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Narrating Enlightenment: Oral History and Civil Society After Hitler

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for Thekla

The tendency of all opinions to become sectarian is not cured by the freest discussion, but is often heightened and exacerbated thereby; the truth which ought to have been, but was not, seen, being rejected all the more violently because [it was] proclaimed by persons regarded as opponents.

- John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859

If you want a democratic process, not just findings on the part of the researcher but social change and a human encounter, then you will also have to 'out' yourself—be able to 'out' yourself—openly, searchingly, personally, but not objectively...

— Heide Kaiser, 1998

Abstract: Does oral history promote liberal values? civic virtues? This paper will explore the contemporary role of narrative interviews, a core method within the everyday life history movement in Central Europe (*Alltagsgeschichte*). Reflecting back on a series of interviews I conducted on the Nazi past in 1992-94 in Hildesheim, this paper will show that I and my interview partners responded to the authenticity of this encounter by judging each other categorically. This

response denied the ethical ambiguity of the Third Reich and raises the thorny question of whether history should be based on facticity or authenticity. Both oral history and *alltagsgeschichte* seek to balance these modes of remembrance and, as this paper will show, it is this tension that facilitates the growth of civic virtues. Moreover, this tension is most effective in promoting civic virtues when oral history is conceived and conducted not simply as a means to an empirical end, but as a long-term, social process of remembrance.

THE HISTORY OF EVERYDAY LIFE, or *Alltagsgeschichte*, is a movement of amateur (and some professional) historians, mostly in German-speaking Central Europe, who style themselves as both progressive and populist. They see their work as progressive insofar as they strive to break the silence of the older generation about their activities during the Third Reich. They see their work as populist insofar as they try to accomplish this goal of ‘dealing with the past’ (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) by talking directly with ‘the people’—frequently, through oral history. As a formalized kind of storytelling, oral history is one mode of remembrance, one way in which we ‘make history,’ among many.

I consider myself an historian of everyday life. In the early 1990s, I tape-recorded the stories of the interwar generation (that is, those who grew up between the world wars) in Hildesheim, a mid-sized provincial town in north-central Germany. Some 200 hours of taped, narrative interviews, combined with extensive archival and library research, formed the data base (Bergerson, “Geselligkeit,” 1992-4) from which I wrote a dissertation on the history of neighborliness in Hildesheim from 1900 to 1950 (1998). In my dissertation, I defended oral history as a methodology, but I did not address one of the premises of my project (and many like it): the assumption that oral history is *inherently progressive as a methodology*. This paper will explore that question: whether an ‘authentic’ encounter with the fascist past—here, through the interview process—fosters liberal values, or civic virtues, among its participants.

This paper will describe and reflect upon my encounters with five interview partners (all names are pseudonyms except where noted). The first several anecdotes will suggest that narrative interviews function neither as an efficient method of denazification nor as a reliable antifascist prophylactic. The interviews did not change political opinions; in fact, they reinforced them. My interview partners and I all sought ethical closure on the Nazi past to such a degree that we foreclosed on the ethical ambiguities of that past: we labeled each other in terms of a black-and-white framework of victims and victimizers that denied the gray historical reality. As a discourse, these labels existed long before my research project; yet this paper will show that these

judgmental categories arose as an emotional response to the *authenticity* of the interview process itself.

As compared to archival history, oral history is experienced as a far more direct encounter between historians and their sources. These anecdotes therefore raise the troubling question of the optimal epistemological foundations for remembrance of the Nazi past, in objective analysis or in personal experience. This distinction is often exaggerated—to artificially distinguish the social sciences from the humanities, ethnography from history, rationality from romanticism. In fact, remembrance legitimately relies on both *facticity* and *authenticity*. Oral history mirrors the social process of discourse, reflection, response, and review essential to a healthy democracy. Because it evokes from its participants both analysis and identification, oral history discloses the ambiguity of everyday life, as well as the options and consequences of ethical action (befitting the need for epistemological flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity as suggested by Bell and Handelman respectively in their contributions to this volume). In the long-term, then, oral history can help us to escape the doldrums of self-absorbed melancholy and recognize ourselves as potential agents of liberal values in our everyday life. As two final examples from my research project in Hildesheim will show, the interview process does not change Nazis into democrats, but it can promote those civic virtues critical for a healthy democratic society—reflection, sensitivity, tolerance, activism, and pragmatism.

HELMUT RABITZ learned to see something nasty in Jews, capitalism, and democracy in the 1920s. He rose to a position of authority in the local Nazi party hierarchy in the 1930s. But by the 1950s, after the fall of national socialism, he had nothing but scorn for the many Hildesheimers “who could change their opinions like a shirt [*die ihre Gesinnung wechseln können, wie ein Hemd*]” (Bergerson, *Geselligkeit*, Tape 51a, Roll 65; henceforth: G/#, R/#). That sentiment, at least, I could appreciate.

In the fall of 1992, when I first approached him for an interview, Helmut refused. He said that he did not want to talk about Nazis and politics. I replied that he could refuse to answer any question I posed and that I was only going to ask him questions about neighborliness and friendship (though I failed to mention that I believed neighborliness and friendship were very political during the Third Reich). Yet the more we talked during the interviews (a few months later in 1993), the more I felt that his repeated refusals to talk about politics were just teasers. I was supposed to insist on their revelation: Helmut was being coy.

At the end of our third interview, while asking him about his friends and their associational activities, Helmut finally blurted out: "I will now tell you something *special*. I was a member of the NSDAP." Not wanting to recognize the boundaries that we had just crossed, I turned the conversation back to his friends and clubs. Unsatisfied Helmut asked me to turn off the tape recorder; he also changed his tone. In his deep and gravely voice, he began to tell me how his journeyman's travels had brought him to Berlin in the late 1920s. Without my tape recorder to protect me, I noticed that he sat in a large, heavy, antique wing-chair; I sat on a flimsy stool that belonged to some 1950s dinette; and only a low coffee-table stood between us. I noticed too that the windows to his living room had bars on them, that the shades had been drawn over them, and that smoke from his pipe had filled the room. Each layer of smoke seemed to protect his shadow-world from the bright light of day outside, as he let the unmentionable sneak out from behind the veil of ordinary activities. Still, he most desperately wanted me to recognize the import of his words. He raised his bushy eyebrows and his eyes sparked out at me through the darkness as he revealed to me that it was in Berlin that he learned of *The Party*.

