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**To engage – and to disengage:
Keeping distance in Oral History Interviews**

1. Interviews, Boundary Violations and Trauma

What the process of reflection about the methods of oral and video history lacks, in my opinion, is more tightly focused consideration of the fact that when we conduct our interviews, we enter into a communicative process which triggers interpersonal dynamics that can drive not only our interviewees but also ourselves as interviewers to the very limits of the ability to withstand mental stress. When we quite justifiably call for methodological reflection, this ought to involve not only the process of remembrance or the possibilities of interpretation and analysis, but it should also raise the question of what we can properly expect of ourselves and of the human beings we interview. For this interpersonal communication with interviewees, ethical guidelines have been developed that provide us with normative orientation. But how do we deal with ourselves?

When we in Central Europe conduct interviews with elderly persons, we confront a historical era whose emotional baggage includes the horrors of World War II. Even interviews on the subject of migration and minorities quickly bring us into contact with persons who were the victims of persecution. And, actually, in none of our interviews do we have any assurance that the biographies of our subjects do not conceal experiences with violence of which we have no advance knowledge. One example of violence that we might encounter at any time in interviews is sexual abuse. As soon as we embark on a biographical approach to the conduct of an interview, we inevitably confront this traumatized stage of our interviewee's life.

When we began to apply the methods of oral history in Austria in the late '70s, we had received no practical university-level training in this approach; rather, our dealing with oral history had been purely theoretical. It was, above all, the work of German historian Lutz Niethammer that served as our inspiration. After that, it was more the fascinating encounter with human beings and talking with them about their past that constituted the special attraction of oral history. In other words, we worked according to the autodidactic principle of learning by doing, and made every mistake possible without the benefit of feedback from experienced colleagues.

How to deal with the issue of trauma and interviews seems to me to be an important question. Those who have gained experience could pass this along to younger, inexperienced colleagues, first and foremost in courses at the university level.

In our role as oral historian, we are active at the interface of documentation, understanding and explanation. It is above all the aspect of understanding that demands that we take care since, if we want to understand people, we have to be able to put ourselves in their position to a certain extent. As to the practical side of our craft, the capacity to listen attentively and sensitively ought to be highly developed. At the same time, in going about this, we must take pains to avoid unconditionally relinquishing our own personalities in the narratives of the interviewees and ending up completely subservient to them. Thus, "boundless" attentiveness could turn out to be counterproductive to our efforts.

Experience can only be gained individually, but reflecting upon it and becoming aware of the mechanisms that confront us with unmanageable situations should be among the professional skills of oral historians.

2. Lack of Distance

Once again, the following elaborations deal exclusively with situations that demand too much of the interviewer, though we ought not lose sight of the fact that our questions can have the same effect upon our interviewees. The following remarks are based on my own observations and on interviews that I conducted with oral historians in Austria and the US who interview groups of victims or perpetrators.

2.1. Identification

I first confronted the issue of keeping distance at a conference on the subject of memory at which I encountered colleagues who had come to identify completely with the victims of National Socialism that they had interviewed. In one case, this was a persecuted Jewish couple's son living in the US; in another, a scholar originally from Germany who interviewed emigrants. My question as to whether, in their view, it was not rather suspect for a scholar to identify so unconditionally with the group that was the subject of his research elicited an indignant reaction that was tantamount to accusing me of hardheartedness. In response, I asserted that a scholar ought to, as a matter of principle, maintain a critical and analytically oriented attitude. Furthermore, I would not even be taking the interviewees seriously if I were not also to encounter them with my critical facilities.

There is a group in the field of oral history that does intentionally expose itself to the danger of identification—namely, those who attempt to document biographies exactly how the interviewees themselves wish to recall them. I consider this problematic not only for methodological reasons, since it ignores the dynamics of the communication process (academician meets subject, produces source material, and evaluates it), but also because it is tantamount to placing the interviewer at the mercy of the interviewee's testimony. Moreover, I am much more interested in triggering an associative and reflexive process of recollection.

2.2. Pursuing One's Own Agenda in the Interviews

I often discuss with my Austrian colleagues who have interviewed the victims of National Socialism and documented their life stories why we happened to select this particular line of work. We are as a rule children or grandchildren of members of the war generation. Our parents and grandparents were on the side of the National Socialists during World War II as members of the German Wehrmacht or the SS, and thus active in close proximity to Nazi crimes. One thing that is striking indeed—particularly in the case of the Third Generation—is that some of our families include individual members of groups that were threatened at that time.

