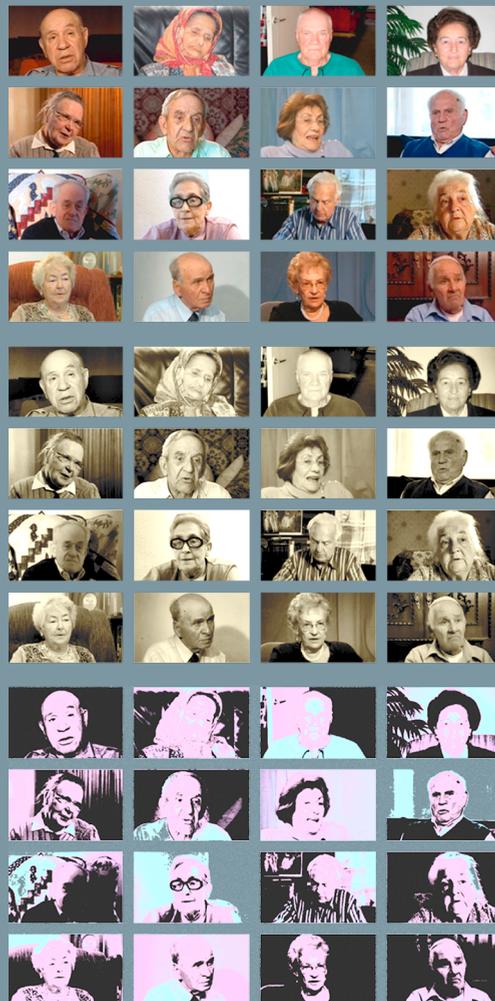


PRESERVING SURVIVORS' MEMORIES

Digital Testimony Collections about Nazi Persecution: History, Education and Media

edited by Nicolas Apostolopoulos | Michele Barricelli | Gertrud Koch



Education with Testimonies, Vol. 3

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edited by Nicolas Apostolopoulos | Michele Barricelli | Gertrud Koch
on behalf of Stiftung „Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft“ (EVZ)

Due to the generation shift, the central challenge has become to preserve the memories of the survivors of National Socialist persecution and to anchor these within 21st century cultural memory. In this transition phase, which includes rapid technical developments within information and communications technology, high expectations are being made of the collections of survivors' audio and video interviews. This publication reflects the interdisciplinary debates currently taking place on the various digital techniques of preserving eyewitness interviews. The focus is how the changes in media technology are affecting the various fields of work, which include storage/archiving, education as well as the reception of the interviews.



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Nadine Fink

HISTORY EDUCATION WITH VIDEO TESTIMONIES: A SWISS CASE STUDY ABOUT PUPILS' HISTORICAL THINKING

This article relates to research on the contribution of work concerning memory and history of the Second World War in Switzerland and using this for the intellectual education of pupils (Fink 2014). The research was based on an exhibition of video testimonies named “I am History. 555 versions of Swiss history 1939–1945”. I have observed how 15-year-old pupils visited the exhibition with their teachers and how they worked on it in class. I have also interviewed teachers and pupils as well as collecting all materials which have been used or produced in class.

The main purpose of the research was to see how pupils deal with video testimonies and what kind of relationship they have to empathy, to the notions of truth and of subjectivity, how they articulate individual and collective narration, if and how they make a distinction between history and memory, if and how they establish links between the past and the present. All of these questions are about pupils' historical thinking. I will focus here on how pupils received these video testimonies.

Theoretical and methodological frame

Martineau (1999) defines three dimensions of historical thinking: a language, a method and an attitude. Language refers to facts, concepts and theories in terms of historical grammar. Method consists of documenting, questioning, reasoning with a time perspective and in the interpretation of social facts. It is the third dimension – the historical attitude – which is central to this research and has been defined with four intellectual aptitudes:

- A *critical thinking*, a reflex of questioning what is given as truth (Audigier 2005);
- A *problematized conception of history*, which means to conceive history as a discipline, as a result of an intellectual process and a research procedure (Prost 1996);
- A *historical consciousness*, as an awareness of the “the past’s present”, the “historicity of the present” and the “room for initiative” for individual and collective actions (Koselleck 1990; Ricoeur 1991);
- *Sensitivity for the social function of history* to contribute to the intellectual education of citizens (Martineau, 1999).

