

# Experiences in Oral History

Contemporary witness  
interviews in archive  
organizations and  
historical research



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# Editorial

While interviews with contemporary witnesses may not yet be commonplace in the archives of political parties and social movements, they are no longer unusual. In any case, it is interesting to note that users of the Ecology Archives often conduct interviews as part of their research. It is also notable that interviews with contemporary witnesses represent a source category for archives that is only rarely used, despite the interest that has developed recently. Too little information has been communicated to date about interviews and the ways in which they can be used.

Against this background, inviting historians to the Oral History Workshop of the International Ecology Archives Network (IEAN) seemed an obvious move.<sup>[1]</sup> The historians, who come from Germany, France, Italy and the Netherlands, had done research in the participating archives as well as in others in recent years and had complemented their archival studies by conducting interviews with contemporary witnesses. One of the historians ultimately had good reasons to forgo interviews for her dissertation project, which made her views particularly interesting in a workshop on oral history.

The overall aim of the workshop was to promote discussion among the archives on their respective practices, to reflect on the practice of interviewing with the involved historians and, last but not least, to find ways to make better use of the interviews available in the archives. We would like to take this opportunity to thank Annette Lensing, Silke Mende, Birgit Metzger, Christie Miedema, Anna Trespeuch-Berthelot and Martha Verdorfer.

The first part of this reader contains the self-portrayals of the archives involved in the network and presentations of their contemporary witness projects, while the second part features reports from the historians on their practice, including reflections on their approaches. The appendix contains detailed overviews of the archived interviews of contemporary witnesses. Together with the texts, they are intended to give an impression of the interesting interviews that can already be found in the Ecology Archives and to arouse curiosity about their scientific use.

Berlin, October 2018

*Christoph Becker-Schaum and Anne Vechtel*

**1** Experiences in Oral History, Contemporary witness interviews in archive organizations and historical research, September 8–9, 2016, hosted by the Green Memory Archive of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in cooperation with International Ecology Archives Network.

**The following archives are members of the International Ecology Archives Network:**

- The Green Memory Archive of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Berlin
- Etopia Private Archive Centre, Namur
- The Green Archive, Vienna
- Alexander Langer Archive, Bolzano
- Musée du Vivant/Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherches sur l'Ecologique (CIRE), AgroParisTech, Paris

Further information about the individual archives can be found in the text.

# 1 CONTEMPORARY WITNESS INTERVIEWS IN ARCHIVE ORGANIZATIONS

## Introduction

A total of five archives presented their projects. The *French Fondation de l'Écologie Politique* (Foundation for Political Ecology), for example, reported on its Memory Booth project, which it conducted in 2015 as part of the Summer University of the French Greens. Participants were invited to give spontaneous accounts of events in the French environmental movement. Their memories were recorded and archived. The *Austrian Grünes Archiv* (Green Archive) presented a series of interviews with contemporary witnesses conducted on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Austrian Green Party's founding. Green politicians were asked to recall the occupation of the Danube's Hainburger Au wetlands, a conflict that was decisive for the founding of the party in 1986.

Here we are publishing the workshop reports of the *Walloon Centre d'archives privées Etopia* (Etopia Private Archive Centre), the German *Archiv Grünes Gedächtnis* (Green Memory Archives) and the *Frauenarchiv Bozen* (Bolzano Women's Archive) of South Tyrol – two archives of party foundations and one of the new women's movement.

The first two contributions focus on biographical and thematic interviews with women and men from the environmental, peace and women's movements who played prominent roles in the formative and early stages of Green parties and belong to the generation of founding members. The recording of these personal memories is intended to contribute to historical education and to the historiography of the respective Green parties associated with the archives. A further objective of the interviews is to close gaps in written records and answer content-related questions. *Frauenarchiv Bozen* conducts interview projects in order to explore the lives of «nameless women» and hitherto neglected or taboo topics. It can thus provide researchers with new source material.

A wide range of methods are used in conducting interviews and processing the material to ensure its long-term availability and use. What they have in common is that the archives create sources that can be used in a variety of ways, even though they deviate in some cases from the methodological standards of oral history.

All workshop reports met with great interest and were discussed constructively in the context of the workshop participants' own experiences. In particular, ideas were proposed regarding contextual data that archives should provide on their interview projects.