I realized then why Helmut had agreed to the interviews. He wanted once again to feel the rush of power that he had experienced when walking down the street in his party uniform, the heightened sense of self that he felt while instilling fear in the hearts of his neighbors under the banner of the swastika. I laughed at myself. *I* had never convinced *him* to do an interview with *me*. Once he realized that I would actually listen to his every word, he jumped at the opportunity to terrify the enemies of the Reich, in this case a young American. I almost felt as though he wanted me to play the role of *Professor of the Occult* in some bad vampire movie. By raising a cross, only to watch it burn under Helmut's gaze, Dr. von Berg was supposed to reveal Helmut's true, yet long-hidden identity to the historically naive. He wanted me to recognize him not for the Nazi he still was in 1993, an old man isolated in his fortress-like home in a suburban development, but for the Nazi he had been during the Third Reich: young, powerful, feared.

I chose a different role in a different script. I played the hard-of-hearing, dull-witted academician commonly seen in made-for-TV documentaries. I simply asked him which party it was precisely that he had joined in Berlin. He responded again: *The Party*. His eyes flared once more, even more ferociously, but the moment had passed. I had hid my fear successfully behind a facade of historical objectivity and pedanticism. He then conceded this round to me by saying "the National Socialist German Workers Party"—as if that

party was no more or less significant to either of us than any other party (G/52a, R/440).

The interview ended a short while thereafter, and I raced home on my bike to hide under my covers. Even though it was still afternoon, I felt exhausted and fell asleep. I found myself inside a cattle car; I escaped, but then I found myself running alone on the dark, wet, cobbled streets of interwar Hildesheim, away from some abstract Nazi predator. In objective reality, there was no need to fear the Gestapo, or an old man like Helmut, in the 1990s. But that predator was very much alive in my subjective reality, lurking there in the shadows. What was I running from in fact? In spite of our differences in age, nationality, language, and politics, the interview process had helped me see the world from Helmut's eyes. I found that I appreciated how Hitler's speech in Berlin could have appealed to Helmut during the chaos of the Weimar Republic. I now realize that I felt more akin to him than I had been willing to admit at first. Even if I despised him for his politics, I found myself respecting him for the fact that he stuck to his party guns—that he did not 'change his opinions like a shirt.'

I had become friendly with an unrepentant Nazi. The identification required for successful interviews pushed me tentatively from my long-standing identification with the victims of Nazi oppression towards an identification with the victimizers. This so disturbed my image of myself that I created a dreamworld in which I could be the victim again. Yet in my fantasy, I could not run away fast enough from the fascist I found there, lurking.

The civil war between liberalism and fascism that had raged in Europe for decades did not end in 1945 but continues to be waged subtly, even in the 1990s. In his shadow-and-smoke filled salon, Helmut tried to make me fear the Nazi in him, so that he could once again feel that heightened sense of his own importance. Meanwhile, in my conversations with my friends and relatives back home in the months and years that followed, this encounter with Helmut became my stock tale of the real-uncanny, designed to titillate my American audience. It was my Close Encounter of a Third-Reich Kind; the story I pulled from my NS-Files. Clearly, neither Helmut nor I had any intention of letting ourselves be convinced by the other persons' political opinions. We had already judged each other categorically. We used the interview process to reassure ourselves of the validity of our values, and to get a final jab at our political enemies, past and present.

THIS SAME STORY could be told—in the inverse—of Otto Koch. A warm friendly man, Otto was a social democrat who had been put in jail for passing out resistance literature on the factory floor in 1934-35. He stopped actively

challenging the Nazi regime after this incident and continued to work in a factory involved in war production for a decade. Yet I excused him his trespasses, understanding in his case the necessity of ensuring his family's survival in hard times. He made this task especially easy for me by ridiculing himself for it during the interviews in 1993. I found myself heroicizing him.

In the summer of 1994, I returned to Otto's home to give back some photos that I had borrowed. I was flying back to the United States a few months later, so I assumed that this would be the last time I would see him. As I was leaving his company, it took me a long time to unlock my bike; he, too, stood in the door of his matchbox home—like me, waiting to complete something we had not yet finished. Finally, awkwardly, I said: "*Herr Koch*, you know, I just wanted to tell you that I really respect you for what you did during the Third Reich. You are a good man." Otto responded:

Herr Bergerson, when I was in prison in Celle, my guard brought me my food every day. He never said a word to me, in spite of the fact that I greeted him cheerfully. One day, the guard confronted me, challenging me to explain my curious behavior. After all, I was in prison. I should be angry and unhappy. I was on one side of the bars, and he was on the other. I responded that the two of us were going to be 'working' together for a while anyway, so why not make the best of it.

This conversation (unfortunately never recorded on tape) reassured me that everything I had thought about Otto was true: he was a wise and wonderful man.

After my return to the United States a few months later, I recounted this story to my family and friends as my counter-example to Helmut, to prove that all Germans had not been Nazis. I described Otto as a man whom I would be proud to have as my grandfather. In my dissertation, I struggled to find a new way of conceptualizing everyday life during the Third Reich, to show how men like Otto could both participate in and resist it. In retrospect, it became clear to me that I liked Otto because he fit my ideal for ethical behavior. He balanced the strength to resist with compassion for the situation of others and self-critical introspection. That is, I found in Otto someone who legitimized my own opinions and prejudices.

Should we conclude that interviews are only a matter of self-justification, of locating ourselves and our partners in polarized categories of identification or condemnation? Here I should add that I did not interview Helmut for several weeks on his own and then move on to Otto. On a daily basis, I alternated between these two political extremes, an unrepentant Nazi and a

Socialist resistance fighter—that is, between ethical extremes of my own invention.

