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Polish voices in the Workshop of Memory

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The Workshop of Memory (in German: *Werkstatt der Erinnerung*) is the oral history archive of the Research Centre for Contemporary History in Hamburg. The collection currently contains over 2,200 interviews and is still growing.[1] A simple search in its database using the keyword "Poland" yields more than one hundred hits. The search results do not always point to detailed narratives that are most relevant to oral historians. Nevertheless, it is surprising how often, how varied and how differently Poland, Germany's neighbour, is mentioned, be it as a country of origin of the interviewees, as a historical place, as a destination of journeys or as a national or historical projection. It can therefore be assumed that the Workshop of Memory is an archive that could be a relevant address for oral historians interested both in Poland, Polish history, Polish voices or in the intertwined histories of the two countries and in the perception of Poland and Poles. Yet, it is also safe to assume that the Workshop of Memory is not very well known in Poland. This article aims to change that.

Below, I would like to describe the history of the Workshop of Memory and outline the historical, experiential and narrative aspects of Polish history, Polish experiences and Polish narratives that the interviews provide information on. To this end, I will sketch the founding history of the interview archive and then describe its holdings. After a general overview, I will concentrate on those interviews that can be understood as Polish voices in the broadest sense. Since this article is primarily intended to provide information for a Polish readership, and as we have already touched on at least one aspect that could well be discussed based on these interviews – the question of (shifting) national attributions – I will first return to the above-mentioned presentation of a brief history of the Workshop of Memory before commenting on some selected collections.

The memory workshop – origins and focus of the collection

The Workshop of Memory was established in 1989 by a number of members of parliament with the active support of the then director of the Research Centre, the historian Detlev Peukert. This, however, was not a consequence of the Cold War, which is usually associated with the year 1989. In 1990, it was established as an initially temporary (today: permanent) project at the Research Centre for the History of National Socialism (now the Research Centre for Contemporary History) in Hamburg, as the city parliament voted in favour of its establishment. The aim of the Workshop of Memory was to preserve those aspects of the "memory of the city" that had previously received too little attention, and specifically to conduct and archive interviews with men and

1 https://zeitgeschichte-hamburg.de/WDE_information-for-english-speakers.html [accessed: 15.05.2024].

women who had been persecuted by the Nazi regime for racist reasons or who had been political opponents.[2] How did it come about? In the years preceding this decision, a number of socio-political developments and discussions about how to commemorate the Nazi past coincided. These were linked to changes in the history of historiography and generational changes. As a relatively young historian, Detlev Peukert brought with him to Hamburg a number of academic and socio-political experiences.[3] During his academic career, he had worked intensively on forms of resistance to National Socialism. In 1978, he became a research assistant to Lutz Niethammer at the University of Essen. While there, he was closely involved in the oral history project *Lebensgeschichte und soziale Kultur im Ruhrgebiet* (Life history and social culture in the Ruhr region) that later came to be regarded as pioneering for German historians.[4] In Peukert's view, oral sources were particularly useful for "understanding how contemporaries [...] organized history in their own lives" and "what history meant to them."[5] What sounds obvious to oral historians today he declared in 1984, at a time when mainstream German historians generally rejected interviews as unscientific and too subjective. In the 1980s, he had also successfully campaigned for a memorial to be erected in the former synagogue in the German city of Essen. As the new director of the Research Centre in Hamburg, he argued for the political and moral justification of "history as a duty," in which the aim should be to use the tools of science to determine "where we come from." He also promoted an understanding of history as a "public task of living memory."[6] This approach attracted considerable interest among the city's residents, given that for many years there had been controversial debates about how to deal with the memory of the Nazi era.[7]

For almost 35 years now, the Workshop of Memory has been a repository of interviews with women and men from Hamburg and northern Germany. The following overview of the history of the Workshop of Memory is intended to demonstrate how the research interests of historians have evolved and undergone change over time. Initially, the priority was on interviewing those who had been persecuted as Jews.

2 For further details, see L. Apel, *Ein besonderes Gedächtnis der Stadt? Eine Bestandsaufnahme zum 30-jährigen Jubiläum der Werkstatt der Erinnerung*, in L. Apel, *Erinnern, erzählen, Geschichte schreiben. Oral History im 21. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 2022, pp. 49–80.

3 See R. Bessel, *Detlev J. K. Peukert (1950–1990)*, in *German History*, vol. 8 (1990), no. 3, pp. 321–324.

4 L. Niethammer, *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930 bis 1960*, vol. 3, Berlin 1983, 1985.

5 Detlev Peukert in the RIAS Berlin radio feature, 13.10.1984, see H. Hochmuth, *Theorie und Alltag. Detlev Peukert und die Geschichtswerkstätten*, in R. Hachtmann, S. Reichardt (eds.), *Detlev Peukert und die NS-Forschung*, Göttingen 2015, p. 174.