Martineau’s research shows that teaching based on the historical discipline, which sets out the historiographical process, helps to develop pupils’ historical attitude. This attitude has a key role in so far as it affects the ability of pupils to acquire the two other dimensions of historical thinking, the method and the language. According to Martineau, historical attitude is therefore an important learning goal in order to develop historical thinking.

The research was designed so as to examine pupils’ potential to think historically by analyzing their historical attitude towards video testimonies seen in the exhibition “I am History”. Nine classes of the last year of compulsory school have been chosen from the seventy-three classes who visited the exhibition. The research is qualitative and applies a methodology of participant observation and interview survey (Blanchet & Gotman 1992). Data were collected in four phases: visit of the exhibition, courses given after the visit, semi-structured interviews with eight groups of three pupils and semi-structured interviews with nine teachers. Analyses presented here are mainly based on interviews with pupils. Their verbal productions have undergone a thematic content analysis (Bardin 1993; Quivy & van Campenhoudth 1995). The corpus has been crosscut in order to compile significant data. Such a horizontal and thematic procedure rules out singularity and puts together what refers to a same theme among all verbal productions and thus allows the constitution of a thematically coherent corpus. Qualitative analysis process focuses on the occurrence rather than on frequency of evidence. It ex-

amines pupils’ conceptions and reasoning in order to study the contribution of video testimonies as pedagogical support for learning historical thinking.

Contextualization of the research

It has long been documented that historical facts established by historians when looking at the past and the testimonies of those who lived during the period and the events are not of the same nature and do not always match (Wallenborn 2006). They can be complementary to each other, but they can also be in contradiction or in opposition. The both complementary and conflicting relation between memory and history was observable in the late 1990s in Switzerland when there were deep controversies about Switzerland’s position during the Second World War (Maissen 2005). The country was strongly criticized in particular for the economic and financial relations it had with Nazi Germany and for the policy of repression towards Jewish refugees trying to enter Switzerland. To handle the crisis and its consequences for international relations, the Swiss federal council and the parliament decided to establish an independent commission of historians – the Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland – Second World War (ICE)¹. The Commission’s mandate was to mainly investigate Switzerland’s economic and financial relations with the Axes powers. This decision contributed to strengthening the anger voiced by many actors of the war era. International criticism and the ICE’s investigations were indeed in opposition to the national memory, which conveyed the image of a heroic nation and population protecting its assumed neutrality and independence in wartime.

The context of controversial debates, which especially opposed historians and witnesses, led a few filmmakers and historians to create an oral history association² with the aim of collecting video testimonies of persons relating their memories of wartime Switzerland (Dejung et al. 2002). The association thus gathered over 500 interviews amounting to a total of 1,000 hours of recording. In order to mediatize this collection, the association realized the exhibition “I am History”. The purpose of this memorial work was to point out the diversity of realities during the period of the Second World War in

Switzerland and to show how people remember the past more than fifty years after the events took place. The intention was also to cut through the simplistic division between witnesses and historians. Some of the witnesses were of course defending the image of a heroic nation. But others were much more critical concerning the attitude of Swiss authorities and its population during the war.

Educational purpose

The exhibition mainly consists of sixty-four sequences shown in a room called the “Kaleidoscope” (short films that highlight various witnesses around the same theme) and twenty-two documentary movies shown in a “Film library” (short films combining testimonies and other historical materials). The “Kaleidoscope” is based on interactivity; a majority vote determines the screening of a film, using special apparatus installed for this purpose. In the “Film library”, visitors choose a film together. The total duration is about ten hours of sound and images, which represents only 1% of the 1,000 hours of interviews. Still, it is a lot to see when one has hardly an hour and a half time to visit the exhibition with a class.