Of course these extremes are not fabricated out of whole cloth: the 1930s and 1940s saw many unrepentant Nazis and Socialist resistance fighters, many of whom died for their respective causes. Yet such extremes were exceptional: most Germans belonged to what historian Ian Kershaw (1988, viii) called *the muddled majority*: “neither full-hearted Nazis nor outright opponents, whose attitudes at one and the same time betray signs of Nazi ideological penetration and yet show the clear limits of propaganda manipulation.” The Nazi regime certainly forced many individuals into ethical quandaries as a form of torture (consider the familiar example from the book and movie *Sophie’s Choice* in which a mother was forced to choose which of her children would be murdered). Yet the Nazi regime also promoted ethical ambiguity in systemic ways, indirectly fostering the muddle-headedness of the majority. The Third Reich glorified violence and meted out extreme punishments for disobedience as well as lavish rewards for collaboration. All this made resistance very difficult and collaboration all too easy. Ironically, the human response to the moral polarization typical of a totalitarian society was to seek out small spaces for independent agency in the cracks of that dichotomy, minor acts of nonconformity and conformity. Whether one looks at patterns of denunciation among neighbors in the home towns of Germany, the response of conquered peoples throughout Nazi occupied Europe, or even the activities of Jewish councils and concentration-camp inmates in Eastern Europe, conformity and nonconformity often coincided, enabling each other in ironic, curious, yet often tragic ways. Yet the ‘ordinary’ people enacting these manifold yet small and clever acts of self-realization disguised their agency behind a veil of normalcy: they insisted on their own muddle-headedness. In my dissertation, I argue that fascism was realized in the home town of Germany in part due to this radicalization of the everyday. Taken together, the draconian consequences of everyday decisions, and the many small ways in which such decisions could be manipulated in different circumstances, made it hard (both then and now) to draw a clear line between right and wrong.

In this ethical morass, I tried to build an unequivocal moral framework by alternating interviews between Helmut and Otto. For my peace of mind, I found it easier to pass judgment on my interview partners than think seriously about the ethical quandaries of their everyday life during the Third Reich. Indeed, my need for ethical clarity seemed to have defeated the very purpose of my research in the first place: to learn how ordinary people nego-

tiated the conflicting demands of daily life under Hitler. In my own defense, I am not the first person to trap himself in simplistic categories of victims and victimizers. The contemporary, honest desire for remembrance and reconciliation is often hindered by the shadows of the Nazi past (Krondorfer 1995, Bergerson 1997). As historian Charles Maier has argued (1988), the victim-victimizer framework for identification is one of the reasons why the German past remains *unmasterable*.

In my dissertation, I traced this problem of memory back to the ethical crisis of the Third Reich. Hildesheim's civil society before 1933 defined membership in its community through 'traditional' customs of neighborliness such that exclusions of unwanted individuals took place without a sense of personal ethical responsibility. The fascist society that followed hid its racial definitions for membership behind this facade of normalcy, but its radical quality soon destroyed any facade of 'normalcy.' By the 1940s, everyday life lost its innocence: Hildesheimers were confronted with their personal responsibility for systemic processes of destruction. Decades later, that memory still nags. Without minimizing the significance of Auschwitz to collective memory, I believe that the personal memories of most Hildesheimers are dominated by a multitude of anecdotes in which they remember changing their *neighbors* into *Jews*. The collapse of normalcy in the 1940s left the interwar generation with this obsession, one which they in turn bequeathed onto postfascist generations: to resolve the ethical ambiguities of the Nazi past, and thereby restore normalcy. Unfortunately, the Nazi past cannot be remembered and forgotten like any other, for the Third Reich, in their experience, was not normal. Said in another way, the Nazi past remains unmasterable in the postfascist era in part because of the general unwillingness, then and now, to face the moral conundrums it reveals.

I recognized this pattern of denial in myself as I reflected on my experiences during the interview process. For good or for ill, oral history disclosed to me the ethical ambiguities of everyday life. By telling their life-stories in face-to-face conversations, Helmut and Otto evoked sympathy and identification in me, across seemingly unbridgable barriers of age, nationality, language, and politics. This 'authentic' human encounter challenged the framework of victims and victimizers in which I found ethical comfort; so I responded by judging my interview partners in categorical terms. I re-imposed ethical clarity before the ambiguity of everyday life overwhelmed my sense of respectability.

JÜRGEN LUDEWIG loved history. He regularly participated in an adult-education class in the local historical museum. The teacher of those courses rec-

commended that I interview him. Heide Kaiser, then a student of museum science at the local university, also recommended Jürgen as an interview partner. But she also warned me: “he is to be enjoyed with care [*er ist mit Vorsicht zu genießen*].” During the interviews, Jürgen turned out to be quite a cunning character. He accommodated himself to ‘the system,’ be it fascist or democratic, as the situation demanded, and skeptically denied the existence of any ideal moral positions worthy of sacrifice. In many ways I found Jürgen harder to handle than Helmut. At least I knew where I stood with Helmut. And yet most Germans were like Jürgen, ethically ambiguous. More accurately, everyday life is often that complicated.

One day in 1993, before my interviews with Jürgen began, Heide and I ran into him at a museum exhibition. He had spoken to us separately about visiting him in his house to view *The Immortal Heart*, a movie directed by Veit Harlan and filmed in Hildesheim in 1938. Jürgen, it turned out, was an avid film connoisseur: he had a copy of the final cut of this movie in his extensive video library and promised to tell us about how he had watched the filming in his youth.

The ethical problem with *The Immortal Heart* is not just a matter of the striking similarity between its motifs and Nazi propaganda, but also its functionality in Nazi society. Within months of filming it in Hildesheim, the Nazi regime initiated a massive antisemitic pogrom—the so-called Night of Broken Glass. By offering Hildesheimers this romantic fantasy-image of their town, Harlan disguised the violent realities of the Third Reich and indirectly helped the regime realize its racist goals. Yet it was Jürgen and his neighbors who first adopted the habit of imagining that they lived in Alt-Hildesheim, a premodern, cultivated, yet fantastic town. While watching the filming of *The Immortal Heart* in 1938, Jürgen imagined the disclosure, by modern technology, of a historically romantic citiscape that he and his neighbors had already *learned to see* (Bergerson 1998, ch. 3).