# Workshop reports

Szymon Zareba

## The oral archives at the Etopia Private Archive Centre

The archival heritage stored at the Etopia Private Archive Centre is relatively young in historical terms. However, it allows us to work directly with archive producers and to develop a specific acquisition policy. We essentially have the opportunity to shed a light on any grey areas in our archives by organising interviews directly with the participants of this movement who have produced the archive content.

This article summarises the current state of the oral archives, which we began in 2010. They are somewhat of a work in progress, so we will provide a snapshot of our progress so far. We will explain the reason for this new collection and the method we are employing. We will then look at some criticisms. To finish, we will consider how these sources can be accessed, and reflect on future possibilities.

## Project origins

Before analysing and reviewing these sources, we should first explore how the project came about. In 2010, to mark the 30th anniversary of ECOLO, many of the party's founding members and key public figures in civil society were interviewed about the party's history. A film was even produced based on these interviews.<sup>[1]</sup> However, following significant research into our collection, we noticed that some questions remain unanswered. It is clear that despite a highly active approach to gathering the archives, these sources are incomplete. So we decided to contact the founders of various environmental and ecological movements to interview them. The objective is not just to ask them about their experiences and their work, but also to comment on their archives, to ask them about such and such an event that seems of interest to us and yet was only partially mentioned in the archives. Our idea is therefore to create a supplementary source.

**1** *Mémoire pour le futur ECOLO, 30 ans d'évolution*, produced by Philippe Brewaeys, production: Zebra images, 2010, 28 min. Other collections have also been created, for example: *L'âge de Pierre, montage audio-visuel réalisé à l'occasion du 25ième anniversaire d'ECOLO*, produced by Isabelle Meerhaeghe and Thierry Meunier, production: Ecolo, 2005, 18 min.



## Critical questions

A whole host of questions quickly arose. By organising and holding interviews, we will to some degree be «creating» new sources. Typically, an archivist makes an inventory and arranges the archives that a producer provides. In our case, we are adopting a far more proactive and dynamic approach. In addition to looking for archives in the basements and loft spaces of various organisations and personalities, we are prompting the creation of new archives.

Although it is exhilarating for an archivist to help create new sources, it is important to remain humble. Clearly, we must focus on the interviewee's account. However, it cannot be denied that by asking a certain question or by insisting on a particular point, we are directing the interview. This issue is not new, as it is also encountered in the social sciences. Incidentally, it is interesting to compare the two disciplines. The type of interviews conducted by some sociologists are not necessarily so different from the kind that we sometimes conduct here.<sup>[2]</sup>

## The issue of memory

One of the obstacles that we will encounter from time to time is memory. Obviously, it can fail, or be incomplete. In the present case, we are working with events that happened 40 or 50 years ago, which is why it is essential to structure interviews in order to help revive these memories. Again, the social sciences can provide an interesting perspective. Among the plethora of techniques available, we have opted for semi-structured interviews. This technique has the advantage of covering all of the questions that the interviewer wishes to ask, whilst also allowing for the conversation to follow the interviewee's lead and to pick up on certain points of interest. It ensures both discursive flexibility and a guiding thread.<sup>[3]</sup>

Until now, we have been discussing a type of interview where the interviewee speaks about and explains an event from the past. Analysing the interview becomes more complex when the person jumps back and forth between different time periods. These comments obviously tell us as much about the interviewee's current thoughts as they do about their thoughts at the time. The interview sometimes becomes even more interesting when this person has put their own thoughts into perspective. Then we can learn about their current and past thoughts. The person critiques themselves. This interpretive dimension is very rarely found in the archives. We are then faced with meta-analysis when we then critique this interpretation. In this way, we are in fact dealing with a RE-presentation of memory. Questions

**2** On the interviews conducted in sociology: Quivy R., Van Campenhoudt L., *Manuel de recherche en sciences sociales*, Dunod, Paris 1998, 284 p.

**3** Kaufmann J-Cl., *L'entretien compréhensif*, Colin, Paris 2011, 126 p.

such as «What made you change your mind?» or «While the context has changed significantly, you have maintained your stance on the subject. Why is that?» begin the interviews. This new dimension, although based more on interpretation, provides us with new information.

## An example

Here is an extract of an interview that perfectly demonstrates this point. In the interview, they are discussing the expulsion of *Paul Lannoye*<sup>[4]</sup> from the «Walloon Rally»<sup>[5]</sup> in 1972. The interviewer begins by suggesting a reason for this expulsion, and the interviewee gives the following response.