6 This and the previous quote from Detlev Peukert, Project Proposal Hamburger Lebensläufe – Werkstatt der Erinnerung, February 1989, Archive of the Research Centre for Contemporary History, no. 376–22.

7 See P. Reichel, H. Schmid (eds.), *Von der Katastrophe zum Stolperstein. Hamburg und der Nationalsozialismus nach 1945*, München–Hamburg 2005, pp. 88–90.

However, the voices of the Roma and Sinti, the other group of racially persecuted Hamburg residents, were absent from the collection for many years. The social distance to this group, as well as the continuities of marginalization, which had been particularly strong in the case of the Roma and Sinti, may be the reasons why interviews with members of these groups were included in the collection at a later stage.[8] After interviewing Jews and women and men from the political resistance in the mid-1990s, albeit in much smaller numbers, the so-called "forgotten persecutees," deserters, so-called "asocials" and others came into focus.[9] Interviews with those who could be described as bystanders were added to the archive at a later date. They represent a small group of interviewees and belong to those who were not persecuted under National Socialism, who may have been in favour of or indifferent to it, but who in any case did nothing to defend themselves against it. Some of these interviews were conducted as part of a collaborative research project between psychoanalysts at Hamburg University Hospital and historians at the Research Centre. The interviewees were Hamburg citizens who had survived the carpet bombing of the city by the British in 1943. In many ways, this event is central to Hamburg's history and continues to shape how the city remembers the war. These interviews stand out because some of the older interviewees, in particular, were still quite positive about their relationship to National Socialism, about their life in the Nazi system, and about the appeal of National Socialist ideology and spoke quite openly about this.[10]

Early on, however, the scope of the collection was expanded as other groups of people were interviewed, and interviews that were part of research projects outside the Research Centre were accepted for archiving. In recent years, numerous projects on West German post-war history with a regional focus have been carried out at the Research Centre, many of which also use oral history interviews that are archived at the Workshop of Memory. Lately, migration to Hamburg is an increasingly important topic and interviews with migrants or their descendants are in great demand. As it has hardly been possible to conduct interviews with survivors of National Socialism in recent years, interviews are also being conducted with their children or grandchildren.

Despite the fact that the interviews with survivors of National Socialist persecution remain the core collection within the archive, the Workshop of Memory is not

8 See L. Apel (ed.), *In den Tod geschickt. Die Deportationen von Juden, Roma und Sinti aus Hamburg 1940 bis 1945*, Berlin 2009.

9 See Projektgruppe für die Vergessenen Opfer des NS-Regimes in Hamburg e.V. (eds.), *Verachtet, verfolgt, vernichtet. Zu den „vergessenen" Opfern des NS-Regimes*, Hamburg 1986.

10 See L. Apel, *Voices from the rubble society. "Operation Gomorrah" and its aftermath*, in "Journal of Social History", vol. 44 (2011), no. 4, pp. 1019–1032; U. Lamparter, S. Wiegand-Grefe, D. Wierling (eds.), *Zeitzeugen des Hamburger Feuersturms 1943 und ihre Familien. Forschungsprojekt zur Weitergabe von Kriegserfahrungen*, Göttingen 2013.

solely dedicated to the documentation of the Holocaust. It also aims to create an oral history of the city of Hamburg. Interviewees do not have to have witnessed major historical events or actively contributed to anything that is now considered to be of historical value. The fact that the interviewee has a connection with Hamburg and is willing to contribute to a research project is sufficient in order to be interviewed. The subtitle *Hamburger Lebensläufe*, Hamburg biographies, refers to this ongoing task. Overall, the interviews cover a time span from the early 20th century to the present day. Oral histories with victims of National Socialism and their descendants, which are highly sought-after and are employed in a multitude of contexts, continue to form the core of the collection.[11] Today, it is mostly academics that use the interviews, but they are also accessible for (high-school) students, artists, memory activists and relatives of the interviewees. However, knowledge of the German language is essential, as most of the interviews were conducted in the German language.

On the Polish voices in the workshop of memory

To illustrate the breadth of themes, temporalities, geographies, and identities addressed in the interviews, I will draw upon a broad understanding of Polish voices. This encompasses interviews in which women and men who self-identify as Polish provide information. This also includes interviews with individuals who currently or previously held Polish citizenship, as well as with those who lived in areas that are now part of Poland. Additionally, it includes interviews in which the country of Poland and Polish citizens are discussed. A search of the database using the keyword "Poland," therefore, yields a diverse range of results, encompassing a broad spectrum of subjects and time periods. The majority of the hits originate from the core collection of the Workshop of Memory, the interviews with Hamburg Jews. Among these interviews, a large group of the interviewees, who were no longer resident in Hamburg or Germany at the time of the interview, identified the attack on Poland by the German army in 1939 as a pivotal moment in their lives. The majority of the interviewees were either born in Poland and later relocated to Hamburg with their families or were born in Hamburg to Polish parents and thus were part of a family that resided in the German Reich but held Polish citizenship. One might think that these women and men, who were interviewed between the 1990s and 2000s and were mostly born between 1911 and 1932, tell similar stories. A cursory glance would confirm this, as many mention the deportation of Jews with Polish citizenship living in the German Reich in October 1938, either because

