

ROZHOVORY A MATERIÁLY / INTERVIEWS AND ARTICLES

“Aufarbeitung” – Contribution of Oral History in the Dealing with the Past / “Aufarbeitung” - Přínos orální historie při vyrovnávání se s minulostí

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Abstract

Based on a growing interest in questions of memory, trauma and justice in Europe, this article addresses the issue of dealing with the past and eyewitness interviews. In the German language, this is often also described with the term “Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit / vyrovnávání se s minulostí”. We ask to what extent past events, processes and responsibilities can be reviewed and what contribution oral history can make here.

Dealing with the past - in the sense of successful coping processes for those affected - requires a sensitive, appreciative and respectful attitude towards traumatic experiences in all activities of the memory-cultural process. At the same time, the question arises as to what tasks oral history here can perform, if one assumes that therapeutic tasks are to be sought in other disciplines. This paper offers an actual perspective on dealing with the past by analysing the limits of this historical discourse and exploring the potential of oral history in memory culture.

Abstrakt

Na základě rostoucího zájmu o otázky paměti, traumatu a spravedlnosti v Evropě se tento článek zabývá otázkou vyrovnávání se s minulostí a výslechy očitých svědků. V německém jazyce se tato problematika často označuje také termínem “Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit / vyrovnávání se s minulostí“. Ptáme se, do jaké míry lze minulé události, procesy a odpovědnost revidovat a jaký přínos zde může mít orální historie.

Vypořádání se s minulostí - ve smyslu úspěšných procesů vyrovnávání se s ní pro postižené - vyžaduje citlivý, oceňující a respektující přístup k traumatickým zážitkům ve všech činnostech paměťově-kulturního procesu. Zároveň se nabízí otázka, jaké úkoly zde může orální historie plnit, pokud předpokládáme, že te-

rapeutické úkoly je třeba hledat v jiných oborech. Tento článek nabízí aktuální pohled na vyrovnávání se s minulostí prostřednictvím analýzy limitů tohoto historického diskurzu a zkoumání potenciálu orální historie v kultuře paměti.

Key words: Oral history; personal stories; contemporary history; dealing with the past; potentials; limitations.

Klíčová slova: Orální historie; osobní příběhy; současná historie; zacházení s minulostí; možnosti; omezení.

Introduction

Dealing with the past and remembering historical events is a complex issue and a major challenge, especially in societies that have been affected by violence, war and oppression. It involves coming to terms with sometimes traumatic historical events and taking responsibility for them, often through public recognition and apology. Biographical interviews can contribute to this process by documenting the experiences of people who lived through these events and providing insights into their personal perspectives.

There are several ethical debates around the use of oral history in memory culture.¹ One of the most important debates revolves around the ethical considerations in collecting and preserving individual memories. These considerations include issues of informed consent, confidentiality, privacy and power dynamics between interviewers and interviewees.² Another debate deals with questions of analysis and interpretation of oral histories. Biographical memories are contextual and can be interpreted in different ways.³ This leads to the question of which interpretation is valid and how oral traditions can be viewed in a way that is both respectful and scientifically accurate.

Based on a growing interest in questions of memory, trauma and justice in Europe, this article addresses the issue of coming to terms with the past and eyewitness interviews. In the German language, this is often also described with the term “Aufarbeitung”.

Dealing with the past, in the sense of „Aufarbeitung”, meaning the concept of dealing with the past continues to preoccupy scholars, politicians and society, also with regard to dealing with experienced violence, injustice and human rights violations in other social and historical contexts. In this context, „dealing“ with the past cannot be equated with the question of criminal prosecution or financial

¹ ABRAMS, Lynn. *Oral History Theory*. London 2016.

