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Memory and Self-Identity of Germans in Israel - an Oral History Project

After completing my PhD in German at the University of California, Los Angeles in 2003/4, I spent a year at the Bucerius Institute as a post-doctoral scholar. During this time, I expanded my research agenda from literary studies into oral history, *Alltagsgeschichte*, and life narratives as I began an interview project with Germans, both Gentiles and converts to Judaism, who live permanently in Israel. After an unexpectedly long hiatus of some seven years during which I attained tenure at Wayne State University in Detroit and worked on different projects -- particularly a monograph entitled *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Media* (Rutgers UP 2011) which further extended my research focus into contemporary American culture -- I plan to complete it in 2012. While most oral historians use interviews as a core primary source for their scholarly monographs, I decided not to follow this model but the less common practice of publishing select interviews as a book because I want the interviewees own voices to be heard and let them tell their own life story before I provide a qualitative analysis of the entire corpus of over 60 interviews that will conclude the book.

I sought to understand how the interviewees' individual and cultural memories and identities are constructed and expressed in their life narratives. Moreover, I wanted to specifically explore why some Germans would live in a society where at times they are still be perceived as walking signifiers of the Holocaust because the genocide remains constitutive of national memory and identity, not least because it provides much of the framework for interpreting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. According to both dominant Israeli and German discourse, the Holocaust turned Germans and Jews into Others and they are simultaneously bound and separated by a relationship that Dan Diner famously termed a negative symbiosis and Gert Mattenklott described as dominated by *Befangenheit*, a sense of awkwardness and uneasiness. At the same time, one finds the beginning of a normalization process, particularly over the past 10 years. Germans still constitute the largest number of volunteers in Israel, 9,000 German and Israeli high school students participate annually in youth exchange programs, there are some 18.000 Israelis living in Berlin alone, German language classes at the Goethe Institutes in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem are regularly fully booked, and the number of Israeli tourists in Berlin increased fivefold in the past 10 years.

I. Project Description

The project involves two distinct research phases: The first phase included background research, developing the overall guidelines and specific questions for subjects I wanted to discuss with my collaborators, and most importantly conducting the interviews as well as transcribing them. The second phase involves the following: 1. selecting the interviews I want to include in the book (I had planned to choose 10 to 12 but ended up with 17 must-haves in order to adequately reflect the heterogeneity of the corpus); 2. editing the selected interviews to reduce them in length and carefully adapt them to the written medium; 3) corresponding with these 17 interviewees to raise follow-up questions that arose in the editing process, ask for an update and get the final approval of the transcript before publication; 4) developing an order in which the interviews will appear in the book (I decided on an order that can be described either by the metaphor of the domino principle or the notion of concentric circles. In other words, each of the interviews shares aspects with both the preceding and the following one to ensure a flow in the book's overall narrative structure. But at the same time, I seek to represent a maximal diversity of life experiences); 5) analyzing the qualitative data from the entire corpus of over 60 interviews for the book's detailed epilogue

II. Preliminary Results

While I expected collective Holocaust guilt to be the significant motivating factor for Germans to live in Israel and in many cases convert to Judaism, this core hypothesis was not confirmed. The life narratives of my interview partners reflect a vast range of motivations and experiences in which the German collective past does of course play a role but it neither dominates their daily lives nor constituted a core reason for emigration and/or conversion. A preliminary analysis of the interviews indicated three interrelated but partly contradictory processes:

1. Acculturation and Attempted Passing: The notion of passing describes disguising the stigma of a disfavored origin like social class or ethnicity by consciously altering appearance and behavior into culturally acceptable forms to be part of a socially more desirable group. Most of the interviewees created identities as Israeli and thus culturally Jewish, even if they didn't convert. While acculturation is common among immigrants to any country and necessary on both an individual and a collective level, for Germans in Israel it also constitutes an effort to escape the status of the negative Other especially if it is coupled with conversion. Yet, despite seeking to acculturate and even assimilate, their identities remained a complex hybrid or "zwischen den Stühlen," as one of the interviewees put it.