11 More information about the collection here: https://zeitgeschichte-hamburg.de/WDE_information-for-english-speakers.html [accessed:15.05.2024]. It is possible to listen in on some of the interviews on the website. To protect the privacy of the interviewees, we do not publish full interviews online.

they were directly affected themselves or because they discuss relatives who were deported. On 28 October 1938, approximately 1,000 Polish Jews, who had been considered stateless since October 1938, were deported to Poland.[12] This expulsion is regarded as an early manifestation of the Nazi regime's anti-Semitic policies. However, an examination of the accounts in greater detail – 42 in all – reveals a multitude of diverging narratives. These include accounts of individuals who had already prepared to emigrate at the advent of the Nazi era, accounts of individuals who narrowly avoided deportation before the so-called "Poland Action," and accounts of those who survived the deportation to Zbąszyń and subsequently fled to Palestine. However, the narrative can also be informed by accounts from individuals who were Polish citizens and directly affected by this deportation, or from the perspective of a member of the Jewish community who was responsible for supporting Polish Jews in Hamburg in 1938 but was not deported him or herself. The narratives thus encompass a multiplicity of perspectives, offering unique insights into one historical event. This diversity of perspectives immediately raises the question of whether it is possible to speak of Polish voices in these interviews. It could be worthwhile analyzing whether and in what ways the interviewees had a relationship to Poland, for example as a country of origin or as a place of roots, at the time of the interview, which they mostly gave at an older age. A close listening to the interviews could form the basis for approaching these questions, which are less orientated towards writing a factual history of events than they are towards their own or family origins.

In the following section, I will present a number of different and smaller collections in which Polish voices are explicitly in the foreground. Between 1992 and 1999, various interviewers interviewed former displaced persons and former forced labourers, almost all of whom came from Poland. Twelve interviews were conducted during this period. The interviewees, including two women, were born between 1908 and 1926. They talk extensively about their lives, which were strongly influenced by the invasion of Poland by the German army. They also make frequent reference to the Polish resistance against the German occupation. Many mention that they suffered from National Socialist persecution. Some speak of family members who were executed by the Germans. Others describe their imprisonment in various concentration camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau and Ravensbrück, where they had to perform forced labour. Many of the interviews also deal with life after surviving in Hamburg and the conditions in the local Displaced Persons camps. Some of the interviewees explain their motivations and plans to emigrate, why these attempts failed or were abandoned, and how they dealt with an initially unwanted life in Hamburg.

12 A. Bothe, G. Pickhan (eds.), *Ausgewiesen! Berlin, 28.10.2938. Die Geschichte der "Polenaktion"*, Berlin 2018.

While the majority of the interviews in the Workshop of Memory are available as audio recordings, some of the interviews were recorded on video, because they were intended for use in an exhibition.[13] From this collection, I would like to highlight the interview with Gabriela Janczur that was conducted in 1993. She was interviewed together with her husband, a survivor of Auschwitz concentration camp and director of a camp for displaced persons in Hamburg after the war. Towards the end of the interview, the interviewer invited Gabriela to speak in front of the camera. Although her interview is much shorter than the one with her husband, it is extremely interesting, and not only from today's perspective. In particular, the segment in which Gabriela Janczur discusses why she acquired German citizenship is noteworthy, as it illustrates the unexpected insights that interviews can yield. Mrs Janczur openly admits that German citizenship means nothing to her and that she only applied for it out of convenience. The website of the Research Centre for Contemporary History presents segments of her interview as an example of how to re-use an archived interview.[14] The pictures on the website are courtesy of the granddaughter of the Janczur couple, who we have been able to contact. Subsequently, she consented to a biographical interview, conducted in 2016, which lasted over three hours. In this interview, she provides a detailed account of her life, professional career, and relationship with Poland. The Janczur interviews are of particular value as they encompass several generations of a single family.