² SÖHNER, Felicitas. Ethical Issues in Archiving and Reusing Interviewees Documents, *Bulletin de l'AFAS. Sonorités* (in press)

³ THOMPSON, Paul, BORNAT, Joanna. *The Voice of the Past*. Oral History. Oxford 2017.

compensation. Rather, it describes a social process „through which something unjust and the resulting suffering are to be made visible.”⁴ Rather, this term refers to the process of coming to terms with the past and encompasses a range of activities, including public debates, historical research, commemorative events and educational programmes. Biographical interviews are one tool that can be used in this process, as they offer a way to record personal memories and experiences that might otherwise be lost.

Dealing with the past - in the sense of successful coping processes for those affected - requires a sensitive, appreciative and respectful attitude towards traumatic experiences in all activities of the memory-cultural process. At the same time, the question arises as to what tasks oral history here can perform, if one assumes that therapeutic tasks are to be sought in other disciplines.

This contribution asks to what extent past events, processes and responsibilities can be reviewed and what contribution oral history can make here, offering an advanced perspective on existing debates about dealing with the past by analysing the limits of this historical discourse and exploring the potential of oral history in memory culture.⁵

Summary

This article approaches the topic based on the interdisciplinary project „Testimony”. This project is dedicated to researching the conditions and consequences of placement in children’s homes and Youth Work Courts in the GDR. Our medical history sub-project approached the question using two methodological approaches - on the one hand, by means of a historical analysis of written sources, and on the other hand, from the perspective of oral history. Since written sources have so far offered little information on the professional perspective on logics of action and experiences in GDR children’s homes, this gap was closed through the alternative approach of guided interviews. The perception of the actors involved in children’s homes in the GDR was investigated using a qualitative-sociological approach in the field of historical reappraisal of GDR injustice. Thus, this interview project explores for the first time the professional orientation of action from the perspective of those responsible in medicine, education and psychology. Accordingly, the publication has the character of an initial structuring of the subject matter.

⁴ ANDRESEN, Sabine. Was Aufarbeitung von Unrecht bedeutet. In: ANDRESEN, Sabine, NITTEL, Dieter, THOMPSON, Christiane (eds.). *Erziehung nach Auschwitz bis heute. Aufklärungsanspruch und Gesellschaftsanalyse*. Norderstedt 2019. 23 – 44.

⁵ Excerpts of this text have been published as an extended abstract in the proceedings of the International COHA Conference 2023 in Bratislava.

The starting point for the observations was the interest in how the transdisciplinary logics of action were perceived by the actors involved in medicine, psychology and education in children's homes in the GDR. Since everyday as well as exceptional processes did not always find their way into written documentation, the qualitative research approach of oral history is particularly suitable for investigating individual perceptions, experiences and perspectives.⁶

In order to pursue the research questions, individual case files (youth welfare, pupil and administrative files) were analysed by the historians Anne Oommen-Halbach and Uta Hinz and, in parallel, guided interviews with former pedagogical, medical and psychological actors of various types of institutions within the GDR home complex were collected and considered by the author. In this context, the author conducted 24 thematic interviews with actors in former children's homes in the GDR between November 2019 and November 2021. These persons included ten men and fourteen women. The dates of birth of the interviewees ranged from 1936 to 1962, and they were professionally active between 1956 and 1992 (and in some cases beyond). Among them are representatives of psychology, medicine and education. The interviewees worked in normal and special homes, Youth Work Courts and the Combined Special Homes. Among the interviewees, 21 had worked in or for children's homes themselves, two had lived there as children of employees, and one person grew up as a child in the home.

The guideline-structured interviews document and reflect socio-political contexts and subjective patterns of perception and interpretation of remembered historical processes and events. The topics asked included: the classification of the professional field of activity, recollection of everyday routines, experiences as a professional as well as dealing with families and authorities. In addition, questions were asked about dealing with difficult situations in everyday professional life, about professional options for action, counselling offers and helpful resources.

A register with biographical information was written for each interview, as well as a supplementary protocol containing observations on the course of the interview, the atmosphere, possible disruptions during the interview or other special events. These documents were integrated into the analysis. For the following explanations, the interviews relating to the interdisciplinary field of tension in children's homes in the GDR in general and in the combine of special homes in particular were included. It was agreed with the interviewees whether the contents of the interviews would be included in publications with the names of the interviewees or pseudonymously.

