

Teaching a troubled past : potential challenges and pitfalls of incorporating family recollections into history education

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Teaching a Troubled Past

Potential Challenges and Pitfalls of Incorporating Family Recollections into History Education

(Red.) Mit den Erinnerungen der Zeitzeugen konkurrieren zu müssen ist das grosse Problem der wissenschaftlichen Zeitgeschichte. Die Schwierigkeiten potenzieren sich, wenn diese Erinnerungen in der Familie weitergegeben wurden, weil die nachfolgenden Generationen geneigt sind, das Erinnerungswissen zu beschönigen, wie der nachfolgende Beitrag am Beispiel des Nationalsozialismus zeigt. Dadurch erwächst dem Geschichtsunterricht ein ganz spezifisches Aufgabenfeld.

■ Sabine Moller

«What springs to mind are the stories that I have heard from my grandfather for example. He was [also] sort of lying on the Ruhr meadows in terrible frost as a soldier in captivity. [...] So these are merely family recollections, not history we learned in school or something like that. Of course we are all familiar with these images from documentaries which have imprinted themselves in everyone's mind to an unbelievable degree, these marches through the concentration camps by which everybody actually gets overwhelmed. But what comes first are such stories.»

This statement is from a students' group discussion about the Second World War at a German university in 2003.¹ The speaker is a 25-year-old student we call Nicole who is trying to understand her reactions towards the Second World War. She differentiates sources of historical consciousness through which she is reconstructing this time. What springs to mind first is the stories told by her grandfather about his time of privation as a prisoner of war. She categorizes these associations as «family recollections» [Familienerinnerungen] and distinguishes them from history lessons in school. She does not go into detail about what kind of history she has encountered in school, but maybe she is remembering pictures from her textbooks or documentaries she watched in school that led her to the «images of documentaries which have imprinted themselves in everyone's mind to an unbelievable degree». These images are those *icons of destruction* (Brink 1998) everyone of us can evoke in his inner eye, such as death marches and images from concentration camps. These images are commonly encountered at memorial sites and exhibi-

tions, on television, in movies, books, or newspapers. These are pictures you get «overwhelmed» by – and this reaction creates the opposite of a lively communication. Maybe it is exactly for this reason that Nicole stops talking about these images and goes back to what she remembers and communicates most vividly: the stories told by her grandfather.

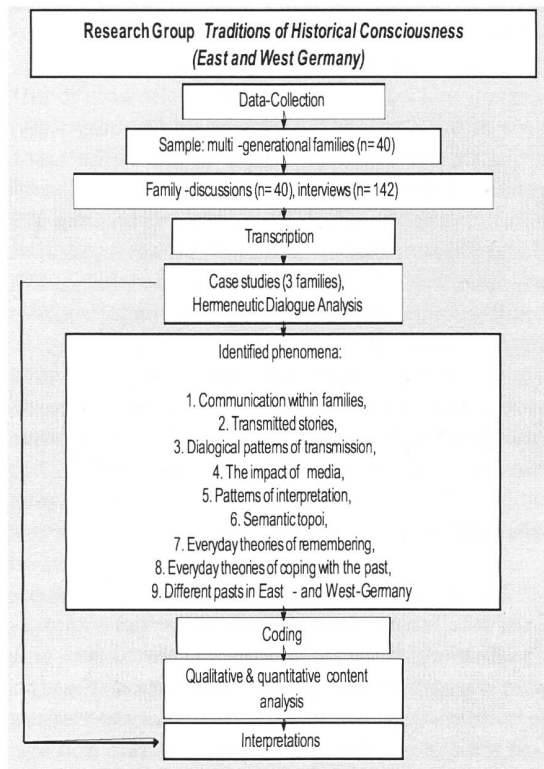
Contemporary history is the part of history that has been witnessed by those who lived through it and are still alive (Caplan 2007). In Germany, these «contemporary witnesses» are sometimes called the natural enemies of contemporary historians, because they regularly question and critique the document-based historical accounts established by academic scholars (Hockerts 2001). So, contemporary history seems to be by definition an area of tension between academic research and lived history. This tension is even higher when contemporary history consists of painful, traumatic or contested pasts. In Germany this is exceptionally significant because, as Raul Hilberg once put it, the Holocaust, in Germany, is family history. I would like to introduce here a study where this family history is linked to the perspective of former bystanders, followers, and perpetrators in the *Third Reich*.