*«I read in the Encyclopaedia of the Walloon Movement that Lannoye accepted the role of president of the <Walloon Assembly> in Namur, on the condition that all members of the executive committee who were city counsellors or provincial counsellors resign, in order to avoid holding multiple offices. Were you aware of that?»*

*«I don't really remember, maybe I'm in denial, but [...] I was in office, I was a counsellor [...] There was possibly a coalition of members who were going to lose power in Namur and who were against Lannoye. It's definitely [...] now that you mention it [...] I'm thinking aloud because I need to remember. I think that [...] well we certainly thought that it was a manoeuvre by Paul Lannoye to get rid of the old-timers, the older generation who had needed the titles of city or provincial counsellor to come into power in the regional election. [...] Looking back, and at Paul Lannoye's career, he definitely wasn't attempting a putsch because he maintained his position on multiple offices afterwards. Do you see what I mean? But it was different at the time. You have to put yourself back in the moment, I see it all very calmly with so much hindsight».*<sup>[6]</sup>

We can see several interesting aspects in this extract. Apart from historical accuracy, the interviewee himself brings up the possibility of denial. Moreover, he uses the expression «now that you mention it» and especially «Looking back». The interviewer begins by mentioning a few pieces of information to help the interviewee remind himself of what

- 4** Paul Lannoye was born in 1939, and among others, he was a founding member of parties such as Démocratie Nouvelle, Wallonie-Ecologie and Ecolo.
- 5** The Walloon Assembly is a mostly federalist party created in 1968.
- 6** Sound archives: *Interview with Ghislain Delwiche*, interviewed by Benoit Lechat and Szymon Zareba, 09 April 2013, Namur, 01hr 57 min. Available at the Etopia Archive Centre.

happened. To what extent does that influence the interviewee's answer? It's difficult to say, but these types of interaction are obviously very interesting. It is notable that denial is mentioned. This is a mechanism that impedes memories or changes how they are perceived, precisely when we are attempting to coax them out and to influence them as little as possible. In this example, the person is critiquing his own comments. On the one hand, he clears up some grey areas, and on the other hand, his retrospective analysis provides us with other interesting elements on his perception of the event at the time compared to his perception of it today.

## Accessing the archives

In addition to the usual access given to researchers at the archive centre, we want to make these interviews available to the general public. They will therefore be available at the «Etopia» archives, after we have cleaned up the sound files, as is often necessary.

The oral memory platform is another way the archives can be accessed. This excellent initiative by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation was set up in 2007. It aims to «facilitate access to these sources, to allow scientific articles to be downloaded, and to provide advice on how to preserve and digitalise them. The aim is to once again gather together the different archive centres to help them with this new data collection process».<sup>[7]</sup>

## In conclusion

As we have stated, we view our work as a healthy collaboration between everyone interested in our archives. In the present case, we're working with researchers as well as the public figures and eyewitnesses that we are interviewing. These different contributions will obviously continue to inform our approach. In fact, an emerging avenue of our work looks at broadening the range of people involved. Why do we always interview people of a certain age? It would surely be just as interesting to interview younger people.

This most recent archive collection has led to a further opportunity, as we can now complete our paper archives with oral clarifications from the subjects of the archive. We can now strongly consider organising «progressive» interviews. For example, we could set criteria, choose a person in office, and interview them every 5 to 10 years. We have many opportunities open to us.

7 [www.memoire-orale.be](http://www.memoire-orale.be)

Anne Vechtel

# The interviewing project at the German Green Memory Archive

In 2007 the Green Memory Archive of the Heinrich Böll Foundation started a series of interviews with contemporary witnesses. The archive interviewed activists and organizers of the 1979 Green EU election campaign as well as some activists of the women's movement, who contributed their feminist initiatives to the forming phase of the German Greens.

The purpose of these interviews was to collect life stories of early activists, and thereby produce a source from which articles can be published that would appeal to a wide readership.

The interviews are part of the historical educational work of the Green Memory Archive and play a central role in the public work of the archive. They are a way to value the work and pass on the knowledge, experience and memory of founders of the party to the younger activists in a user friendly format. This type of archival work creates a strong link to the foundation, because it is directly useful.

The first part of the project is finished. A new series of interviews has been started with the focus on personalities of the «second generation» of Green politicians.