⁶ SÖHNER, Felicitas et al. Disziplinieren durch Gewalt in DDR-Kinderheimen? Ein Überblick über bisherige Ergebnisse. In: BABEROWSKI, Jürgen et al. (eds.) Disziplinieren und Strafen. Dimensionen politischer Repression im Staatssozialismus. Frankfurt 2021, 135-154.

The oral sources considered do not give a unified picture. To tell one story would be to take a truncated view. Rather, the interviews open up a variety of perspectives on different time windows and different places, so several facets stand side by side here.

The interviews show that in some places, committed staff members stood up for the adolescents despite difficult circumstances in order to enable them to receive the best possible support within the mostly difficult framework. It can be seen that violence was not perceived by all, but by many of the interviewees. In individual interviews, being sent to the closed Youth Work Courts in Torgau was described as unproblematic, although it could be assumed that the experiences associated with this measure could be damaging.

Other interview sequences also make it clear that the professional perspective moved away from the perception of the former children in care. In some places, experiences of violence are presented in a rather abstract, attenuating or even justifying way. For example, „scuffles“ or „no angels“ point to violent behaviour among the adolescents. The sequences „not necessarily in control of personality“ and „sometimes off the mark“ refer to violence by staff. In the narrative account, the experience of violence is sometimes legitimised pedagogically (“they weren’t used to it any other way”), at other points the extent (“that wasn’t the rule with me”) is clearly named or classified (“it was always terrible for me too”, „it was a form of violence”). Attributed responsibility, relevance and intentionality of violent actions are always presented in the context of the described behaviour of the adolescents and educators.⁷ In some places, the impression arises that the memories of the perceptions of the time were partly overformed by hegemonic narratives (“from disturbed family relationships”, “bad asocial environment”, „a chance for the family”, „there was no other way to solve the conflict”), and in some places by the depiction of a desired state (“strict and fair upbringing, but no violence”, „we consulted among ourselves collectively”, „basically no corporal punishment”). Thus, the individual descriptions - like all biography-based approaches - are to be classified source-critically in the sense that they are created and formulated depending on the current zeitgeist and current debates.

Different groups of people who perpetrated violence were remembered. Very few memories refer to personal acts. Violence was experienced by the families of origin, by the adolescents among themselves and by the staff of the children’s homes. The analysis further shows that various forms of violence were perceived (“shouting”, „heartlessness”, „exclusion”, „being sent to Torgau”, „headbutts handed out”, „locked in the broom closet”). Representatives of all types of homes

⁷ DEPPERMANN, Arnulf. Agency in Erzählungen über Gewalterfahrungen in Kindheit und Jugend. In: SCHEIDT, Carl et al. (ed.) Narrative Bewältigung von Trauma und Verlust, Stuttgart 2015, 64-75.

mentioned psychological violence, especially pedagogically questionable, humiliating sanction systems; actors in special homes also reported measures of isolation. Physical violence is reported in all types of homes, such as physical coercion, beatings and infliction of pain. It can be seen that in the interviews analysed there are hardly any direct statements about sexualised violence.

Depending on the situation and professional position, different forms of reaction were recalled. These include: Concealment and covering up, latent acceptance, informal exchange, seeking institutional counselling and support, political complaint, talking to those affected, relocating people, personal turning away and resignation. The recalled ways of reacting differed depending on the person interviewed - they would probably have differed even more if former residents had commented on this. The different forms of reaction can be attributed less to the type of institution, but rather to personal characters and the respective scope for action. The more self-confident and socially critical a person was and the better networked he or she was, the more active the individual reaction to the perception of violence.

