduct these workshops myself at different locations in Brandenburg and with very different school groups. If a question on a worksheet was evidently unclear to many of the young participants, we could reformulate it or modify the emphasis of a particular station. The indoor format at the Brandenburg Museum allowed us to add stations to the exhibition architecture, which in turn allowed individual visitors to consider some of the workshop's content and media-related questions in addition to the VR application and texts. Workshops held at the Brandenburg Museum benefited from the new environment and additional stations, making the exercises nearly self-explanatory for the pupils. This greatly reduced the need for the educational team during the circuit – although it was still essential for the dialogue-based start and the concluding evaluation.

When the project began, my priority was on political-historical educational work: using interviews with Holocaust survivors to increase young people's knowledge about the crimes of the Nazi period. When the project got underway, I initially thought this aim would fade in comparison to interacting with different remembrance media and examining their implications. However, an important realization over the course of this project was the fact that media-related questions can provide a framework that inspires pupils to engage with issues of a historical-political and ethical nature.



Figs.3 and 4: Pupils at the book table during a workshop in Jüterbog, September 2023 (© Wenke Wegner)

Wenke Wegner, Dr. phil., studied European media culture in Lyon and Weimar, doctorate from the University of Bremen on film aesthetics and education. Numerous publications in this area. From 2022 to 2024 education associate at the Deutsches Historisches Museum. From 2023 to 2024 education and outreach curator for the exhibition *For real?* from the Brandenburg Association for Culture and History. Currently active with the Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten (permanent exhibition on the Schönhausen palace and Nazi ‘degenerate art’ campaign).