## Why are interviews attractive?

An interview is appealing, because the topic is approached through a person's experience. Theme-oriented interviews with former politicians were, and are, very popular and published a lot in newspapers and books, but life stories are relatively rare among publications about the history of the German Greens. Therefore the Green Memory Archive wants to contribute to the historiography of the Greens by recording the personal knowledge, experience and memory of members of the founding generation in the form of life stories and thereby create an original, self-contained view on the history of the Greens.

Furthermore interviews in written form are an attractive, user friendly format and are read by a wider audience.

In the case of these particular interviews there was no plan to conduct them in accordance to scientific standards and produce a new historical source that could be used by scientists or others outside of the archive.

## How were the interviewees chosen?

The interviewees were chosen from the group that organized the first German election campaign of the «Sonstige Politische Vereinigung Die Grünen» for the EU Election in June 1979 and from a group of feminist activists, who worked closely together with the new party. These interviewees were important in the founding phase of the German Green party that followed the EU Election. By choosing them a set of interviews was possible, that shed light on two particular groups of activists, and thereby on two particular political traditions of the German Greens. Other groups and networks played an important role in the founding process of the party as well. The life stories of their activists remain to be told.

## Why does the archive conduct interviews?

On the one hand the German Green Memory Archive has a lot of contacts with donors of archival holdings and getting into contact with possible interviewees is relatively easy.

Working with donors and holdings brings forth information on interesting and relevant people as well as identifying topics which have not been covered.

On the other hand the archive gains a lot of information and internal insight into the working of the party by conducting interviews. That way the Green Memory Archive receives as a byproduct information about holdings that were not in its focus.

## What kind of interview practice and processing work is used and done?

Due to the intention of getting life stories for publication, the interview questions are semi-structured and the style of the talk is narrative. The interviewers play an active role. Their questions concentrate on the interviewee's family background, school and education, job, profession, and of course, the first contact to political activism. In most cases the questions cover the interviewee's lifelong political work.

The interviews are recorded, transcribed and saved as audio recordings and transcriptions. So far no further processing work is done, as they are not intended for public use.

The transcripts go to journalists, who write articles in the form of interviews and use the transcripts as their only sources. The journalists are relatively free in concentrating and organizing the information. Their articles are reviewed, changes are applied and permission for publication is granted.

The interviews are published online and in print, without audio clips and other data except the information as to when, where and by whom they were conducted.

## Conclusion

The interviews play an important role in the archive's historical educational work and are fully approved by the foundation.

They intensify the archive's relationship with donors or future donors. They also complete the knowledge about holdings and strengthen the archive's work.

Despite the fact that the interviews were not conducted to produce a scientific source, historians working in the field of contemporary history have expressed their wish to have a look. They want to get a feeling for politicians, historical situations and have a chance to approach their topic on the basis of a variety of different documents. To make this possible, the interviews will have to be catalogued and permission from the interviewees will have to be obtained.

Martha Verdorfer

# The oral history holdings in the Bolzano Women's Historical Archive

The Bolzano Women's Historical Archive has had an oral history project since 2008. The initial consideration behind the project was that the experiences of women are often underrepresented in traditional written archives. The Women's Historical Archive consciously intends to address this imbalance.

The result was the *Frauenerfahrungen im 20. Jahrhundert* (Women's experiences in the 20th century) project. Women from all three language groups – German, Italian and Ladin – in South Tyrol agreed to biographical interviews in this context. Women of other language and cultural backgrounds will be interviewed in the future. Dedicated workshops were held to train a group of interested women to conduct and transcribe the interviews.

From 2007 to the present, a total of 72 interviews were conducted with women born in the years between 1912 and 1956, with a special focus on the birth years 1920 to 1935.

The bulk of the interviews were conducted in 2007 and 2008, after which the group of interviewers was disbanded.<sup>[1]</sup> In the following years, interviews were conducted by one to two persons, and by a single person in the last three years.<sup>[2]</sup>

The open biographical interviews were conducted according to an outline that used both biographical periods such as childhood and school as well as key periods and events of (local) history such as Italian fascism, the Option Agreement and resulting resettlement, and National Socialism as a framework. The Women's Historical Archive holds the audio files as well as partial or full transcripts thereof and makes them available to interested users.