The perceptions described clearly show the desire of the interviewees for better staffing and low-threshold support services (counselling, intervention, prevention). Even if this was theoretically and partly structurally laid out in special home concepts such as the so-called Combine of Special Homes or the children's home A.S. Makarenko in Berlin, the actual implementation was remembered as being of varying success. At the same time, individual constellations conducive to violence became apparent: staff involvement prevented the addressing of conspicuousness, quantitative (care ratio) and qualitative overload of staff (non-specialist, field of tasks), hierarchical structure, fragile relationship of trust among the staff, so-called total institution, lack of external regulation, communication culture. Depending on the institution considered, the situation was characterised by deficiencies. In particular, staff and room shortages as well as overcrowding could lead to stressful situations, which in turn could affect the behaviour of those housed and working there. This, coupled with deviant behaviour and the accompanying disciplinary measures, could certainly lead to obvious or covert forms of violence. Although individual or collective misconduct can be explained by the sometimes precarious staffing of some facilities, this cannot and must not be used as an excuse.⁸

Discussion

The results from the project described here make it clear that historical memory work can elicit aspects of subjective experiential history standing alongside the

⁸ FANGERAU, Heiner et al. (Eds.) *Leid und Unrecht. Kinder und Jugendliche in Behindertenhilfe und Psychiatrie der BRD und DDR 1949 bis 1990*, Köln 2021, p. 172

narratives handed down in the respective professional cultures (collective memory). A central feature of biographical accounts is their authenticity, since they emerge directly from the situation as experienced at the time of the interview. Through the subjective perceptual perspective of the interview partners, research is given the opportunity to gain insight in a differentiated way into subjective narratives shaped by many factors that emerge in a specific setting.

As a result, oral tradition can provide a more nuanced understanding of historical events and processes by capturing the perspectives of people who may have been marginalised or excluded in traditional accounts of history. By collecting and analysing oral histories, historians can gain insights into the experiences of individuals who may have been silenced or ignored in the past. The interviewees interviewed in the project presented here belong to this group of people, as the memory of events in children's homes in the GDR was for a long time in the hegemonic power of interpretation of the institutions and authorities concerned.

It was also evident in the historical work of the project that through biographical interviews, individuals can reflect on their own experiences and the broader historical context in which they took place. This can be a powerful tool for dealing with the past as it allows individuals to explore their own feelings and beliefs and share their perspectives with others. Also, for people in the direct environment of the interviewees, reflecting on their perceptions and experiences can be a gateway to reflect on their own perspectives.

A further yield of the project presented here is the possibility of gaining insights into the experience and management of crises. Here, too, the assessment of biographical crises shows learning potential and the possibility of a change of perspective in two respects: on the one hand for the person who experienced and overcame them, and on the other hand for the recipient of the historical report.

The discussion and linguistic processing of memories requires a considerable amount of context formation from both the reporter and the researcher. Thus, the autobiographical account can be used, on the one hand, as a means of self-knowledge and, on the other, as a way of reconstructing the narrator's image of and coping with life.⁹ We addressed this aspect in the project presented here by comparing the narratives collected in the interviews with written sources and previously published studies on the history of GDR children's homes from the perspective of former residents and embedding them historically.

Furthermore, in the historical work with interview partners, it became clear that the oral history offers the possibility to document the experiences of those

⁹ HEINRITZ, Charlotte. Das Kind in der autobiographischen Kindheits Erinnerung. In: BIOS – Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History 7(1994), 165-184.

who were affected by traumatic events. By documenting the experiences of individuals, communities and societies, oral history can help ensure that the lessons of the past are not forgotten. This documentation can also provide a form of validation for survivors by acknowledging the reality of their experiences and making them feel heard and seen.

Finally, oral history can serve as a tool to promote empathy and understanding between different communities and counteract a simplified or distorted portrayal of history. By sharing stories and experiences, people from different backgrounds can come to understand the complexity of traumatic events and the diversity of experiences they have had. This can promote healing and reconciliation and contribute to a more just and equitable society. One of the most important tasks of oral history in this context is to create a safe and supportive space for people to tell their stories. This may involve actively listening to survivors and being sensitive to their needs and feelings. It also involves recognising the power dynamics inherent in the process of sharing traumatic experiences and ensuring that survivors retain control over their narratives.