The main goal of my paper is to highlight findings from empirical research that show unintended consequences of history education, and I want to discuss them in the broader context of the question, «How do we cope with students' individual (unofficial) histories which are in conflict with the official history put forward by the school curriculum?»

The research project

The work presented here was done by a research group called «Traditions of Historical Consciousness» that has investigated how the Second World War and the Holocaust have been spoken of and transmitted across generations (Welzer et al. 2002; Welzer 2005). For the German study, 40 families, which included members from the generation that experienced National Socialism, their children, and grandchildren, were interviewed in a group discussion as well as in individual interviews. The main goal of the project was to explore what Germans remember from the Nazi period, how they talk about it, and what is passed on to the children and grandchildren. All 182 interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a combination of hermeneutical interpretation and content analysis.² Altogether 2600 pages were analyzed, with the help of the software MAXQDA, in topic-based,

cross-sectional evaluations of the material as a whole. In this way we could reconstruct which stories are taken up, adapted, and retold by the younger generation.



The fact that people prefer to pass on the stories which underline the rebellious and daring character of older relatives emerges in several interviews. In particular, it is the grandchildren who seem to scrutinize their grandparents' stories for any clues that would indicate the moral integrity of their relatives. We found evidence for the often remarked assumption that grandchildren are *natural allies* of their grandparents. Actually there were 26 out of 40 families for whom we could document this kind of effort on the part of younger generations to depict their own parents and grandparents in a way which fulfils the need for an intact family history and for ancestors who proved themselves during a «terrible time». I am going to illustrate this with an example of how one story from the Second World War is retold from different generational perspectives.

The Krug Family

The tendency to glorify the grandparents' generation can be found in a family we named Krug. In an individual interview, the twenty-six-year old granddaughter explains that her grandmother's generous nature was not affected by the political situation during the Nazi time. She was not deterred by potential sanctions, and stood up equally for crashed allied pilots and for those persecuted by the Nazi rulers. As the granddaughter says, «If she saw that she could help, then she did help.»

However, there is little evidence in the 91-year-old grandmother's recollections that she aided prisoners or escapees from the nearby concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. According to her, she was only informed about the concentration camps at the end of the war. Following are three different versions of one story. The first version is told from the grandmother's perspective. Frau Krug tells how she came into contact with former inmates from a concentration camp when the camps were liberated by the Allies in 1945. Since her village was in the Bergen-Belsen area, the villagers were forced at the end of the war by the Allied occupation administration to accommodate former prisoners.

Frau Krug: The Jews were the worst afterwards. They really harassed us ... They sat there and made us serve them, and then they didn't want ... We had this big hayloft [where] they slept overnight. ... The Jews and Russians, I always made sure that I didn't get them. They were really disgusting, you know? I always stood down the street, in front of the gate, and when they said, «Quarters,» I said, «No, everything's full!» If the Jews ... came, I said, «It's all full of Russians, you can come in with me!» ... And when the Russians came, then I said the same thing, that there were Jews here.

Clearly, Frau Krug is still annoyed to the present day about the former Jewish concentration camp inmates rejecting the accommodation they were offered. But by the end of the war she had found a solution by using a trick; she would intercept these people at the entrance to her farm and tell them that their house had no more vacancies.

Even the sixty-four-year-old son, who himself still has his own memories of the war, repeatedly points out that his family could have not known anything about the camps before the end of the war.

Interviewer: And how did you experience the persecution of the Jews?