In order to travel in this “kaleidoscope” of memories, an educational kit suggests that one works on the specificity of individual memory, singular testimonies and their contribution to historical knowledge and its narration (Fink 2003). Emphasis is placed on developing intellectual skills: recognize and differentiate memorial discourses and historical interpretation; consider any comment on the past as a socially constructed discourse and examine its relation to truth. It is important to focus on these questions because the evocation of the past in testimonies has a collective shape, which tends to mask the profoundly heterogeneous nature of individual and plural experiences. Here is an example:

“I am scandalized by the attitude of the authorities. We knew that we produced engines for the Germans. It was a tangible argument. With this material, we also could have strengthened our own army. It made us live. I can assume it without shame. I participated

in it day after day. I do not feel responsible or guilty, absolutely not. One has to know the period we lived in. But there is a moral limit in such a dramatic period. And this limit was widely overstepped when we repressed the Jewish refugees.”¹³

What is striking in this testimony is that this man did not exercise any professional activity in the field of armaments, nor did he take part in refugees’ repression. Still, we see how much he goes from individual to collective responsibility, from individual to collective memory. This is what emerges strongly from the way most of the witnesses speak. Statements are set out personally and collectively, constantly coming and going between “I”, “we” or “one”. Each witness speaks for a collective entity while points of view diverge. The diversity and the uniqueness of narratives are striking when we analyze the testimonies. Still, witnesses become vectors of a collective memory that they share among their generation. They have different positions on the past, but they also speak about it using a common language that marked their time. Despite the multiplicity of narratives, the exhibition thus reveals a certain consistency in the way witnesses take position on the period of the war in Switzerland. Most of them felt at war, they went through this period in fear and with a feeling of renunciation.

By visiting the exhibition, pupils mainly receive this collective memory. To a certain extent, this collective memory even becomes theirs. The exhibition leads to the construction of a representation of the past which seems to be shared by witnesses and pupils. In spite of the fact that the pupils didn’t see and hear the same testimonies during their visit, their comments converge to a common vision of Switzerland during the Second World War. This common vision can be roughly summarized as follows: Switzerland experienced war and wasn’t as neutral as was pretended; the country didn’t take an active part in the war, but the population had to cope with its consequences and restrictions.

“The Swiss government, which really took care of the war, which tried to come to an agreement with the German government, which was the most powerful country at that moment, later on they turned to the Allies just to survive and

to not be invaded. And the people, they continued to live as best they could, with what was distributed as food, because it was regulated.” (David)

Pupils’ reception

Teachers and pupils show a strong interest in oral history. Teachers value the opportunity to discuss the history of World War II through a medium that appeals to pupils. To use another type of document than written texts and to deal with the life stories of ordinary people is considered to be appropriate in order to promote the curiosity of their students. Pupils are sensitive to the emotions expressed by the witnesses. The technology of the exhibition and the use of video testimonies stimulate their interest in historical matters. By listening to the individual experience of agents of the past, the history of World War II becomes more concrete to them. Witnesses are ordinary people with which pupils can identify themselves. Despite it being virtual, the exhibition generates empathy and humanizes a past that therefore becomes closer and more touchable for pupils. They feel concerned. They consider the exhibition as a relevant way to deal with the history of the Second World War in Switzerland, to address a specific topic of history differently and using another context when compared to the traditional classroom. However, their attitude reflects the importance given to learning historical content about the past. Despite the fact that the exhibition shows a plurality of experiences and points of view, pupils are constantly making generalizations from anecdotal stories. The individual experience is reinterpreted as being a general factual knowledge about the past.