2. Rejection of Gentiles to Uphold Collective Israeli Identity in the Jewish State: These attempts at acculturation and passing trigger rejection processes, both socio-culturally and inter-personally, because Jewish-Israeli identity is to a significant extent constructed in opposition to Gentiles in general and in the post-Holocaust age to Germans in particular. The line between Them and Us that my interviewees tried to cross by living in Israel and, in many cases, converting is thus reinforced. Incidents of anti-German and/or anti-Gentile sentiments or behavior mentioned include that an Orthodox colleague spit out a piece of the bread an

interviewee had baked and that Benni Begin told a journalist that he does not speak to Germans. Not even the next generation, raised in Israel by a German and an Israeli parent, could escape such discriminatory experiences. While both sons of an interviewee were called “Nazi” at school, the Israeli-born daughter of one of the two German women married to an Israeli I found who did not convert, was told by a close friend that if your mother isn’t Jewish, you are not Jewish either and therefore also not Israeli. And when she tried to express her hybrid identity as a teen by wearing a small silver cross and a Magen David, both family heirlooms, together on a silver necklace, she was verbally attacked in the street and suspended from school until she would take it off. Unlike other immigration societies like the U.S., Israeli society shows little tolerance for complex identities if they fall outside the Halachic definition of “Jewish,” especially where the German Other is concerned.

3. Partial Acceptance and Integration of Germans to Uphold Israeli Identity in an Immigration Society: However, alongside this rejection of Germans as the negative Other, especially if they do not convert, Israeli society also engages in a diametrically opposed process in supporting their attempts at acculturation and passing as new Israeli immigrants. Such a desire to culturally streamline newcomers is particularly strong in immigration societies, such as Israel or the U.S., due to the need to create a collective identity among the citizens. Hence, a self-identification as culturally Israeli and conversion to Judaism is encouraged, at times even enforced, in both the official and the personal context, in order to fully integrate new immigrants into the dominant culture. For instance, while foreign marriage certificates are legally recognized, marriage between Jews and Gentiles is impossible as there are no civil unions. And for all but two of the women in my corpus not only conversion as such but by Orthodox rules was a condition for marriage, despite the fact that the families they married into were secular, so that both the daughter-in-law and potential grandchildren would be officially recognized as Jewish. As one of my interviewees aptly phrased the personal and collective pressure to convert, “Hauptsache sie wird Jüdin.”

III. Methodology

The project reflects the methodological turn towards examining the everyday experiences of ordinary people engendered by *Alltagsgeschichte*, oral history, and the study of life narratives. In conducting the interviews, I followed the life-history approach and structured them chronologically while allowing for prolepses and analepses as well as reflections and meta-comments. In fact, I encouraged deviations from chronology by interspersing topical questions, for instance, on family history in the Third Reich and views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as questions specific to a particular life story wherever they fit best into the narrative framework which was largely generated by the interviewee.

According to oral historian Valerie Yow, the “in-depth interview is a research method that is based on direct intervention by the observer and on the evocation of evidence. In the sense, that the evidence was not tangible until the interviewer recorded it and that the evidence is the result of the interviewer’s questioning, this is the making of evidence.” But rather than denying

or trying to eliminate the subjective effects, we should try and understand them or, as sociologist Jack Douglas put it, we should explore “how different forms of subjective interaction with the people we are studying affect our conclusions about them.” Consequently, oral historians and life writing scholars advocate that both the interviewing and the analytic process include critical reflections on the interaction between our own and our collaborators’ subject positions.