After watching the movie in 1993, Jürgen tried to convince us that *The Immortal Heart* was not a Nazi film. At first, Heide argued with him as I listened in silence, but both of us soon thanked him for his hospitality and excused ourselves in frustration. Once we were alone in her car, Heide and I spoke of our mutual outrage. In his youth Jürgen had collaborated with the Nazis, and in his maturity he continued to justify this behavior.

Then the conversation took a surprising turn. Heide did not understand why I had remained silent while Jürgen tried to justify his past. She asked whether I also let unrepentant Nazis make outright antisemitic comments during the interview process. I responded that I did, that it was not my role to

try to change my interview partners from fascists into democrats, and that I could not do so even if I were to try. They had lived for eighty or more years one way; one conversation with me would not change their ways. Defensively I argued that, were I to challenge their politics in the interview process, I would not create trust and they would not speak honestly into my tape recorder. I would be ruining the purpose of the interviews. I could criticize them only after the interviews were done—for instance, in my written analysis. Heide appreciated my opinion, but she was not convinced. She felt uncomfortable giving Nazis and their collaborators any opportunity to excuse their past behavior in the public sphere.

Late last year I wrote Heide, asking her to respond to this paper. In her reply (11 January 1998), she explained her behavior that afternoon:

Given my conviction that National Socialism was possible because Nazi ideas had become ‘tolerable for discussion in polite company’ [*salonfähig*] and everyone else had grown silent, I could not and had no intention of restraining myself. I ‘had’ to contradict Herr Ludewig.

To fully appreciate this comment, the reader needs to understand that Heide was raised in a *postfascist* society: one that is still living in the shadow of fascism, in which any ‘respected’ elder, perhaps even parents or grandparents, could be a disguised murderer. So she has learned never to trust anyone over a certain age. She has also come to believe that democracy requires civic activism: she instinctively responds to fascist rhetoric with public display of democratic virtues. Though a student of museum science, she is also part of the movement of *alltagsgeschichte*. Since the 1970s these younger researchers, amateur historians, and civic activists have been fighting to reveal the local Nazi past against an entrenched reign of silence. They seek to prevent an artificial, intellectual foreclosure on this traumatic past and to promote democratic consciousness in their communities. There are a variety of such groups in Hildesheim, for example. They have created walking tours of the local Nazi past, restored and preserved Jewish cemeteries, met survivors of Nazi terror, run intergenerational and interconfessional discussion groups, and, of course, conducted research projects in oral history (described in Bergerson 1997, 1998). Through authentic encounters with the Nazi past, these groups try to make that past accessible and relevant to people today. Yet the everyday life historian’s interest in authenticity can be troubling, as Heide is continually reminded. She currently works at a memorial-museum located on the site of a former Nazi concentration camp. In her letter (1998), she explained that she finds herself “always confronted with the desire for

clear answers as to good and evil, having to endure the contradiction of wanting to preserve the remains of a horrible past, [and] trying to keep in mind the question of my own political and scientific intentions.” That is, both the Nazi past and the everyday life history movement trying to preserve its memory raise the question at stake here in stark terms: does an ‘authentic’ experience with the past, through a visit to the site of mass murder or a narrative interview with an eye-witness, in fact foster liberal values and civic virtues?

In the case of our visit with Jürgen, the answer seemed to have been: *no*. Jürgen insisted that *The Immortal Heart* was not a Nazi film, because he wanted to believe that Alt-Hildesheim had never been a Nazi place. In 1938, he was busy imagining a medieval dreamworld while the Jews of Hildesheim were being robbed, brutalized, and deported to concentration camps. In the 1990s, he still watches *The Immortal Heart* for the same reason: to forget the ethical complications of everyday life, past and present. Jürgen is addicted to this fantasy, and he tried to addict two young historians to it as well—to validate his non-ethic of escapism. Heide and I responded with an analogous self-justification: we reasserted our antifascist positions by judging Jürgen to be a Nazi collaborator. The irony of this story is that this intergenerational encounter did not transform our values or virtues. Instead, all three of us repressed precisely what made the Nazi era so disturbing: having to make ethical choices when none of the options seemed ‘reasonable.’ For my part, I can also now see that I did not keep my polite silence with Jürgen just for the sake of recording a ‘truthful’ account of the past. This ‘authentic’ encounter with the past had revealed a panoply of ethical conundrums, and I hid my anxiety about them behind a disciplinary obsession with facticity.

JÜRGEN BELIEVED that he could lure Heide and me into his dreamworld—with good reason. All of us, Helmut and Otto included, enjoyed the interview process; it seemed to be so *authentic*. Like working with Nazi artifacts in a museum or walking around the grounds of an ex-concentration camp, conducting oral history with members of the interwar generation was a unique experience insofar as these people, places, and objects are inextricably linked to specific, traumatic, historical events. We may reproduce words on tape, images on postcards, and events in history books; but these mechanical or electronic reproductions cannot take the place of the ‘original.’ One of a kind, these witnesses evoke identification from us, either as sympathy or revulsion. Ironically, they cannot ever be disassociated with that past and still preserve their authenticity. As Walter Benjamin implied in his classic essay from the 1930s (reprinted in Boyer and Goldstein 1986), the authenticity of an object in the modern era depends on the fact that all other sources for that

experience have either been copied through mass production, or, I would add, destroyed through mass destruction. The systematic destruction of the Jewish communities of Europe created the foundations for the authenticity of their isolated survivors; the systematic reproduction of the images and voices of the Holocaust (earlier via books, museums, and documentaries, today also on cassette tape, CD-ROM, and the Internet) completes this process. Not surprisingly, historical tourism, museum preservation, and oral history are all on the rise, for they seem to offer authentic access to that ephemeral, yet unforgettable, past.

For men like Helmut, who held positions of power in a currently despised regime, or Jürgen, who preserved his respectability by living in a fantasy of historical romanticism, the *melancholic* quality (Maier 1993) of the interview process is most obvious: remembering their days of glory or innocence makes them feel good, in spite of the fact that their glory or innocence ultimately collapsed. Retelling stories from the past was also bittersweet for Otto. Through the interview process, he could re-live his resistance while knowing for sure this time that his resistance would lead to a happy ending. Meanwhile Heide and I relished conducting interviews, especially when compared to the factual history books we read as part of our professional training. Unlike far too many historical monographs, oral history is rarely dry or boring.

