Problems of Archiving Oral History Interviews.
The Example of the Archive "German Memory"[1]

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Abstract: The largest collection of oral history interviews in Germany at present is to be found in the archive of the "Institute for History and Biography". Under the name "German Memory" ("Deutsches Gedächtnis"), approximately 1,500 life history interviews with witnesses of time periods from East and West Germany are archived there in the form of audio or video tapes (just under one tenth of the interviews were filmed on video camera) and their transcripts (as electronic data text files and printouts). In addition, there are photos, personal documents, diaries, letters or other written sources from particular witnesses. With continual additions, there is a huge quantity of qualitative person specific data from different media sources that must be dealt with and archived. From the numerous problems which arise from specific archive materials, I would like to focus on the following three in this text: the anonymity and transfer of rights, the preparation for data use and the physical deterioration of audio and video tapes.

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1. Introduction

The largest collection of oral history interviews in Germany at present is found in the archive of the Institute for History and Biography of the Fernuniversität Hagen. At present, approx. 1,500 life History interviews with witnesses from East and West Germany are archived under the name "German Memory" and used for scientific and journalistic purposes. [1]

The organisation of the archive is one of the tasks of the Institute. The other tasks include conducting research projects on historical experience with an emphasis on the cinematic presentation of the results in exhibitions and museums or as documentary films for television and the publishing of the relevant scientific journal in the German speaking world, the newspaper BIOS.[2] [2]

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1   The following text was the author's contribution to the "European Social Science History Conference", Amsterdam, the Netherlands, April 2000.

2   For further information about the institutes work see: http://www.fernuni-hagen.de/INST_GESCHUBIOG/.

In the last few years the Institute for History and Biography has developed into a centre for life history research in Germany, here the close relationship between own research work and archive takes on a special meaning in several respects. One could even say: There would not be an archive without the institute's own research projects. There are both historical and practical reasons for this. [3]

During the eighties Lutz NIETHAMMER and Alexander von PLATO carried out a series of large-scale oral history projects in which several hundred people of different regional, political, religious and social backgrounds from East and West Germany were interviewed (NIETHAMMER 1983a, NIETHAMMER 1983b, NIETHAMMER & von PLATO 1985, von PLATO 1984). A large amount of material arose from this which was first evaluated within the context of the respective projects, but its usefulness appeared conceivable and desirable. Therefore, it was recommended that the interviews be stored in an archive where its future use would be assured. These interviews are stored in the archive "German Memory" at the "Institute for History and Biography" founded in 1990 at the Fernuniversität Hagen. [4]

Many interviews have been added since then. For the most part these also originate from the institutes own research over the last years. As the Institute and its research publication have become better known, the archive has also become a collection centre for the narrative life history interviews of other researchers. By archiving their material in a public archive they offer—to those who are interested in verifying the results—an access to the original source of data and at the same time make their sources available for other research projects. This further use is of particular importance for many, especially considering the amount of time involved in collecting the material. [5]

The present collection of 1,500 interviews mentioned in the beginning have been archived as audio tapes as well as transcripts in the form of data text files and printouts. In the last few years an increasing number of interviews have been recorded on video so that they could be used for documentary films or for presentation in exhibitions and museums. Therefore about one tenth of our stock is also available in the form of video films. There are also photos, personal documents, diaries, letters or other written sources of the respective witnesses so that with continual additions there is a huge quantity of qualitative person-specific data, stored on different media which must be dealt with and archived. [6]

I should just mentioned that although the life history interviews make up the core of the archive, it also contains other material. The "German Memory" is considered an archive for "subjective sources of memory" of all kinds and therefore also archives autobiographical texts, diaries, letter collections, photo albums and such items. [7]

A whole series of problems arise out of the special features of the archive materials, from which I only wish to pick out a few. Therefore, if I refer to how we deal with these respective problems in our archive, it is not because I find our procedure exemplary. My particular concern is to exchange experiences about

the archiving of oral history sources and to consider possible improved solutions for these problems. [8]

2. Anonymity and the Transfer of Rights

Generally with the oral history interview, an agreement regarding the use of the interview is made either in writing or verbally which guarantees the interviewer the rights for the evaluation and the interviewee the anonymity of his or her data. The interviewer takes full responsibility for this by giving his word or signature. The anonymity is of course impossible if the interview is recorded on video and is to be used in a film. But the interviewee is aware of this and can adapt him to this during the talk. [9]