It is a fact that we have devoted much more attention in these interviews to the victims than to the perpetrators. The reason for this is obvious: it is far more difficult to get perpetrators to talk. During the postwar era, they denied their deeds and thus reinterpreted their own histories in order to avoid legal prosecution. Those who still maintain a Nazi outlook today would be most likely to regard the deeds they committed back then in what would be for them a positive light. Nevertheless, they too would still avoid doing this publicly in order to avoid the legal consequences that still threaten such open advocacy of the National Socialist program. In other words, interviews with perpetrators are restricted by a broad spectrum of censorship measures or reinterpretation efforts.

However, the grounds for avoiding interviews with perpetrators also lie in our own biographies. We are all certainly familiar with the strategies of silence and we even became a part of these strategies in that we either went easy on our parents or we rained down abuse on them without getting any closer to the heart of the matter. The

so-called "double wall of silence" is almost impossible to break down through interviews with former Nazi perpetrators. We shied away all too quickly from limits established by taboo, and were all too ready to provoke moralistic controversies. We were not sufficiently capable of recognizing that most perpetrators were not born as human monsters but were made into them. We lacked distance from these narratives; we were too involved to be able to freely engage in dialogues about them.

In discussions about our mental involvement in the case of interviews with victims, it turned out that many who went about this work succumbed to the wish for the "good father" or the "good mother" who would make possible a positive orientation in our own lives. We established a mental connection between this work and the political aspiration to be an active force for more tolerance and understanding in society. In doing so, however, we also wanted quite consciously to distance ourselves from the fascism-tinged biographies of our parents and grandparents, and, so to speak, to embody a "new and better land."

This phenomenon has also been the subject of discussions by psychotherapists, who concluded that this work is meant to work out something in our own mental make-up. This may well hold true to a certain extent, since unsolved issues also produce the very interest we take in our work. However, this becomes problematic if we fail to recognize our own motivation, since interviewees are then subject to mechanisms (e.g. attitudes of expectation) that considerably constrain them in their spectrum of expression. Here, professional accompaniment is an absolute necessity to avoid complete subversion by such mechanisms.

2.3. Idealization

One form of failing to maintain distance is the idealization of certain individuals or groups, whereby the outcome is a positive stereotype that is inconsistent with reality. The investigation of groups of victims can very easily lead to such idealization. To be sure, reducing human beings to some particular role cannot comply with the demands of an analytical approach; furthermore, such positive stereotypes tend to suddenly turn into negative ones or even aggression aimed at the person who was previously idealized. An example of this is a colleague who at first completely identified with the Jewish victims of the Nazis and conducted interviews in Israel; thereafter, in the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, she fully identified with the role of the Palestinians as victims. In this case, boundless idealization was simply shifted from one group of victims to another.

2.4. Inter-Gender Relationships

Interviews often bring us into contact with elderly, lonely people who are surprised by the unaccustomed attention paid to them during the interviews, and they can very quickly misinterpret this attention as affection. Conversely, we as interviewers very often actually do empathize with or feel fondness for our interviewees, and express this in our body language and tone of voice. I am acquainted with several oral historians who report that interviewees have fallen in love with them. We are no less immune to this than psychotherapists. Since this has also happened to me, I can only report that I was at a total loss in dealing with this situation. It transpired during an interview lasting many hours and conducted over an extended period of time, during which I questioned an approximately 85-year-old interviewee about, among other things, her sexuality. This seemed appropriate to me, since she had been very active politically and came across as enlightened and emancipated. To this day, it is not clear to me whether I unintentionally transgressed a boundary in the interpersonal relationship thereby or whether it was other signals that led my interviewee to believe that a love affair could possibly develop, although I was later greatly relieved to observe that she also became enamored of other young men and this had not been attributable to my behavior alone. I could only react

with honesty, and I had to repeatedly make it clear to her that I did not reciprocate her feelings—an extremely unpleasant situation.

Even worse are the reports from female interviewers who speak of sexually explicit signals from interviewees (touching, invitation to engage in sexual relations, etc.) that they had to fend off. Though these are extreme examples that hopefully occur very rarely, they are nevertheless among the most sensitive cases of transgressing boundaries that we as interviewers can face.