Analysis of the sources revealed that another potential lies in the possibility of historical categorisation. If eyewitness testimonies are understood as historical sources, they can be used, for example, to reconstruct socialisation and biographical processes.¹⁰ In the project presented, the interviews offered access to answering the question: „What happened or can it be reconstructed?“, the clarification of responsibilities, the recording of possible causes, contexts of origin and explanatory models as well as the opportunity to work out historical structural, social and individual conditions that promoted violence.¹¹

However, it should be emphasized here that autobiographical sources can be understood less as accounts of historically past experiences and more as the enacted experience of an individual, autobiographical documents rather provide insights into current discourses and self-designs.¹² This is to be considered when reconstructing processes and framework conditions and when interpreting described events and processes.

In the historical work it became clear and repeatedly reflected that while oral history cannot replace therapeutic interventions for those affected by trauma, but can play a complementary role in the healing process. By creating a space where people tell their stories, document experiences and promote understanding

¹⁰ DU BOIS-REYMOND, Manuela. Die Oral-History-Methode. In: BEHNKEN, Imbke; ZINNEKER, Jürgen (eds.). *Kinder, Kindheit, Lebensgeschichte*, Seelze 2001, 218-232.

¹¹ KRAUSHOFER, Tanja. *Erinnern hilft vorbeugen*. Wien 2015.

¹² SÖHNER, Felicitas. Eyewitness-based perspective on early childhood education. Potentials and limitations of oral history, *Bildungsforschung* 2/18(2020), 1-16.

and empathy, oral history can contribute to a more sensitive, appreciative and respectful approach to traumatic experiences in the memory-cultural process. In the course of the project, it also became clear that at the same time the possibilities of dealing with the past in the sense of „Aufarbeitung“ via oral history are limited.

In the historical examination of the prevailing discourse on the question of dealing with the past, it became clear that the public and professional debate on dealing with the past is dominated by the concept of „historical truth“.

This approach emphasises the importance of documenting and disseminating accurate information about past events. However, historical truth is often contested, and competing narratives about the past can lead to political and social conflict. In addition, the focus on historical truth can exclude the experiences of marginalised groups who may not have access to the tools and resources they need to tell their stories. We have reflected on this aspect in answering our research questions and referred to possible limitations.

Not least because the project presented here was located in the field of medical-historical research, it became clear even before the research began that there are ethical concerns related to the oral transmission of traumatic experiences. The act of recording and preserving memories can be traumatic for participants, especially if they are recounting experiences of violence or trauma. In addition, the act of recording and preserving memories can also raise questions about ownership and control over the collected narratives. These questions were raised on the one hand by the research team and on the other hand by the university's ethics committee and were discussed and clarified in the run-up to the project.

After completion of the Testimony project, the very complex question arises of whether past events can really be fully addressed. While remembering and sharing personal stories can be cathartic and healing for individuals, it is difficult to fully undo the effects of traumatic experiences or fully grasp the complexity of historical events. In addition, responsibility for past actions is usually spread across multiple individuals and institutions, making it difficult to assign blame and responsibility in a way that satisfies all parties. The exchange with the interlocutor in the process of the evaluation and also the conversations with former residents showed clearly that no simple answer can be given here.

So it remains the task of oral historians such as therapists and lawyers that the process of dealing with the past is often fraught with difficulties and controversies. Different individuals and groups may have different views about which events or processes should be prioritised in the process of 'coming to terms', and there may be disagreements about who is responsible for past wrongs. Also,

the process of dealing with the past can also be hindered by persistent social, economic and political inequalities. For example, if certain groups continue to be discriminated against or excluded in the present, it may be difficult to fully address the process of coming to terms with the past.