The sources produced by the Women's Historical Archive are complemented by audio files and transcripts of interviews that were conducted for specific research projects. These include around 40 interviews from a project on South Tyrolean women who worked as housemaids in Italian cities from the 1920s to the 1950s.<sup>[3]</sup>

- 1** Most of the women were not able to reconcile a long-term commitment with their professional or life perspectives.
- 2** The one remaining interviewer is the author of this text.
- 3** See Martha Verdorfer's contribution to this volume on the conducted oral history projects.

The oral history holdings are among the most frequently used resources of the Bolzano Women's Historical Archive. To date, they have been consulted by students and journalists, as well as film and theater producers. This motivates us – despite our staff shortage – to continue fleshing out our oral history holdings. In the medium term, we would also like to realize the archive's own publications based on these resources.



# Self portrayals

## Austria: The Green Archive

The Green Archive was formally established by the «Grüne Bildungswerkstatt» (Austrian Green Foundation – GBW) in 2012 and is a memorial institution of the Austrian Green Movement. It holds a great variety of material relating to the history of the political party «The Greens – The Green Alternative» (also referred to as the Austrian Greens) and to the party's predecessors. The Green Archive exists to collect, preserve and make available records to Green activists, students, historians and journalists.

### The Green Archive is divided into the following sections:

The **archives** hold documentary materials relating to the founding and establishment of the green movement in Austria. Parts of the archives hold unpublished records of the party's predecessors such as the rather conservative «Vereinte Grüne Österreichs» (United Greens of Austria – VGÖ) and the more progressive «Alternative Liste Österreichs» (Alternative List Austria – ALÖ). It also contains special collections from individuals involved in social movements like the anti-war, anti-nuclear and environmental movements. The main part contains material on current Green parliamentary groups at local, state, national and international levels. Currently, the Green Archive accommodates around 40 linear meters of archival materials. This includes minutes, reports, correspondence, newsletters, campaign material, financial records, program drafts and election materials.

Our reference **library** holds 1,200 items. We collect books from and about the Austrian Green Movement, the environmental movement as well as other social movements. The collection also covers publications concerning the German Greens, as well as publications of the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Green European Foundation. Furthermore, the library contains a substantial amount of gray literature. The periodicals database covers around 200 journals. The online catalogue currently lists around one-third of our stock. (<http://adlib.gbw.at/AIS/search/simple>).

The **collections** range from promotional gifts like mugs, lighters, bags, seeds and balls to election materials and items related to social protests like banners, t-shirts, stickers and posters. We currently have around 850 posters, 300 video and audio tapes, 250 buttons, 300 stickers, 22 boxes of photos (party conventions, portraits, protests). The majority of these items still need to be made available in our database.

We collect individual articles from newspapers, journals and electronic publications in our **documentation**.

The Green Archive is a member of the International Ecology Archives Network.  
For more information on the Green Archive please visit: [archiv.gbw.at](http://archiv.gbw.at) (German)

**The Green Archive on Social Media:**

- [facebook.com/gruenesarchiv](https://facebook.com/gruenesarchiv)
- [twitter.com/gruenesarchiv](https://twitter.com/gruenesarchiv)
- [instagram.com/gruenesarchiv](https://instagram.com/gruenesarchiv)
- [366xgruen.at](http://366xgruen.at)

# Belgium: The Etopia Private Archive Centre

The aims of the NPO Etopia Archive Centre (Political ecology activity and research centre) are to house archives related to political ecology and ecological and environmental organisations, to provide archival management for these collections, and to promote them to a wide audience (in compliance with the applicable legal agreements and time limits). The archive centre preserves the records collected since the end of the 1990s at the CEFE (centre for ecology studies and training). This NPO, which became Etopia in 2004, has committed to continue and to invest in the archiving of historical ecology sources, principally in French-speaking Belgium and at the European level. Since then, this specific and relatively young heritage has gone from strength to strength. These archives therefore cover the birth and development of ecology in a broad sense, with the oldest going back to the 1960s.