2.5. When an Interviewee Exceeds the Interviewers Capacity to Cope

Sometimes in interviews we are confronted by unexpected situations which place psychological demands upon us that bear absolutely no relation to the results of the interview. This recently happened to me in what had seemed to be a comparatively innocuous interview with a woman who had worked as a cook for a bourgeois Viennese family in the 1930s. My interviewee seemed far less interested in the actual topic of the interview than I was, and wanted above all to relate her experiences during World War II. There was no stopping her as she described in colorful, graphic terms how, during the retreat from Romania, she was hit by artillery fire and almost bled to death; then, without undergoing anesthesia, her right forearm was sawed off. Although I had already heard many accounts of horrifying violence in interviews, I almost became nauseous listening to this one. But during the interview, I got the impression that this was something she positively had to get off her chest before we could get back to the topic that actually interested me. Presumably, this account had such a strong effect on me because I had not prepared myself for it.

One of my worst experiences was an interview with a man who, unbeknownst to me, had been interned and tortured in a concentration camp during the Nazi era. He began relating this story for the first time, and in doing so began exhibiting both mental and physical signs of regression into the past. This situation completely overwhelmed my capacities. I had had no previous experience with interviewing concentration camp survivors and was unfamiliar with the physical reactions of human beings who regress back into their personal history in traumatic situations. Then, I could only react intuitively. Thereafter, I would repeatedly consult psychotherapists and obtain advice from them on dealing with such situations. Fortunately, my intuitive reaction during the interview was generally correct. I did not get emotionally immersed in the narrative too; rather, I recognized that I bore a share of the responsibility to help my interviewee return safe and sound from this painful regression to the most excruciating segment of his biography. I had informed him immediately that he did not have to talk about his concentration camp experiences if doing so were too much for him, but I did not succeed in holding him back. I let him take his time; he recounted the episode without intervention on my part, and I then utilized questioning to lead him back to the present and everyday life. In this way, I could conclude the interview with a clear conscience.

Actually, we have to anticipate the possibility of encountering such situations any time we interview people who have lived through war or were victims of political persecution. Even when we have advance background information about such individuals, it can be that we are the first with whom they are speaking about this chapter of their lives. We then find ourselves in a therapeutic situation, though one in which we are not working therapeutically. The fact that the story can be told and symbolically “cast off” onto a roll of audiotape might be a source of relief for the interviewee. Nevertheless, we ought to recognize the limitations of what we may reasonably do in such situations in which stories of horror are related.

2.6. Adoption Effect

It has come to my attention that most interviewers who have worked with groups of victims have had personal experience with the so-called adoption effect. Since this work as a rule involves encounters with elderly individuals who often long to find a socially meaningful mission to occupy them during their retirement years as well as to establish “normal” contacts to the younger generation—aside from their own families, if they even have living relatives—such interviews can very quickly give rise to ambitious plans aimed at establishing a friendship. I have absolutely no problem with making friends in this way; nevertheless, I am aware that, in numerous cases, the friendship is perceived as being forced upon the younger person. Here as well, it may be observed that the interviewer, out of a sense of courtesy, had failed to establish boundaries in a timely manner and then perceives the relationship as a burden. By no means am I arguing that friendships that grow out of interview situations should be avoided at all costs; I am only saying that we ought to be honest if we are unable to reciprocate such feelings.

We could also end up in a difficult situation in the case of an intended “political adoption,” whereby our interviewees make what amounts to an attempt to convert us to their political views, line us up to aid them in their political activities, and steadfastly insist upon us going along with this.

3. Signals That an Interviewer is In Much Too Deep

There are clear physical and mental signals that indicate an interviewer is being overtaxed. One that I have noticed from time to time myself: when I begin to dream of victims, I have gotten too intimately involved in their stories. I then take this signal as a warning to increase my distance from the topic and the personal relationships associated with it in order to be able to work through this.

In the field of psychotherapy, this is referred to as secondary traumatization — that is, the traumas of the individuals with whom we work are made a part of our own lives and influence us. Examples of this are fear symptoms that manifest themselves in everyday life as a consequence of our work with traumatized persons—e.g. becoming overly cautious, sealing off certain rooms, constant fear of loss, etc.