As long as the interview is used by the interviewer exclusively within the scope of his own research, there will be no problems regarding the observance of the agreement. The interviewee has become acquainted with the interviewer in the course of the talk, and in most cases a trusting relationship has formed which assures the interviewee that the person facing him will keep to the guaranteed anonymity and that the interviewer's interpretation of what has been entrusted to him during the talk is appropriate and fair. The fact that, in the end, the interviewer's interpretation often goes beyond that of the interviewee's, it does not necessarily affect the interviewee's trust in the agreement. As only few interviewees are interested in following up the further course of the research, there is also only a small number of those who read what the researcher has finally drawn out of the researcher's talk with them. Whether those who read it always agree with the result is another matter.[3] [10]

The situation changes as soon as the interview is made available for research to a third person and is, for this purpose, transferred to an archive. The personal relationship between interviewee and researcher becomes the anonymous relationship of a scientist to his "source". Those who have done the interviews themselves and have also analysed those of others will be able to discern the difference between the two, a difference which can not just be explained by calling one relationship "better" and the other "worse". In my opinion a researcher feels closer to an interview he has conducted himself. This often manifests itself both in a deeper understanding of the interviewee's statements and in a more careful interpretation of these statements. A "foreign" interview, on the other hand, is approached with more distance, which can lead to a more critical interpretation, which may be more to the point but may also be inappropriate. It is, however, just the fact that different interpretations—depending on the interviewer himself, on the questions he asks, at the time the interview was done and in the course of the research—are possible which suggests that this material should be archived and thus be made available for further research. [11]

For the interviewee the transition of the interview into the archive means that his life history is "opened" to strangers. He does not know who will use the interview,

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3   Concerning some ethical aspects of Oral History investigation see my contribution in BIOS 2000.

and for what purposes it will be used for. For this reason an interview can be archived only if the interviewee has explicitly given permission. Either the interview agreement already contains a passage about the possible further use in the form of the archiving or the permission for this must be obtained during the course of the archiving. Naturally with our own projects the later archiving in the "German Memory" is always already a part of the agreement with the interviewee. [12]

Even though we take this agreement very seriously, in case of doubt, it is practically useless. According to German archive laws, an access to person-related data is restricted for fifty years. The interviewee by giving consent to the archiving of his data, effectively suspends this regulation; but he can withdraw his consent at any time. Whether this possibility is cancelled in the case of death or whether the descendants also have the right to withdraw permission is not clearly regulated. It can certainly be assumed that the German courts rate the protection of the individual person very highly. Only those people in public life with whom we in oral history usually have no contact, are excluded from this protection. Thus, the archiving of life History interviews is all in all a difficult venture, in which a large amount of energy is spent on an actually uncertain basis. In my view, the interview agreement is to be seen less as a legal contract but rather as an agreement between two persons based on a relationship of trust, with each partner obliging himself not to break his promise unless compelling reasons are given. [13]

In my opinion there is a major problem regarding anonymity. It is feasible to ensure anonymity in the electronic form of transcript by simply changing the names but this is impossible or very difficult with the primary source, the sound protocol. Therefore we do not archive the interviews in an anonymous form. In other words: When hearing one of our interviews or reading one of our transcripts one automatically discovers at least the name, often also the address of the interviewee. Most of our audio tapes and also our transcripts begin with: "I am sitting here to interview Mr or Mrs X on Such-and-such-a Street and so on." [14]

We solve this problem by making each user of the archive sign that all the data will remain anonymous in the case of publication. In addition, he is made aware that he may not contact the interviewee on his own, but only with our arrangement. We can hardly control how the archive user undertakes these obligations and what he does with the material and it is ultimately left to him. Therefore the passing on of oral history interviews is a sensitive matter in which one must always weigh, on one side the responsibility to the interviewee and on the other side the requirements of the archive user from a service. [15]

3. Disclosures

Those visiting an archive are seeking material on a particular subject and can usually rely on more or less a good reference book at hand. In the "German Memory", this reference book is an electronic data bank in which each interview is described with up to 127 criteria. These criteria provide information about the biographical data of the interviewee, from the year of birth to the family and regional origin, the school and career background and the development of the family right up to the political and religious orientation of the interviewee, his parents and life partner. Also, the state of the archiving is recorded here—the type and quantities of the data medium, time and duration of the interview, state of processing, etc. All these criteria can be defined as a search function either linked together singly or logically. This electronic reference book is instrumental in locating interviews with people of specific gender, a specific year of birth, particular origin or a similar criteria. [16]

Difficulties mainly arise when the search is not according to the external biographical characteristics but based on events, for example if the interviewee experienced something specific or was a witness to a particular occurrence. Due to the enormous complexity of the qualitative interview material, it is impossible to exhaustively describe with a necessarily limited number of criteria the huge number of interviews in their multitude of different aspects. [17]