Of course, history must be based on verifiable facts if it is to be considered valid (as discussed by Jim Bell in this volume). Yet writing even the most condemnatory book on the Nazi genocide defeats the purposes of antifascist pedagogy, if it is so objective, so analytical, so distant from personal experience that no one is inclined to read it. What distinguishes a history based on authenticity from one based on facticity lies in the faculty which historians seek to engage in their audience—intellect or emotion, reason or experience. Fact-based histories tend to dictate interpretation to their audience on the basis of objectively verified evidence, whereas authenticity-based histories inform through identification, breaking down the boundaries between the subjects, authors, objects, and audiences of history. Of course, there are a variety of options here (as Jim Bell also suggests). It is a strength of history as a discipline that it can combine facticity and authenticity in its narratives. It is just unfortunate that historians tend to prioritize facticity over authenticity as the yardstick of professional legitimacy and success.

Various fissures among historians fall along this same, false dichotomy. In Germany, two distinct, politicized, and mutually antipathetic schools of history developed by the 1980s. A dry, yet factual, 'social science history' domi-

nated certain university departments (notably Bielefeld's), while an oftentimes imprecise, atheoretical, yet authentic and appealing everyday life history grew popular on the margins of the academy—in local museums, community cultural centers, tourist programs, and history 'workshops' (*Geschichtswerkstätte*). Given the superior institutional supports available to social-science history, it won the early battles in this turf-war: everyday life history is often condemned out-of-hand as an intellectual heir to the romantic, and later Nazi, folkloric tradition (*Volkskunde*).

Historians must recognize, however, that modern audiences are attracted to history less by facts and more by authenticity, so long as that authenticity is also combined with ethical clarity. In the international public sphere, academia is clearly losing the turf-war with Hollywood. In spite of factual errors in their films, Spike Lee, Oliver Stone, and Steven Spielberg have done more to provoke public awareness and debate on critical issues in American and European history than almost any academically trained historian in recent decades—in large part because film promotes identification so strongly (for academic reviews of *Schindler's List*, see Denham 1995, Hansen 1996, and Eley and Großman, 1997). The most obvious exception to this rule within the academic history of Germany is Daniel Jonah Goldhagen. His book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, achieved mass market appeal in 1996 because he offered both a personalized account of mass murder while also reasserting ethical clarity over a Nazi past. After hundreds of pages of horrifying accounts of how ordinary Germans participated in Nazi brutalities as members of mobile killing units (*Einsatzgruppen*), Goldhagen's nonprofessional readers could still rest easy, for they know who was to blame: *The Germans*. Readers could feel the terror of the past while also feeling confident that such brutality would not happen again—at least not in their neighborhood. The book was popular even in Germany, giving younger Germans ammunition to roundly condemn their parents and grandparents. By contrast, academic historians had been busy muddling and *historicizing* (Brozsat 1985) the Third Reich. Consequently, their many histories of the Third Reich in the decades before Goldhagen never provoked such a widespread public discussion in Germany—to the distress of academics. Only the broadcasting of the Hollywood television miniseries *The Holocaust* in 1979 (see Rabinbach and Zipes 1986, Kaes 1989) was comparable. Like Goldhagen's book and Spielberg's films, however, this soap-opera stimulated widespread interest because it combined the experience of authenticity and identification with ethical clarity.

What local museum directors, tour guides, and Hollywood producers understand is that authentic history sells. Its profitability often makes fact-oriented historians green with envy (instead of profit), but also makes them hold onto their obsession with facticity all the more, to distinguish their 'superior' histories from the mass-cultural brand. That said, the economics of publication is not so terrible for historians of the Third Reich. For, as every publisher knows, Nazi history also sells. Even factual histories of this era appeal to a relatively wide audience, arguably because the Second World War has about it a certain default value of authenticity. In part, this derives from the kind of history it is: from the extreme violence of the Nazi war for racial hegemony, from the radical qualities of its ideologies and technologies, from the all-or-nothing drama of its narratives. It is hard not to believe the rhetoric of the older generations when they assert that they fought and sacrificed for real ideals in their youth, while the younger generations today lack ethical clarity. I and my interview partners bought into this myth: we seemed to long for this kind of clarity of purpose, and we lived vicariously in it during the interview process.

We are not the only ones to buy into this myth. In the United States, we are constantly being reminded of the impending danger that the eyewitnesses of the Holocaust will soon die and that horror will be forgotten. The marketing agents of Steven Spielberg's "Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation" as well as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum use this logic in their membership drives, to try to convince American Jews to donate time and money for expensive exhibitions and elaborate interview projects. These populist projects have mass cultural appeal: the USHMM is now one of the major tourist attractions in Washington DC, while the interviews in Spielberg's project are dutifully and expeditiously conducted by trained, but largely nonacademic interviewers. In Germany, the situation is inverted, but the end result is similar. The interwar generation claims to command authentic access to a pre-Nazi, respectable community, while they remain silent about their Nazi past. Consequently, the Nazi past seems all the more authentic to skeptical postwar generations. In this context, a generational struggle for control over cultural capital tramples the turf of memory.

The aura of authenticity surrounding the Nazi past also derives its cultural momentum from contemporary processes beyond the scope of this paper—the globalization of capitalism, the collapse of the welfare-state and nation-state, the seismic fluctuations in familial structures, populations, and categories of gender and sexuality, etc. These manifold dislocations have divorced people from their traditional identities, both public and private; some look in

turn to history to provide them with the experience of authenticity. They find it among witnesses who can recount 'authentic' stories about life in an era which, they desperately want to believe, was conditioned by clear categories of good and evil.