**We currently have 2,319 linear metres of archives, as you can see in our collection inventory:**

[www.etopia.be/IMG/pdf/etat \\_ des \\_ fonds \\_ 2015.pdf](http://www.etopia.be/IMG/pdf/etat_des_fonds_2015.pdf)

- We store the archives for the Ecolo party. They cover the internal life of the party, its presidency (the federal secretariat), political advisers, the various internal bodies such as the Federal Council (the party's internal parliament) as well as all publications and periodicals. In addition, there are also the parliamentary archives and those of ministers and their cabinets. We also have archives for the main Belgian ecology parties, such as Démocratie Nouvelle and Combat pour l'écologie et l'autogestion, as well as the archives for the European Green party.
- Moreover, we also store the archives for the majority of ecology and environmental organisations (Friends of the Earth, Inter-Environnement Wallonie, Inter-Environnement Bruxelles, the Foundation for Future Generations, Jeunesse et Ecologie/Empreintes, l'Institut Eco-Conseil, etc.).
- Furthermore, we look after the archives for the major public figures active in the ecological struggle.
- Our collections also include over 150 objects, almost 900 posters,
- and 200 stickers, among others. It should also be noted that we have a search tool covering 96 % of these collections.
- We also manage a software program that helps us to organise, describe, and make use of our collections: <https://alexandrie.etopia.be>
- Currently, this features over 40,000 digital documents described with the necessary metadata.

**For more information on Etopia and its work:** [www.etopia.be](http://www.etopia.be)

# Germany: The Green Memory Archive

## The history of the archive

The first efforts toward archiving by the Greens took place in the 1980s in the parliamentary group and the party's federal office, as well as among anti-nuclear initiatives and the peace and women's movements. Archives on the Greens and the new social movements were also created at the Free University of Berlin and the Technical University of Hanover. Together, these archives formed the basis for the *Archiv Grünes Gedächtnis* that was established in the wake of the 1990 election defeat. Following the death of Petra Kelly, her estate was added and remains the archive's most extensively used holding. The archive has been organized by the Heinrich Böll Foundation since 1992.

## Historical archive of the German Greens

The archive encompasses historical records of the Green party at the federal and state levels, the European, federal and state-level parliamentary groups, institutions associated with the party, personal archives of politicians, as well as records of selected nationwide initiatives and networks of the environmental, women's, peace and international solidarity movements. Together, they make up the historical archive of the German Greens. The broad range of holdings is one of the riches of the archive, as it reflects the different perspectives and interests that have been incorporated into the decision-making processes of the party and federal parliamentary group.

## Library and audiovisual collections

The archive contains the full range of media used in political campaigning by the Greens. These include posters, leaflets, stickers and buttons, and above all publications, of which historically only a small number have been products of traditional publishing houses. Internet-based publications are currently becoming increasingly important. Other media include photographs, sound and video clips of events, cinema, radio and television spots for election campaigns, as well as pinwheels and other items used as campaign attention-getters by the Greens. The websites of the party, its parliamentary groups and structures are also archived. In general, it should be noted that in times of electronic data processing and the internet, the collection of paper records is no longer the standard by which a successful archive is measured. While the digital holdings do not represent a separate division within the archive, the archival handling of digital material does require its own rules and technical equipment.

## Cataloging and use

Archiving encompasses the following six areas of activity: actively collecting material, evaluating its historical significance, cataloging the material and producing finding aids, long-term storage, providing material to users, and promoting active engagement with the historical heritage conserved by the archive through events, exhibitions and publications. Of these activities, cataloging is the most time-consuming. However, it is a prerequisite for any further use of the material, as the data records in the archive database are the key to accessing it. Any use requires effective consultation services by the archive. The online catalogs of the library and audiovisual collections are central resources for archive users. The description of the archive holdings can be accessed via Archives Portal Europe.

## Research and political education

The edition of meetings of the Green parliamentary group jointly published with the Commission for the History of Parliamentarianism and Political Parties (*Kommission für Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der politischen Parteien*) currently extends up to the 1990 federal elections. Other completed projects relate to the peace movement of the 1970s and 1980s, while ongoing projects are covering the environmental and anti-nuclear movements. The intention here is to provide impulses and contributions to promote research into the origins of the Greens. The archive regularly conducts interviews with contemporary witnesses and is active within the network of alternative archives and the cooperation of Ecology archives in Europe.

# Italy: Bolzano Women's Historical Archive – Archivio delle donne Bolzano

In 2003, a group of female historians, archivists and history buffs founded the Frauenarchiv Bozen (Bolzano Women's Historical Archive) association to give the historical experiences of women a dedicated place and to maintain and promote awareness of women's and gender history.

The city of Bolzano provided the association with the necessary facilities, which are managed by the Interkulturelles Frauenzentrum/Centro Interculturale delle donne umbrella organization.

At present, the Women's Historical Archive has an office with archive boxes, as well as a function space that it shares with the Frauenbibliothek/Biblioteca delle donne (Women's Library). This space, which serves as a public library and repository of archive material, can also be adapted for events.