It must be noted that in our reference book there is a large gap between requirements and reality. In no interview are all 127 criteria provided with entries. This is in part because no appropriate statement was made during the interview. That means if the mother's occupation was not mentioned then the appropriate field was not filled in. The empty fields are also partly due to insufficient knowledge of the respective interviews. It is often not possible for us to work up every interview entered into the reference book completely, as it involves enormous amount of time. Often, only the information of the first self description of the interviewee in the beginning sequence forms the basis of what is entered. However we are aiming towards a successive improvement in our data bank whereby asking the archive users to complete the data sheets of the interview which they are working on. [18]

Nevertheless there remains the basic problem: If the criteria of a search function are not identical with those of the data bank, there is only the time consuming search for the particular terms within the transcript. This procedure can be shortened by the possibility of the electronic search, which however leads to many mistakes due to the inflexibility of the computer. The computer searches exactly for the terms which are entered independent of their meaning in the context or grammatical variations. At times, an incorrect text is suggested and at other times the relevant text is completely missed by the search. As a second step the appropriate passages must then be searched for on the sound carrier. In the transcripts the tape running number is noted about once per page, however this tracing also requires much time. [19]

It would certainly be more user-friendly if all the data from an interviewee could be stored on a CD-ROM, that is the sound document, the transcript, the entry into the data bank and eventually other pictorial and text documents specific for the person. By this means it would at least be possible to have a rapid, exactly fitting change between transcript and sound source, and the pictures and texts available could be assigned suitable reference positions. [20]

Using an archive like ours under the present circumstances, is altogether extremely time consuming. The access is certainly made more difficult since the interviews are not permitted to be taken outside of our archive. Considering the aspect of the protection of the interviewee, I do not support the transport of the data using post or e-mail. [21]

4. The Physical Deterioration

The storage of the complete archive material on CD-ROM would not only make the use easier but would be especially desirable on other grounds. The most urgent problem of our archive at the moment is the progressive deterioration of the audio and video tapes. The electromagnetic recordings undergo a rapid aging process associated with progressive loss of quality so that the long-term safeguarding of the sources must have absolute priority. The most suitable way for at least a more permanent preservation would be to digitalise the analogous sound and video tapes and then to store them on a CD-ROM. [22]

This way is however closed on financial grounds. Although the costs for this procedure have sunk considerably in the last few years, in view of the amount of material it is still not within our reach. With an order of magnitude of over 1,500 interviews on an average of three 90 minute cassettes, we are looking here at close to 5,000 audio tapes and several hundred video cassettes. What stops us as well, is the limited faith in the actual state of the technology. Who knows in which direction things will develop. Where will the technology be in the next decades? I must admit—up until now, we have not been able to come to a decision. [23]

Our oldest recordings in the meantime are nearly twenty years old and thus clearly too old for this medium of storage. Valuable interview material—valuable as source and in the sense of the production costs—is deteriorating. What remains is the transcript which is at present viewed by us rather contemptuously and mistrustfully as a secondary source. [24]

5. Conclusion

A text whose title starts with the word "problems" might tend to neglect the positive aspects. That is the reason why at this point, I would for like to reverse the perspective. I think that certainly nobody would put up with the risks and problems related to it if the archiving of life history interviews had not proved to be highly useful and efficient. After about twenty years of collecting and archiving interviews, we now dispose of source material which makes it possible to work on

many mentality- and experience-related questions about the German history of the 20th century, for example about the development of consent and dissent in a society, about how political breaks—so numerous in the 20th century Germany— have been digested, or about the significance of past experiences for the later course of history (von PLATO 1998, 2000). Many interviews are already now irretrievable, either because the generation of those interviewed is no longer alive or because the political conditions of the time the interviews were collected no longer exist. In this respect the sources will, of course, become more and more valuable in the course of time. [25]

A positive aspect above all is the growing popularity and the increasing use of the archive. That its use encourages many researchers to do the interviews themselves, speaks in my view, rather for, than against it. A life history interview can, after all, not sufficiently cover all aspects of a field of research. Questions that other researchers perhaps would have liked to ask, possibly remain unanswered. Subjects that they take a keen interest in, might only superficially be dealt with. In this respect the oral history interview does not differ from other historical sources. The fact that there are questions left unanswered is, however, only one of the reasons why other researchers start to do their own interviews. It is most of all the confrontation with the life History interviews as such that arouses their interest and makes them trace back the historical experiences themselves. [26]

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