GIVEN MY AFFECTION for oral history, I obviously support mixing the traditional facticity of history with some ethnographic authenticity. By doing precisely this, everyday life history could engender a more inclusive and fruitful debate about the Nazi past. Yet I do not recommend authenticity without reservations. I am not so much worried about potential inaccuracies cropping up in our narratives: ultimately, veracity never derives from the factual accuracy of any one research project but in the long-term, collective process of research and review in the public sphere. Rather, I am concerned with how this shift could influence our public culture. Authentic history alters who controls the processes of remembrance. The legitimacy of an oral historian's interpretation always refers to the witnesses interviewed; this is true to some extent with every historical source, but arguably more so in the case of oral history which deals directly with living human beings. As those generations who experienced the Second World War die, oral historians become the regents of their cultural capital. Even as regents, however, our access to the past remains indirect and mediated through the witness' claim to authenticity.

Compare oral history with, say, a cleric in the early modern era or a psychoanalyst in the modern era (in the analytic tradition of Foucault 1980). In the confessional, salvation was dictated to the sinner; on the couch, neurotic dreams were interpreted, and the patient was healed. Exorcism of the past came through the authority of these Western 'witch-doctors,' and the sinner or neurotic was in no way unique or special. Not so the eyewitness whose experiences are recorded by the oral historian—especially not in the case of the Holocaust. My authority over the past as an oral historian comes not from divine grace or professional training, but always *vis-à-vis* the experiences of the 'real' witnesses. One result is the tendency among some oral historians, particularly in the case of the Nazi past, to simply conduct and publish interviews as if these sources spoke for themselves (in the U. S. context, see Spielberg's Shoah project and the USHMM). Obfuscating the oral historian's very active intervention in the past, they present their interview narratives as if they were the past in fact. Moreover, the motive of remembrance in the confessional or on the couch was to free the sinner or neurotic from the burdens of the past. By contrast, the interview process does not exorcise the ghosts of the Nazi past: its long-term purpose is to preserve them in a histori-

cal record; its short-term purpose is to permit the interview partners, and sometimes a wider audience, to re-live that Nazi past. Viewed cynically, oral historians and elderly eyewitnesses conspire to keep the past unmasterable in order to ensure that we can still write books that sell and that they—elderly people desperate for human contact and sympathy—get public and private attention.

That is, the process of remembrance itself has become a means through which resources can be shifted to both historians and their interview partners. By highlighting the personalized suffering of one group, the search for an authentic past can therefore derail modern politics off the tracks of classical liberalism. As Charles Maier (1993) has convincingly argued, whether one looks at child-abuse cases or collective identities on the basis of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender, the tendency in contemporary society is to divide resources not according to human needs and rights (in the modern tradition) but through unique claims to past suffering (a postmodern condition). Any efforts toward pragmatic solutions to chronic human problems are now circumscribed, he argues, by the obsession with respect and recognition, and replaced with apologies for past sins. In the fall of 1997, for instance, the American media hotly debated whether the President of the United States should make a public apology for slavery. Authentic modes of remembrance shift our public culture towards this kind of political melancholy.

In the extreme, political melancholy creates xenophobic groups, isolated by their unique claims to past suffering. It gives rise to the notion that historical experiences of suffering are inherited. This confusion emerged in West Germany during the infamous *Historikerstreit* of the mid 1980s (see documents in Augstein 1987). With what figures should young Germans identify: the soldier fighting communism or the concentration camp victim? In the increasingly multicultural, unified Germany, it is unclear how this national identity is transmitted in fact (through biology, culture, or citizenship); and it is also unclear who can or should be able to identify with which figures from the Nazi past. I recall a sympathetic, young Kurdish immigrant living in Hildesheim, who explained to me in all seriousness that he took part in a student exchange program to Israel (see Bergerson 1997) because he felt that, as a German, he needed to 'come to terms with the Nazi past.' His good intentions notwithstanding, when he arrived at the airport, Israeli guards closely searched his bags and body, and not those of his German friends, because to these guards he looked like an Arab.

In postmodern times, identity is flexible, consumable—though it is perhaps precisely this new degree of freedom to adopt and adapt identities that

has provoked an historically essentialist response. Political melancholy reasserts clear categories. It implies that only members of the same gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, class, generation, etc. can appreciate the experiences (read: suffering) of that group. Taken to an extreme, political melancholy challenges the Enlightenment model of the human being on which our democratic societies were founded: that, as individuals, we were all created equal, if not in our individual abilities then in our common dignity, potential, and capacity to reason. This commonality also means that we should all be capable of understanding each other—in spite of differences in opinion or background.

Narrative interviews as well as autobiographies set in the Nazi era tend to fall into this trap of political melancholy: to stress the uniqueness of suffering and to claim an exclusive past to which one (as a member of a group) has preferential access. Oral history of the Nazi era thus has the potential of promoting illiberal habits of mind, fostering the segmentation of our societies into mutually indifferent if not hostile groups. In the stories told so far, my partners and I made these errors. The interview process led us to notice our human similarities, yet we preferred to emphasize our differences by imposing simplistic categories of judgment on an ethically ambiguous past. We relished the process of revisiting an authentic past and the control that *witnessing* gave us over that horrific past, while the fantasy of ethical clarity in the past helped us to ignore the question of how we should confront analogous terrors in the present. Interviews did not help improve the future, but trapped us in rigid categories of righteousness and pits of melancholy.

LIKE THE REST of my interview partners, Thekla Reifenrath (her real name) behaved with remarkable consistency throughout her life. The middle child of a large, wealthy Catholic family, she sacrificed herself for others her whole life, first by being the eyes for a blind lawyer for twenty years, and then by raising her cousin's children whose parents had died. Born before the First World War, Thekla had what interwar Hildesheimers called *niveau*, that certain sophistication and grandeur of a nineteenth-century Lady. It was also Thekla who showed me one way to escape the doldrums of melancholy. Though it does not yet resolve the problem of dealing with the Nazi past as such, my experiences with her do reveal the hidden potential within oral history to teach civic virtues.

