

End of Testimony? 24|06 – 14|11|2021

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Soon there will be no-one left alive who witnessed the brutality of the Nazi regime first-hand. What remains are memories in the form of books, historical film documentaries, exhibitions, educational projects, and most recently, virtual encounters with survivors of the Holocaust. These kinds of testimony will gradually replace that of living witnesses. The exhibition “The End of Testimony?”, showing at the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism from June 24 to November 14, 2021, focuses on the history of testimony and examines the complex relationship between survivors of the Nazi regime and contemporary society. How has testimony been recorded, collected, and preserved since the 1940s? How is it used in the public sphere? And how can schools, museums, and memorial sites care for this legacy in a responsible manner—now and in the future, when survivors will no longer be there to talk about their experiences in person?

The emergence of testimony is a complex process involving more people than is generally assumed, and it raises numerous questions. How do memories become a narrative and to what extent is this narrative also shaped by other people? And how should we approach the fact that such narratives need to be treated just as critically as any other historical source?

The exhibition “The End of Testimony?” was conceived by the Jewish Museum Hohenems and the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp Memorial Site. It has now been adapted for Munich, and some new exhibits have been added. For the first time in a museum context the Munich Documentation Center will present two digital testimony projects currently being developed at Munich’s Ludwig Maximilian University and at the Volucap Studio of the UFA film studios in Berlin; visitors to the exhibition will be able to try these out for themselves.

The exhibition, shown on the second floor of the Documentation Center, is divided into four chapters, each examining different aspects of the memories narrated by survivors. A number of audio-visual media points enable the contemporary witnesses to speak for themselves.

A fait accompli – the contemporary witness interview

First-hand encounters with witnesses of the Nazi era are rare nowadays. Instead, interviews with them are presented or can be accessed in a growing number of media formats. These interviews are usually presented as finished products; how they came about is not generally revealed, and indeed is not supposed to be. Yet the conversation between the narrator and the trained interviewer is subject to its own dramaturgical and communicational rules. Both the narrators and those asking the questions have their own perceptions and techniques. The narrators may choose not to talk about certain memories or to emphasize others. They leave questions unanswered, or may even refuse to answer them. An interview with a contemporary witness takes place in a context of mutual expectations about “ob-

Dr. Kirstin Frieden
Public Relations

Contact

Phone +49 89 233-67013
kirstin.frieden@muenchen.de
presse.nsdoku@muenchen.de
www.nsdoku.de
@nsdoku #nsdoku
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jective information” and “subjective experience” and has a staged quality involving lighting, make-up, images and sound, and technical equipment. Sometimes breaks in the narrative involuntarily reveal that an interview is something “constructed.” And indeed, these breaks sometimes reveal more about the narrator than their words do, and they offer interesting insights into how testimony emerges.

Memories – narratives – expectations

Today, hundreds of thousands of interviews with contemporary witnesses exist all over the world. They are stored in large databases such as that of Yad Vashem or the Shoah Foundation but also in smaller archives. Yet even if many of the interviews are similar with respect to their central message, no two stories are the same. The testimony is colored by the personal experiences of the narrator and is rarely told in chronological order. Rather, it is made up of a series of fragments of memory strung together through a process of association. The stories told develop their own logic, sometimes following a narrative thread, at other times interrupted by unexpected, emotional moments or else they are supplemented with new, secondary information.

The exhibition at the Munich Documentation Center presents a selection of testimony with connections to Munich and Bavaria, assembled from various collections. Excerpts from the testimony of people such as Max Mannheimer, Charlotte Knobloch, and Hugo Höllenreiner illustrate different aspects of narrated memory—the long silence of the survivors, their trauma, or the way that the feelings generated by these experiences are passed down through families.

The history of testimony

The history of testimony is the central theme of the exhibition. Since World War II, the role of contemporary witnesses and the function of their narratives has undergone a process of continual change. Testimony has served as a historical source, as evidence in trials, as a political statement, and sometimes as the expression of disturbing memories at odds with social mores. Society’s perceptions of survivors and the way that their testimonials and stories of survival have found their way into the public sphere have always been influenced by the historical context.

Even before the end of World War II—while the mass murder of European Jews and Sinti and Roma, the persecution of homosexuals and of political and other opponents of the Nazi regime was still going on in large parts of Europe—both the victims and the Allies were already beginning to document Nazi crimes. Some of these people hoped that their testimony would help to catch and punish the perpetrators. With the onset of the Cold War and the division of Europe, interest in survivors of the Nazi era dwindled; as a consequence, many of them kept quiet about their traumatic experiences.

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During the 1950s, few people paid any attention to the survivors and their fates. In their rare public appearances, the onus was less on their experiences than on their successful integration into postwar society, so that they tended to be politically instrumentalized as “extras” on various stages. In the United States, the memory of the Holocaust focused primarily on the Americans as the liberators of Europe and on the moral victory of the individual. In the socialist countries, by contrast, the official state narrative was one of collective resistance to and victory over fascism.

The 1960s saw spectacular trials of Nazi perpetrators. In 1961, Adolf Eichmann, who had been tracked down and arrested in Argentina, stood trial in Jerusalem. This was followed by the so-called Auschwitz trials in West Germany in 1963. Yet, even here, emotional narratives had little place within a legal framework. Time and again the contemporary witnesses found their credibility being called into question. The silence of the perpetrators, on the other hand, had a resonance of its own—both in court and in the German and international public spheres. Media coverage of the trials thus concentrated primarily on the perpetrators, while the survivors once again disappeared from public awareness after a short period of time.