“They said that women worked hard. Because the men, they were at war. And things were going bad, because they were the only ones who were able to feed their families.” (Damir)

“They [women] had too much work to do; they didn’t have time to sleep.” (Aïcha)

When pupils are asked to talk about what they saw and what they remember from their visit, they refer to testimonies as being certainties that happened

in the past, as facts that took place exactly the way in which the witnesses describe them. They erase the singularity and the subjectivity of witnesses’ narrations. For example, the story of a Jew repressed at the Swiss border suddenly becomes representative of the general functioning of the asylum policy; a witness opposed to Nazism becomes representative of a point of view widely shared among the population. Pupils gather together information and constitute a set of knowledge without undertaking any periodization, without contextualization, without using any concept and way of reasoning that would reflect that a historical thinking process is taking place. They reproduce the witnesses’ own tendency to generalize. For example:

“There was an aviator; he was talking about how they reacted when there was a plane that violated the airspace. He said: ‘The Italians, we didn’t care about them. The Germans, we were shooting at them. And with the Allies, we made the sign of victory’. And Switzerland was neutral. I don’t know, it’s ... They weren’t really that neutral” (Patrick).

Patrick refers to a specific testimony:

“We said: ‘The Italians, we don’t see them, we ignore them, we don’t care about them. If it’s the French or the British, we make the sign [of victory]. If it’s the Germans, we attack’. Once they were shot, who could have said that we didn’t warn them? This was very clear.” (Alfred Wachter, sequence 3.2.3).

Pupils identify and reproduce information in order to tell their own stories. Their narratives are declarative and factual. Individual, singular experiences of witnesses characterize a general context. These individual and singular experiences are added in order to create a kind of collective character, which becomes the keeper of a just representation of the past. Here is another example:

“At this time, Swiss people did not know foreigners, they had never travelled. The Polish soldiers were very kind and they were beautiful in their uniforms. They were not for the

Nazis. They thought that by kissing, they could become pregnant. The Jews were nice people. They were 6 out of 25 in a classroom. They didn't speak about sex and about love, it was a taboo." (Written production of 4 pupils)

Pupils' construction of a collective narrative becomes very clear here. Each element of the above written production becomes widespread, even though it emanated from only one particular case. What is significant to them, what they remember from testimonies, is recorded as knowledge about the past. Thus, they tend to immortalize representations conveyed by witnesses, which actually belong to the field of memory rather than to history. Such examples show the importance of providing a proper historical frame, of doing strong historical work when we ask pupils to work with oral history or with video testimonies.

Following these observations, one might conclude that the use of oral testimony in history class is not relevant. Yet, on the contrary, my findings show that it has a significant pedagogical potential which is observable at least at two levels.

Pedagogical potential

When pupils are explicitly questioned about the nature of oral history and oral testimonies, they pay attention to the diversity of individual and singular experiences and to the fact that witnesses are often in contradiction to each other.

"People are here to tell us the truth, so that we discover what they've been through. [...] Then we can form our own opinion" (Aïcha).

"There are many who tell it in their own way, so that we can't really know what happened. [...] We can listen to what people say, but they'll have a completely different point of view, so that we'll never exactly know" (Flora).

"You can't generalize. There's the truth in the camps, there's the truth at home, there's the

truth when they were hiding... There are many truths, but we'll never be able to make one big truth, I think" (Selma).

"First you listen to what they say, you look at it to see if it makes sense or not. [...] But you can still check, there are official sheets" (Quentin).

These quotations show that pupils know how to withdraw from the narratives they are being faced with. It seems that oral testimonies contribute to promote their comprehension of important concepts, for example the concept of historical truth. They develop their understanding of the interpretative nature of narratives about the past, which is fundamental in terms of historical thinking.