In the historical discussion, it became clear to both the researchers and those being researched that experienced injustice or violence not only affects the people directly affected by it throughout their lives, but also the society in which these people live. Like a „toxic package“ that cannot be disposed of, one affected person has described the continuing effects of experienced injustice.¹³ The effects affect the individual person (individual level), the places and institutions in which injustice occurred (institutional level) and society, in which a group of people with their unprocessed traumatic experiences are not seen and supported. Therefore, reprocessing must also take place on these three levels.¹⁴

Conclusion

In the historical work with biographical interviews - as also in the Oral History project considered here – it becomes apparent that dealing with stressful events of the past is a complex field. In summary, it can be said: Reappraisal is to uncover past injustice. Social reappraisal begins with the experiences of people who were affected by traumatising events and processes. Their accounts make it possible to openly name the extent and consequences of their experiences and to examine which structures made traumatising events and processes possible. Reappraisal aims to clarify why traumatising acts were covered up or concealed and to show ways out of this silence. Reappraisal cannot replace a legal clarification of crimes or the individual processing of trauma in therapy. However, social reappraisal makes the injustice of the past a topic of the present. Reappraisal aims to improve society's understanding of the dimensions of traumatising experiences.¹⁵

Dealing with traumatic aspects of the past is about the belated acceptance of responsibility. Legal consequences and financial compensation are pragmatic forms of acknowledging past suffering. However, a sustainable understanding between representatives of the institution and victims requires more.¹⁶ As already emphasised in our learning tool at the Torgau Memorial, dealing with the past in

¹³ KEUPP, Heiner. Wie kann individuelle und gesellschaftliche Aufarbeitung gelingen? *Verhaltenstherapie & psychosoziale Praxis* 52/2(2020), 305-315.

¹⁴ Cf. HINZ, Uta, OOMMEN-HALBACH, Anne, SÖHNER, Felicitas, GAHLEITNER, Silke et al., *Aufarbeitung, Learningtool Memorial Closed Jugendwerkhof Torgau 2022*.

¹⁵ Cf. HINZ, Uta, OOMMEN-HALBACH, Anne, SÖHNER, Felicitas, GAHLEITNER, Silke et al., *Aufarbeitung, Learningtool Memorial Closed Jugendwerkhof Torgau 2022*.

¹⁶ KEUPP, Heiner. Wie kann individuelle und gesellschaftliche Aufarbeitung gelingen? *Verhaltenstherapie & psychosoziale Praxis* 52/2(2020), 305-315.

the sense of serious engagement with the past must involve three levels: On the one hand, it has to be about remembering the past; on the other hand, it has to be about taking responsibility in the present; and finally, it has to be about looking into the future.¹⁷

Oral history is a powerful tool for memory culture. In the analysis became clear that oral history can help to preserve collective memory and cultural heritage. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of marginalised individuals and communities, oral history can challenge dominant narratives and provide a fuller and more empathetic understanding of historical events. However, there are also ethical concerns related to oral history that need to be considered.

Overall, oral tradition makes a valuable contribution to the culture of remembrance and the ongoing process of coming to terms with the past, but must be used with care and sensitivity. Ultimately, the process of dealing with the past requires ongoing dialogue and recognition that it is no substitute for therapeutic intervention.

Dealing with the past - in the sense of successful coping processes for those affected - requires a trauma-sensitive, appreciative and respectful attitude towards to traumatizing experiences in all activities of coming to terms with the past.¹⁸ Oral history can make here a valuable contribution.

¹⁷ Cf. HINZ, Uta, OOMMEN-HALBACH, Anne, SÖHNER, Felicitas, GAHLEITNER, Silke et al., Aufarbeitung, Learningtool Memorial Closed Jugendwerkhof Torgau 2022.

¹⁸ GAHLEITNER, Silke, GABRIEL, Meite, DE ANDRADE, Marilena, MARTENSEN, Marie, Erfahrungen mit dem Fonds. In: GLAESMER, Heide et al. (eds.) Kinder und Jugendliche in Heimen der DDR – Trauma und Bewältigung über die Lebensspanne, Weinheim (in press)

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