Son: Not at all, nothing. We didn't hear anything about it. I knew when the Americans moved in here, they were here two or three days. Then a Jew came from Bergen-Belsen, and even my mother, who was a «NS-Frauenschaftsführerin», you know, she didn't know anything about it. Then he told her that there was an extermination camp there, you know. [...] He had survived. And he spent the night with us and talked all evening.

But Herr Krug is also able to tell a story that was told to him. He tells the story of how years ago he and his wife visited the concentration camp memorial at Bergen-Belsen. In this context he mentions an incident told to him by his wife, who, according to Herr Krug, knew even more about this concentration camp. This was due to the fact that she had been employed on an estate near Bergen-Belsen where she heard that the lady of the manor was hiding escaped inmates. Herr Krug refers to this person as «Granny».

Son: She [his wife, SM] was on a farm in Belsen for a year. They came right by there. The grandma

hid some of them, and they sat in a wooden box. Then [the SS-men, SM] went around, searching everywhere ... They would have shot the grandma immediately. She put a hot pot with boiling potatoes on top of the wooden box so they wouldn't get them.

The twenty-six year old granddaughter now tells her version of what her own grandmother did:

Granddaughter: Once she told a story I thought was really interesting: Our village was on the road to Bergen-Belsen, and she hid someone who escaped from one of those transports, in a really interesting way, in some grain box with straws sticking out – she really hid them. Then people came and looked in her farmyard and she kept quiet. That's a little thing that I really give her a lot of credit for.

The granddaughter has conflated multiple stories. In her own account elements have been re-assembled which can be traced back to the family recollections of the grandmother and father. Only the settings – the closeness to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and the lodging provided for the escapees or survivors – are arranged here in such a way that they guarantee a family history which was not affected by National Socialism. Even minor details – such as the grandmother's hayloft, where she had been forced to accommodate the liberated inmates of the concentration camp *after* 1945 – reappear in the granddaughter's story of wartime events, when she talks of the clever hiding place in the grain crate from which a straw was still sticking out.

The granddaughter seems to integrate the family recollections into her own image of her grandmother's generosity, and in the same way, she presents a certain picture to the interviewer who is nearly her same age. This picture ensures recognition of her own family history during the National Socialist time, and in doing this she precludes any critical questions from the outset.

This glorification can be explained within the theoretical framework of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. Halbwachs writes about the collective memory of the family; that the notion we have at the time of recollection «of the moral nature of our parents [...] imposes itself on our mind with so much power that we cannot escape being inspired by it» (1992, p. 61). It is for example, the notion that members of our family do help, if they see that they can help that serves as a frame in which family recollections are reconstructed. This notion of the moral nature of her grandparents has to be adjusted to the knowledge about the *Third Reich* encountered in school. With respect to the history of National Socialism in Germany this process is closely linked to the question, «How did my parents or grandparents contribute to the Holocaust»? This means we have to cope with questions of identity and the need to solve contradictions. In this respect historical knowledge can turn out to be a double-edged sword; the greater the knowledge

about the history of the Holocaust the greater seems to be the need to locate one's own ancestors in a historical role or setting that does not participate in prejudice, war crimes, and genocide.

The research project was based on a qualitative design. We examined processes of historical understanding and sense-making through intensive, hermeneutic analyses, but we were also able to test some of our findings through an additional survey. In this survey a representative sample of Germans was asked about the attitudes of their parents and grandparents towards National Socialism. Only 6% of the respondents said that their ancestors had very positive or positive attitudes while 49% thought they had negative or very negative attitudes towards the regime. But this survey also showed that the more advanced the respondent's level of education, the greater the tendency to attribute attitudes against National Socialism to their own ancestors (Welzer et al. 2002, pp. 246ff.).