Between 1999 and 2000, seven interviews were conducted on the subject of "Poles in Hamburg." These are the only interviews in the Workshop of Memory that explicitly target Polish nationals. The interviewees, including two women, were born between 1910 and 1957, and the interviews encompass a wide range of topics, among them the war against the German Reich, the Warsaw Uprising, the experience of war captivity, life in Hamburg, attempts to emigrate, and questions concerning their German and Polish identity. The subjective perceptions in the interviews, the differing individual ways in which certain events were processed and the various forms in which they are narrated offer the oral historian countless points of reference. The interviews, which were conducted in German by the historian Angelika Eder, are predominantly biographical, range in length from one to four and a half hours, and they are available in digitized audio format.[15] In the broadest sense, an interview conducted in 2022 by a student as part of a course

13 See P. Wagner, *Displaced persons in Hamburg. Stationen einer halbherzigen Integration 1945 bis 1958*, München 1997.

14 https://zeitgeschichte-hamburg.de/janczur.html [accessed: 15.05.2024]. The interview was conducted in German. See A. Althaus, *Migration und Mobilität. Neue Fragen an alte Interviews*, in *Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg 2016*, Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg (ed.), Hamburg 2017, pp. 105–110.

15 A. Eder, *Polnisches Leben in Hamburg im 20. Jahrhundert. Kulturelle "Heimat", Identitätsressource oder Fiktion?*, in A. Eder, *"Wir sind auch da!" Über das Leben von und mit Migranten in europäischen Großstädten*, München 2003, pp. 95–113.

on immigration to Hamburg at Hamburg University could also be mentioned here. The interviewee was a young man who had been born in Poland in 1998 and had been living near Hamburg for several years. This illustrates how the categorization and cataloging in the archive is influenced by changing perspectives on the evolution and composition of urban society, as interviews like these are now classified under the heading of migration and not under the label "Poles in Hamburg".

I would now like to look briefly at a specific group of people who are referred to in the German context as *Flüchtlinge und Aussiedler*, refugees and displaced persons, and who do not belong to the above-mentioned group of Polish DPs. The term is used to describe those Germans who fled from Eastern and Central Eastern Europe to the West during and after the end of the Second World War in 1945, or who were expelled or deported after the end of the war.[16] Historian Oliver von Wrochem conducted 20 interviews concentrating on experiences of arrival and integration. Twelve of the interviewees hailed from regions that are now part of Poland, and the interviews yield intriguing insights into how people coexisted during that era, how personal or spatial distances were perceived, and how identity and a sense of belonging were conveyed across institutional boundaries and evolving times.

Having highlighted the interviews in which Polish voices talk about their historical experiences, it is also worth mentioning interviews in which Germans, who were mostly born after the end of the war, talk about how trips to Poland, and visits to the memorials erected there to commemorate the Nazi mass crimes, have influenced them and shaped their lives. These are mainly interviews with women and men who are or have been involved in activities related to the culture of remembrance and have worked in Hamburg in different ways and in different professional contexts to ensure that the Nazi atrocities and the crimes committed in Poland are not forgotten. They comment on their visits to Poland (as well as trips to other places of the former German occupation) and emphasize the significance of their interactions and discussions with the Polish people as pivotal moments in their personal and professional development.

I have not yet mentioned those interviews in which (German) interviewees refer to Polish colleagues, neighbours or acquaintances. Of course, statements about (and not only by) Poles can also be found in the Workshop of Memory. It may be assumed that some of the interviewees use pejorative terminology, suggesting prejudice, but

16 According to 1950 census figures, 12.5 million refugees and displaced persons from the former eastern territories of the German Reich that had been transferred to Polish and Soviet ownership and from the settlement areas of the "ethnic Germans" had come to the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR. See J. Oltmer, *Kleine Globalgeschichte der Flucht im 20. Jahrhundert*, in *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 26–27 (2016), https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/229817/kleine-globalgeschichte-der-flucht-im-20-jahrhundert/ [accessed: 15.05.2024].

perhaps also reactions to how prejudice is dealt with. However, this should not be the end of this article. Instead, I would like to emphasize the particular strength of oral history. The various interviews on the subject of Poland show exceptionally well how multifaceted interviews can be. Their value is by no means limited to an understanding of the topics the interviewers have chosen to focus on. Sometimes, it is much more revealing to trace the specific concerns of the interviewees, which often do not coincide with the research interests of the interviewers. This demonstrates the particular heuristic value of oral history interviews. Narrated life stories can set new accents in historical research and become historical sources for a history of experience.[17] The Polish voices in the Workshop of Memory are therefore very likely not just Polish voices but go far beyond national or identity-related aspects. A few of these interviews are available online on the interview portal Oral-History.digital.[18] Most of them are located in Hamburg and can be accessed there. I hope I have sparked some interest in the Workshop of Memory and would particularly welcome future enquiries and visits from Polish oral historians.

17 A. von Plato, *Oral History als Erfahrungswissenschaft. Zum Stand der mündlichen Geschichte in Deutschland*, in "BIOS. Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen", vol. 4 (1991), no. 1, pp. 97–119.

18 https://portal.oral-history.digital/en [accessed: 15.05.2024]. Oral-History.Digital is a platform for curating and researching collections of audiovisual narrative interviews. Most archives require prior registration to protect the privacy rights of interviewees.