To my knowledge, Thekla never intervened directly either for or against the Nazi regime. As far as I could tell, she isolated herself from Nazi hatred and violence by creating this very private world of personal sacrifice among friends and family. Friendship could function in this way during the Third

Reich: it normalized a racist life world, indirectly facilitating the Nazi reign of terror. Perhaps I am too willing to make excuses for Thekla, because she had become my friend. In the thirty months that I was in Hildesheim, I met with Thekla periodically to play cards. I also introduced her to another friend of mine, who saw in Thekla the grandmother she had recently lost. The three of us exchanged stories, gifts, food, and experiences above and beyond the formal relationship created during the interviews. When I told her that my mother would be coming to town for a visit, Thekla told me that she would be honored to meet my *Frau Mutter*. I could do nothing but gladly and graciously comply.

One day, Thekla told me the story of *Gold for Iron*, a money-raising program during the First World War in which German citizens were asked to give the government their gold jewelry, capital which was then used to pay for the war effort. In exchange, they received an iron ring on which was engraved the year and the words, *Thanks of the Fatherland*. This iron ring was still on Thekla's finger in 1993. I do not know what piece of jewelry it had replaced, and thought it inappropriate to ask such a personal question if she did not volunteer the information herself. The iron ring was obviously an important piece of jewelry for her, in spite of the fact that the original had been melted down and traded to some neutral country for war supplies some eighty years ago. What happened next shocked me: she took off her ring and handed it to me—as a gift. I tried to refuse, but could not. “I have no family,” she explained to me, “and I know you will appreciate it.” Most interview partners shared their stories with me. Thekla parted with hers.



When I first met Thekla, she was wont to complain, in a polite way, about her age and infirmity. She was reluctant to die. Shortly after I returned to the

United States, she explained to a mutual friend that she no longer feared death. She died in her sleep two months after my departure. I believe that, by telling me her stories and giving me her ring, she was preparing herself for death. She knew that her ring would be safe in my hands, and that I would tell her stories to others when she no longer could. Her death was not voluntary; but it was proactive.

Like my many other tales from Hildesheim, I now use this story, and the ring associated with it, to show my American friends and family that narrative interviews do not have to be exercises in futile melancholy. When Thekla gave me her ring, she freed herself of the burdens of that past and empowered herself to take the next, most terrifying, step in her life cycle. Likewise, my visits with Thekla helped me become more comfortable with the prospect of growing old and dying. Thekla showed me that she was still the master of her own fate. Through Thekla, I recognized myself as an agent in my everyday life. We did not resolve the question of what she should have done during the Nazi era: Thekla was not a model of political self-reflection. Yet, these narrative interviews did make us both think about human relationships by establishing new ones with each other. These interviews fostered reflection about choices and consequences in spite of social and cultural differences. These subtle benefits went unnoticed at first; what enabled me to see them was the long-term relationship I shared with Thekla. By receiving her stories, like her ring, I helped her give up the past and prepare for the future; and I learned in turn that dealing with the past is a choice. Only after repeated cycles of discussion and reflection could this 'research project' help us both to escape some of the old patterns of an unmasterable past—enough that we could begin to think about our present and future circumstances. Oral history is most fruitful, then, when it is conceived and conducted as a long-term, collective social process.

AT THIS POINT, I should say a word about the structure of these narrative interviews. I planned to meet with my interview partners four times. During the first meeting, my interview partners described their background to me, and I explained the interview process to them, both in general terms. During the second and third meetings, we discussed neighbors and friends respectively. That is, for the first three sessions, the topic under discussion was their personal *life world* from 1900 to 1950. In the final session, the topic of conversation shifted to the political events in Hildesheim during the same period—that is, to *the system* (Habermas 1981). This shift from private to public events, from authentic experiences to factual circumstances, was sudden but productive, as I learned from my first interview partner.

When I arrived for the final interview with Theodora Algermissen, she was agitated. She admitted that she could not sleep the previous night. She kept asking herself: *what should I have done?* —about the Nazis, about the Holocaust. In this, she was not so much anticipating the specific questions I might ask as being sensitive to the overarching thrust of the interview process. The structure of the interview topics had implicitly drawn a link between her everyday life and the political violence and industrial mass murder of the regime under which she had lived. The very logic of an interview process that combined life world and system forced her to question her partial yet personal responsibility for global processes of mass destruction; it raised the question of her agency. Our conversations did not give her the opportunity to construct an historic fantasy of ethical clarity; rather we reenacted her own experience of ethical ambivalence during the Third Reich. An interview process so-constructed returned her to the moment when the myth of normalcy had collapsed, when the life world and the system had collided.

While writing the conclusion to my dissertation last spring, in which I began to piece together a model of normalcy and its collapse, I felt compelled to return to Theodora's question. On the one hand, I had no intention of reproducing the excuses of her cohort. Collaboration had not been forced on them by a totalitarian dictator and his terror state. It was the goal of my dissertation to show how Hildesheimers normalized racial violence, and helped realize a racist society, through 'traditional' customs of conviviality. On the other hand, my years of working with interwar Hildesheimers had convinced me that judging their behavior according to some idealistic standard of ethical action, like a denazification tribunal, was not only scurrilous for someone born in 1966, but also self-defeating —both as a historian and as a liberal member of a civil society in the 1990s.

Of course, fascism is alive and well at the end of the twentieth century and, so long as it survives, democracies will need judges to sentence criminals and humanitarians to provide succor to their victims. Historians can and should lend a hand in these projects by providing evidence of crimes committed. Should these judges then fail in their task of establishing legal responsibility, it may also fall to historians to pass judgment in the public sphere, so that the crimes of those who 'got away' will not be forgotten. Yet the exacting demands for consistency and truth in a courtroom promote totalizing and categorical kinds of explanations, an approach to truth that is ill-suited for historical analysis (as pointed out by Scott 1998 in terms of feminist theory). For this reason, historians should take care to distinguish these *ancillary* tasks of condemnation and commemoration from the *core* imperative of their call-

ing: to explain, factually and authentically, the causes, nature, and consequences of past events. As those responsible for providing a purely intellectual analysis of the past, historians have a duty to make their models as complex and contingent as necessary to explain the past. Said in another way, the primary task of the historian is to help the majority become less muddled. This goal of enlightenment can be accomplished only by sinking ourselves into the ethical ambiguities of everyday life in the Third Reich and analyzing it, through a detailed phenomenological-historical approach such as *alltagsgeschichte*. The more we rely on the categorical judgments of lawyers, humanitarians, or commemorators—as appropriate as these judgments may be in other arenas of democratic activism—the more we endanger our central reason for being as historians. In this sense, it is not only beneficial but also necessary that oral history complicates our models of the Third Reich. Only a complex understanding of how fascism played out in everyday life in the past will help us to recognize fascism in our own everyday life in the future.