Discussion

Our empirical findings document a paradoxical effect. The grandchildren feel a contradiction between official textbooks and other sources detailing the Holocaust on one side and family recollections and their own experiences with their grandparents on the other side. But the younger generations do accept the official narrative, and consider the *Third Reich* a negativ past. The *Third Reich* is thought of in regard to its outcome – the Holocaust. German crimes are certainly present here and several of the grandchildren also use the term «generation of perpetrators» in this context. However, if one asks the younger generation about their own grandparents' experiences during this period, their responses emphasize the courage and/or suffering of their own relatives – as in the example presented above –, thus eclipsing the political context. Approval of National Socialism or involvement in the system of Nazi rule remains remarkably pale – often in contrast to the stories of contemporary witnesses, who even today still refer to their function at that time with pride.³

What implications do these findings suggest for history education? Why does history education need to address this problem? How can history education deal with contradictions between school curriculum and family recollections?

It is helpful for teachers to be aware of the social psychological processes which underpin private recollections, because these processes can thwart a critical encounter of a recent past in at least two ways. First, the glorification of one's own grandparents is a form of presentism, which itself is a general problem in the understanding of history (Lowenthal 1997). Grandchildren view their grandparents' pasts in present terms, imputing their own experiences with them to their ancestors' attitudes in earlier times. Presentism is an obstacle to historical think-

ing that has already been addressed in history education (Wineburg 2001). A second phenomenon that characterizes the grandchildren's glorified recollections is the fundamental attribution error: our tendency to attribute actions to individual virtues or defects rather than see people's behaviour as it is shaped by situations (Trope/Gaunt 2003, pp. 190ff.). This is another social psychological process that might be addressed in history education.

But what are the *goals of teaching history* in schools? If one of these goals is the development of the critical thinking and research skills that historians use, starting history lessons with students' family recollections of a troubled past might be a very difficult point of departure. In general, *oral history* projects in schools are a great opportunity to motivate students to begin to engage with history, to produce and collect sources, and to create their own narrations about the past. In interviews with contemporary witnesses individual experiences with «big history» become the centre of investigation, and students are invited to reflect on the difference between living through and remembering history. Students have the opportunity to learn how these vivid and concrete memories were created and retold in a personal conversation. In this respect, the recognition that the contemporary interview is an account of the past that needs as much interrogation and close reading as other sources could be a valuable insight. Interviews from oral history projects in school have a great capability to advance students' ability to critically assess sources.

Admittedly, on that score it can be challenging to motivate students to start by interviewing members of their own family who were witnesses of contemporary history. Using critical historical thinking and research skills means to treat information, from both primary sources and other documents, with methodological mistrust. It might be too difficult for children and adolescents to address their own family recollections with this kind of scepticism and suspicion. I assume that the same productive unease or confusion that results from conflicting historical accounts and fosters critical historical thinking skills could also hinder the development of these skills when students examine sources that are too closely linked to questions of their own identity.

On the other hand it becomes all the more important for schools to give students such kinds of impulses. If family recollections are not critiqued in school, then it probably will not happen elsewhere. Although this might be true, we should be realistic about the goals and achievements of history education. A history classroom should not be confused with a therapeutic setting where problematic family recollections are addressed. The range of possible primary sources and historical accounts to develop the critical historical thinking skills that historians use is in principle unlimited. Collecting personal oral histories can motivate students to talk with their parents and grandparents about the past. It is

a great pedagogical tool for engagement, but educators must be aware of potential challenges and pitfalls.

Anmerkungen

- 1 This discussion was based amongst others on photos from a very popular exhibition about crimes of the German army (the so called Wehrmacht's exhibition). For further details see (Jensen/Moller 2007). This group discussion was part of the European comparison of the research project «Traditions of Historical Consciousness» (cf. Welzer/Moller/Tschuggnall 2002; Moller 2003; Welzer 2007). A shorter English version was published by Welzer (2005). For methodological questions see Jensen (2000). Parts of my paper draw upon research published in these papers. This paper was presented in 2009 at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego.
- 2 The analyses were based on Hermeneutical Dialogue Analysis (after Welzer) and Content Analysis (after Mayring). For further details see Jensen (2000).
- 3 Frau Krug is also an example, where she emphasises her function as Nazi «Frauenschaftsführerin» several times over the course of the interview. Her son also points this out in the sequence presented here – although with the intention to clearly illustrate the secrecy under which the persecution of the Jews and the concentration camps were kept.

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