In 1979, the screening of the US TV series “Holocaust – the Story of the Family Weiss” sent shock waves through West Germany and became a turning point in the collective memory. Thousands of viewers began to examine their own memories of the Nazi era. In West German society a broad and controversial discussion took place about how much ordinary Germans had known about the Holocaust and about personal responsibility. Among historians, too, a debate began, known as the “Historiker-Streit,” about the uniqueness of the Holocaust, and debates took place in the media about personal attitudes in and to the past.

During the 1970s, Holocaust survivors began to reflect on their role as representatives of those who had been murdered. From the 1980s onwards, the voices of members of the postwar generation became louder as they began to address their parents’ silence or their inability to stop talking about the Nazi era and the war.

The fall of the Iron Curtain fundamentally changed both society’s perception of the Holocaust and World War II and the way it was discussed in public. Contemporary witnesses from all over Europe began to speak out about their experiences—and people listened. Concentration camp survivors, former forced laborers, and victims’ groups such as the Sinti and Roma or homosexuals, who had been given little or no space over the previous four decades, now described their memories of the Nazi dictatorship in interviews and in literary testimony. As the various groups of victims became socially and politically recognized, a rival debate emerged about their “victim status”—not least against the background of old national conflicts in Europe.

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The new variety of voices and the huge public and media interest in Nazi atrocities and the victims thereof led to an enormous flood of testimony, TV documentaries, and feature films. In 1993 the Hollywood blockbuster “Schindler’s List” triggered a veritable “memory boom.” However, the new public focus on the “figure of the contemporary witness” also gave rise to critical counter-narratives— and sometimes wrongful claims to this status.

The future of testimony

What will happen to the interviews with survivors when they are no longer alive to tell their stories? What weight will this collected testimony have in the future? What responsibility do institutions have that are charged with preserving this testimony and making it available to the public? Can digital forms of testimony replace direct encounters with contemporary witnesses?

New technologies and artificial intelligence will offer new opportunities for outreach work. Today, it is already possible to use virtual testimony instead of real people to keep their legacy alive. Two digital testimony projects will be presented to a broad public for the first time in the exhibition “The End of Testimony?”

The legacy of Ernst Grube

Together with the UFA film studios in Babelsberg, researchers at the Fraunhofer Heinrich-Hertz Institute in Berlin have developed a “volumetric” film, giving access to the memories of Holocaust survivor Ernst Grube using virtual reality technology. Sixteen pairs of cameras were used together with super computers to produce a three-dimensional image of the Munich contemporary witness, which can be directly integrated into virtual surroundings. The result is a “walk-in” film about Ernst Grube’s experiences in Nazi Germany and as a prisoner in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. This is intended to make the subject of Nazi Germany come to life, particularly for younger people. Visitors to the exhibition at the Munich Documentation Center will be able to watch a three-minute excerpt from the film using VR glasses and thus gain an impression of what this innovative technology is capable of.

LediZ – Learning with digital testimonies

In 2010 the USC Shoah Foundation began developing virtual and interactive testimony of Holocaust survivors. Independently of that, digital testimony was also produced in Germany. In 2018 an interdisciplinary team at Munich’s Ludwig Maximilian University in cooperation with the Leibniz Computer Center began developing and studying testimony using a design-based research approach. The “Learning with digital testimonies” research team invited the Holocaust survivors Abba Naor and Eva Umlauf to participate. As a basis for creating holograms of the digital witnesses, they each answered around 1,000 questions on their biographies at the Pollen Studio in England while being filmed stereoscopically with two RED Epic-M-Dragon cameras. This type of camera allows both a two- and three-

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dimensional visualization. Speech recognition software was used to enable the virtual digital witnesses to interact with the public. The aim of the project is to establish the new format in schools and further education institutions.

On July 1, at 5.30 pm the project leaders at LMU Munich will present the project “Learning with digital testimonies” at the Documentation Center. Further presentations for schools are planned.

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Symposium and accompanying program

Immediately prior to the exhibition opening, an online symposium entitled “The Future of Testimony” will be staged from June 21–23 supported by the Stiftung Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft (Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future, EVZ). Together with the cooperation partners of the exhibition—the Jewish Museum Hohenems and the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp Memorial Site—the Munich Documentation Center invites participants to think about and discuss the “Future of Testimony.” Historians and social scientists as well as Jewish Studies researchers will examine the history of testimony and address the question of how remembrance work can continue once the contemporary witnesses, the survivors of the Holocaust, are no longer alive.

In addition, the exhibition “The End of Testimony?” will be accompanied by an extensive program of events. As well as open tours of the exhibition (Tuesdays at 5.30 pm and Sundays at 10 am) and the presentation of the project “Learning with digital testimonies,” a series of lectures, discussions, a film screening, a writing workshop, and a theater production are planned, initially for the months July to September. The theater production entitled “Vernebelt sind die Gehirne” (Fog on the Brain) by students at the August Everding Theater Academy will be performed on the square in front of the Documentation Center. In addition, on September 22 there will be an opportunity to have a digital conversation with the contemporary witness Ernst Grube.

For information and current dates please visit: www.nsdoku.de