This can, however, also express itself in feelings of depression and loneliness. Narratives having to do with victims are often socially taboo and thus repressed. Through our having become party to what know, we are isolated from society and provoke a conflict with the consensus of silence. Nevertheless, this alienation cannot be compensated for by membership in the academic community, political resistance or acceptance within the group of the victims.

Feelings of aggression toward the interviewee can likewise be interpreted as a signal that the interviewer is at the limits of his capacity to cope with the communication process. The adoption effect, expectations that are impossible to fulfill, and pressure to display agreement or approval are particularly likely to give rise to this. One example is the interviewee’s expectation of being given publicity.

4. Practical Techniques for Our Own Protection

Although it may certainly be exciting to explore the limits of what we are capable of withstanding, such failures to maintain adequate distance clearly overtax our mental makeup and leave behind scars. For this reason, we should carefully consider our working techniques to plan how we can take timely steps to protect ourselves from a dangerous situation. This is not a matter of recommending methods that have to be followed slavishly; rather, we are interested in finding out at which moment danger is imminent in a particular case and what we can do to take the necessary precautions.

Body language, for example, is not subject to universal interpretation since it is very often specific to a local culture. Nevertheless, I would like to pass along a few hints. In the field of psychotherapy, the phenomenon of the seated therapist bending forward in an exaggerated manner is interpreted as being equivalent to crawling into the patient's case history. This phenomenon, of course, occurs in oral history as well and might possibly signal the attempt to display boundless attention. In a case in which the situation threatens to become more than the interviewer can handle, he or she can lean back to quickly achieve greater distance. If this is still not enough, the interviewer can shift the shoulders or fold the hands in such a way as to create more space or set up a sort of protective barrier.

However, of prime importance, in my opinion, is achieving clarity about one's own motives for working as an oral historian. If we proceed under the assumption that inherent in our work is also the effort to fulfill a task having to do with ourselves, then we should be cognizant of this agenda that is undergoing transference into our work in order to avoid placing too much of a burden upon ourselves and our interviewees as we go about this. Here, conversations with colleagues working on similar topics can be very helpful. Since one continually reformulates these tasks and needs throughout one's life, it is advisable to repeatedly undergo this process of reflection.

Recognition and acceptance of the limits of one's tolerance for such stress is an important fundamental attitude. It is not incumbent upon us to take up all of society's unfinished business or expose all of its dirty laundry. When we exceed the limits of what can reasonably be expected of us, we hurt ourselves and, in doing so, make it no easier to achieve the goals we have established. Thus, when we notice that a topic is overtaxing our capacities, it makes sense to increase our distance from it. Not everyone was cut out to interview mass murderers or the perpetrators of genocide.

The interview setting already provides us with a limited form of distance. The tape recorder sits between interviewer and interviewee, though both participants also tend to forget about it over time, which is why a very personal relationship can develop. Distance is perceived as even greater in the case of a video history interview; here, the camera assumes a much more dominant role than the tape recorder and thus permits neither side to forget that the reason for the encounter is to produce historical source material. The presence of a cameraman or film crew prevents the relationship from automatically reaching a more personal level, so that it is solely attributable to the skill with which the interview is conducted when this does occur.

Actually, our function as scholars ought to enable us to automatically achieve distance from our interviewees. At any rate, it is we who are ultimately responsible for adapting and interpreting their accounts and, in this way, utilizing them for scholarly analytical purposes. Accordingly, we are in any case involved in an ongoing conflict with our interviewees because we revise the meaning of their remembrances. For example, when we observe perpetrators' "strategies of silence" and presume to find banalization, anecdotal narration, evasiveness, intentional falsification and lies in their historical accounts, they will certainly take little pleasure in reading this. To be sure, in the interpretation of the accounts of victims, we subject ourselves to considerably more censorship to avoid insulting these people.

For ethical reasons, I consider it essential to make our role as scholars clear to our interviewees right up front in order to prevent nasty surprises from coming up later. After all, we are analysts and not mere reproduction technicians for remembrances. The German language has two words having to do with the communication process, and we can use these to describe the way we work as oral historians: *einlassen* (to engage) and *auslassen* (to disengage). Thus, in order to prevent the communication process from turning into an unwanted process of adoption, it is important that we "engage" our interviewees to the extent that this is reasonably permissible during the time we spend

together, but once our collaboration has been concluded, we have to be able to “disengage” and thus take leave of them.

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