I will moreover cross disciplinary and methodological boundaries by incorporating written life narratives into the interview transcripts. The two text types will of course be typographically offset in the book. This intermediary approach has a number of advantages: It enables me to raise questions, particularly challenging ones that encourage self-reflection, with the hindsight of having completed the interviews as well as thoroughly read and carefully edited the transcripts. It also allows the interviewees to comment on their oral narrative, reflect on how their ideas may have changed, and bring their life narrative up to date, especially as eight years have passed since I conducted most interviews. Allowing and encouraging my collaborators to comment on their interviews in writing will hopefully also minimize requests to make significant changes to the transcript before publication. Moreover, while interviews are characterized by the immediacy and dialogicity of orality, the written narratives will reflect the distance, lesser time constraints, and more soliloquous nature of life writing and thus be characterized by lower levels of self-censoring. I expect the written segments of my collaborators’ life narratives therefore to provide deeper insight into experiences mentioned in the interviews, represent memories that were not narrated orally, narrate aspects of the oral accounts in a different way, and offer reflections and meta-comments. Last but certainly not least, asking for written comments involves them in the analytic process thus democratizing it by minimizing hierarchies.

IV. Ethical Reflections

As literary scholar Thomas Couser cautioned, “the vast majority of collaborative life stories result from partnerships that are voluntary, amicable, and mutually beneficial. Still, there is a thin and not always clear line between making, taking, and faking the life of another person in print. Co-authoring another’s life [story] can be a creative or a destructive act, a service or a disservice, and act of homage or of appropriation.” Moreover, as scholars who co-generate life narratives, we violate Immanuel Kant’s famous ethical principle that people must be treated as ends in themselves and not as a means to an end because we do use our collaborators for ends that are largely our own. So we must take particular care not to betray their trust. Clearly, one should not elicit testimony that is self-indicting and if it is nevertheless given, we should carefully point it out and/or ask for clarification. And this pertains not only to interviewees whose ideals and convictions we share but also and especially to collaborators with whom we differ on such core identity markers as politics, ideology or religion. The most difficult ethical dilemmas, then, are those that arise from a conflict between what Couser termed the obligation to both truth and trust when we do not share the collaborator’s values and beliefs. It is precisely because of these dilemmas that there are so few collaborative projects, whether in oral history or life writing, with perpetrators. While I genuinely liked the majority of my collaborators, a

dilemma between the obligation of trust and truth did arise for me with a few interviewees, including a reborn Christian and an aristocrat-turned-settler, whose core values include the idea that Judea and Samaria, as they term the occupied areas, are part of Israel, and which I clearly don't share.

What are the ethical dilemmas, then? During the interview, it is necessary to develop and retain rapport but restrain from both actively voicing and agreeing with an interviewee's convictions and arguments if one does not share them, in other words, to find the fine line between one's own conscience and keeping the narrator talking. And the ethical quandaries continue into the processes of editing and analyzing the interview transcripts for publication. To do justice to the obligation of trust, I decided against including the interview with the reborn Christian in the book because I think it is in his best interest not to make what I consider to be a significantly self-incriminating interview public. I hope to do justice to the obligation to truth by employing quotes from the interview anonymously in the analysis of the interview corpus that will conclude the book. Moreover, I will include in its entirety an interview with another evangelical Christian, whose self-portrayal raises fewer ethical concerns as it is much less self-incriminating. I will also include the interview with the aristocratic settler in the interest of representing as broad a spectrum of experiences and convictions. And I hope to justify the obligation of trust by asking him to read the transcript, add written comments, and authorize publication. Nevertheless and despite being aware that his decision to be interviewed was an informed one and that it reflects his interest in making his political views public in hopes of gaining support, and also despite my awareness that being tolerant of intolerant others can have dire consequences, there remains an unease at exposing him to public scrutiny when I expect the implied reader to reject much, if not most, of what he defends and embodies. And if I criticize his beliefs and convictions in the analysis section, even if only implicitly, do I then not violate the notion of not using collaborators' words to ends they would not share or condone? And while the collaborators whose convictions I find reprehensible may never read the book, is it necessary and is it possible to exclude from the composite figure that constitutes the implied reader in my mind as I am writing the analysis and thus fully liberate myself from the obligation of trust?