The analyses of the interviews with pupils showed that the exhibition has an influence on how they think about history. Usually they conceive history as being there to tell about important dates and characters around assertions of truth organized in a linear narrative. Through the video testimonies, the exhibition offers another point of view on the past. Here, witnesses are ordinary people attesting the human reality of history, which becomes an environment of "agency" (Barton 2012). Pupils realize that witnesses were agents in the past, confronted with choices as well as constraints and they pretty much ignored the outcome, exactly as pupils today ignore the outcome of what is happening in the present. Testimonies have the pedagogical potential to bring to light what Ricoeur (1991) calls the "historical present". Witnesses show that there were other possible outcomes in the past, just like there can be different outcomes for what is happening at the present time.

A second significant pedagogical potential is that video testimonies make a major contribution to pupils' historical consciousness. All those who have been interviewed spontaneously establish a link between themselves and the generation which they encountered in the exhibition. The feeling of empathy humanizes a past, which becomes all the more close and accessible to pupils. This feeling of nearness allows one to get in touch with both the past and the present. Most of the pupils explicitly include themselves in this his-

tory. After visiting the exhibition, they have the impression of a confrontation with their own past. They recognize the temporal dimension of human realities. Becoming aware of the presence of the past in the present, in particular because agents of the Second World War are still alive (even if most of them were actually no longer alive by the time of the exhibition), pupils conceive that this past is not over as yet, that it still has consequences for the world we currently live in.

Speaking about the exhibition, many pupils make a link between witnesses who were agents in the past, and themselves, who in turn are agents in the present. This leads them to think about their own responsibility in the present. Many pupils pay attention both to the powerlessness of people who do not have control over the course of history, but nevertheless participate in it, and to the flexibility available to everyone – an ability of choice – to act according to convictions, values and a sense of responsibility. This attitude is very strong when pupils recall testimonies concerning acts of disobedience with regard to repressing Jewish refugees at the Swiss border. It helps them to understand that history is not simply determined by those who have power and endured by ordinary people. Here is an example:

“I think that what goes on today is also history, and that each of us makes history, a small piece of history. And all together, we can somehow influence history, we can make... And that’s important for those who will come after us. They will say: my great-grandmother did that, then I made that, it’s a chain.” (Diane).

However, as stated above about the tendency of generalizing, pupils’ historical consciousness needs to be more explicitly worked on during history class. Indeed, causal explanation still remains subject to a purposive rationality. Some pupils point out that the present could be different if people in the past had made different choices. However, the course of history is still seen as something inevitable. Pupils only remember the stories that confirm this point of view. Even when they consider themselves becoming witnesses of their time, they never call the present reality into question.

Nevertheless, teaching history with support of video testimonies such as those of “I am History” impacts on the improvement of pupils’ historical consciousness based on, and considering, the following concepts (Buton & Mariot 2006): the “present’s past” (historicity of present time), of the “past’s present” (uncertainty and unpredictability in the past about the future) and of the “past’s past” (what did not happen). It is important to explore further this relevant pedagogical potential in order to enable and support the pupils’ intellectual and civic potential.

Conclusion

Although in many countries, including Switzerland, history curricula are today organized in terms of intellectual tools and keeping one’s distance from an identity-based conception of the past, history teaching will always convey factual knowledge about the past and contribute to building a shared culture as well as a sense of national community. Bringing pupils to the point where they can partake in distance-related identity-conveying discourses entails taking seriously their intellectual skills. These skills are promoted in history curricula and by history education research. It requires teaching history in a way that systematically refers to the mode of reasoning about the past in order to exercise pupils’ historical thinking. Stimulating this “unnatural act” (Wineburg 2001) is the most important purpose if history education aims to contribute to the intellectual education of pupils and to promote enlightened and responsible citizens.

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1 <http://www.uek.ch/en/index.htm>.

2 The name of the association is “Archimob” for “Archives of the Mobilization”. In the French part of the country, the term “mobilization” is commonly used to qualify the period 1939–1945 in Switzerland. More information about the association is available on www.archimob.ch.

3 Max Wickart, sequence 2–3-1.