Thus, the more I thought about my interviews with Theodora, the more I realized that the relevant question for me was not *what should they have done?* but *what can we do?* or more pointedly *what must I do?* Researching Theodora's past returned me ultimately to my present not because I have abandoned history as a legitimate pursuit, but because our identification, our relationship, was contemporary. Again it is significant that this insight emerged not as an immediate response to one encounter with the past: at such moments, I was always too absorbed in that past and its ethical paradoxes. My contemporary perspective emerged instead as a result of the long-term process of interpersonal interaction—including stages of narration, identification, distancing, reflection, response, retelling, and so on. I, too, had responded to an interview process that combined system and life world: in the short-term by seeking to resurrect normalcy, and in the long-term by recognizing that my everyday agency also helped to realize broad historical changes in my lived reality.

The discipline of history is never concerned solely with the past; similarly, oral history should not be understood simply as an empirical methodology for an independent researcher to gather data. As a long-term, collective social process, it forced both Theodora and me to rethink how our everyday lives related to the systems of mass destruction around us. When my interview partners showed me how surviving during the Third Reich affected the lives of their friends and neighbors, they forced me to think hard about how my survival has had an impact on my friends and neighbors. The variety of

their responses to the Nazi regime has shown me the wide array of pragmatic choices available for resistance and collaboration. If, at first, I responded with judgments, the reiterative and identificatory qualities of the interview process slowly revealed to me certain parallels between them and me, between the ethical ambiguities of their memories and similar ambiguities in my contemporary reality. Hearing their struggles with ethical choices in their Nazi past, I began to notice similarities to how I make ethical choices in my present.

Interestingly, Theodora moved in an analogous direction, also in response to the interview process. On a return visit to Hildesheim in the Fall of 1997, I visited her, and we talked about my dissertation as well as the questions posed in this article. She responded that she had never really thought critically about the Nazi years before the interviews. But she did think a lot about our interviews over the intervening few years, and they motivated her to new pursuits. She explained that the interviews made her realize that she had been missing something crucial about what it means to be a Christian German by never having understood what it meant to be a Jewish German. So, together with her daughter, she has begun exploring Jewish culture and history.

What makes Theodora's current state of mind so refreshing is not so much her willingness to admit her culpability in the crimes of the Third Reich. (In a letter dated 18 December 1997, in which she reacted to this paper, she referred to herself as one of many 'silent collaborators' [*schweigenden Mitläufern*].) Nor do I really find complete comfort in her search for a Jewish heritage in her community. Far too often, such responses derive simply from an inverted identification with the victims rather than the victimizers, not a transformation of consciousness that recognizes the ethical and historical complexity of living in a modern society. What reassures me that the interviews did in fact promote these civic virtues in Theodora's case is her desire to talk with her daughter about her experiences during the Third Reich. She continues to explore her past with her daughter in spite of the fact that she runs the risk of disclosing potentially awkward, scandalous, or even criminal behavior. It is almost as if she wants the interview process to continue, if not with me then with a family member, so that they will all better understand what went so very wrong in the past—for the sake of the future.

This anecdote should not be mistaken for a redemptive 'happy-ending.' Theodora is not very typical of the members of her generation in Germany. Few want to trade in their melancholic past for a healthy, yet ethically challenging, present. Still, this anecdote could be read as a prescription. For, Theodora's transformation did not take place in a vacuum: she did benefit

from the somewhat atypical experience of participating in a long-term, oral history research project. Arguably, that research project helped her to recognize the historical and ethical significance of her own agency in her everyday life—past and future.

FEW NATIONAL HISTORIES are as ethically loaded as the German; yet, by focusing on its paradoxes, we can see dynamics within our approaches to remembrance that remain hidden in the case of less traumatic pasts. Precisely because of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, then, historians of the Third Reich are obliged to communicate the facts of that past accurately, but also to present that past authentically, such that we make the historical and ethical complexity of that past real, relevant, and accessible to a modern, mass audience. On the one hand, we do this at great risk. The ethical distinction between events of such world-historical significance and the everyday lives of ‘ordinary’ people stands at the heart of the experience of normalcy. By challenging these cherished myths, we evoke emotional responses in ourselves and our audiences. What follows is often a rush to judgment, a desperate attempt to preserve our respectability in a century of unprecedented inhumanity. On the other hand, historians will make history far more relevant to an ‘ordinary’ audience the moment we include experiences that make sense to them in our historical narratives.

This tension between facticity and authenticity, between micro- and macrohistories, can be a productive and pedagogical one. When I show Thekla’s ring to my students and tell them how I got it, they feel the rush of authenticity; perhaps the reader felt a bit of this when they turned the page and saw its photographic reproduction. More so than archival or bibliographic research, oral history makes the past present. Its authenticity teaches us how to listen attentively to the experiences of others, to sympathize with their perspective, to understand some part of the many complexities of their reality and, most importantly, to reconsider our behavior under similar circumstances. Properly executed, narrative interviews force us to rethink the cherished myths of everyday life, past and present, and to recognize ourselves as agents in everyday life. These are not simply effective tools for historians doing research or for teachers during office hours; these are also virtues for members of a civil society.

My conclusion, then, at this stage in the interview process, is that oral history cannot change evil Nazis into good democrats: the very authenticity of the interview process leads us to impose these judgmental categories onto the ethical chaos of everyday life, categories that can in turn promote political melancholy and xenophobic identities. Only if it is practiced as a long-

term social process, rather than just a research methodology, can oral history promote those civic virtues crucial for the survival of a democratic society. Through the kind of discussion and reflection on the many challenges facing individuals in the past, made possible through oral history, both ordinary people and historians can develop proactive, pragmatic ways to defend their liberties from fascist incursions in their everyday life.

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