The above description already touches on one of the problems the Women's Historical Archive currently faces: lack of space. Unless an extension is added to the building, the archive will sooner or later have to resort to external storage. The issue is already being discussed with the Municipal Archives and the State Archives.

The Interkulturelle Frauenzentrum (Intercultural Women's Center) was opened in 2005. The Women's Historical Archive has also been operational since then. It collects written source materials, photos and posters, as well as discussions related to women's and gender history. The materials are properly archived and made available to researchers and the interested public.

The objectives of the Women's Historical Archive are:

- 1 ) the acquisition and collection of archive material within the territory of historic Tyrol that is significant to women's history. This includes the acquisition and inventory of estates and archives, as well as the creation of a repertory of women-specific holdings in public and private archives in the region.
- 2 ) the collection and production of oral history interviews of women and the establishment of an oral history archive holding.
- 3 ) provision of support for research projects and educational initiatives on women's and gender history through the use of archive material; the building of a specialized library and organization of conferences, exhibitions, film screenings and guided tours.

## The structure of the archive

The Women's Historical Archive is governed by a board of six women. The archive also employs two women to manage the archival work, as well as administration and accounting.

# Italy: The legacy of Alexander Langer in the Alexander Langer Archive

## Biography

Alexander Langer was born in Sterzing, Italy, on February 22, 1946. He attended the Italian preschool and the German primary school in Sterzing. Already imbued with Christian spirit as a student, Langer was renowned for his penchant for justice and tolerance. In his youth, this increasingly manifested in his striving for common understanding, mediation and concrete change. During his studies of Law in Florence and later of sociology in Trento – with periods abroad in Germany – he became increasingly politicized.

The political reality of South Tyrol was always a driving force for Langer. The segregation of the language groups and the resulting constraints and limits became the pivotal point of his career as a political activist. He rebelled against separation and tried to favor positive change through his work as a teacher, journalist and policymaker – first at the local level, then on the European political stage as an MEP. He worked to overcome borders, build bridges and seek out new ways of living together.

With the emergence of the Green movement, in which Langer played a major role in both Germany and Italy, the issue of ecology became his second thematic pillar.

Newspapers, essays, countless articles, documents related to groups, campaigns, initiatives and political movements have remained as documents of his tireless activity.

Langer was married and lived with his wife in Florence, where he took his own life on July 3, 1995.

## The archive collection

The Alexander Langer collection has been gathered from his various workplaces. The files, which amount to around 20 linear meters, are now located at the Alexander Langer Foundation in Bolzano. Collecting, processing and providing writings and documents by and about Langer is one of the central activities of the Foundation. The archive is the point of contact for students and the interested public researching on topics of nonviolence, inter-ethnic coexistence, environment, and on Alexander Langer as a person.

The archive contains a unique and rich collection thanks to the considerable time Langer spent collecting documentary material and narrating his experiences.



**An initial overview of Langer's life and work, which was shaped by his ability to reflect on events, encounters, social initiatives and institutional activities can be found at:**

[www.alexanderlanger.org](http://www.alexanderlanger.org)

The inventory of the material was completed in 2005 and a finding aid created to facilitate access to the extensive collection.

The following focal points were established in the finding aid:

1. Personal matters/Personalia
2. Initiatives/Initiativen/Iniziativa
3. Political activity/Politische Tätigkeit/Lavoro politico
4. Newspapers, periodicals, clippings/Zeitungen, Zeitschriften, Ausschnitte/Giornali, riviste, ritagli
5. Institutions/Institutionen/Istituzioni
6. Conferences/Tagungen/Convegni
7. Poster collection/Plakatsammlung/Raccolta manifesti

The period covered by the collection ranges from Langer's time in secondary school (1958) and his first public activities to his suicide on July 3, 1995.

The archive is multilingual: articles and material collections are predominantly in German or Italian and often bilingual. The individual units were catalogued according to the language used.

A collection of articles, copies of parliamentary records from 1978 to 1988, books with contributions by Langer and a collection of photographs are available at the Alexander Langer Foundation.

## 2 INTERVIEWS IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

### Introduction

The following section contains six reports by historians on their practical use of oral history methods in their dissertation projects and a further text on the theory and practice of biographical interviews in contemporary history research.

In the first article, Christoph Becker-Schaum outlines the recommendations of contemporary history research as a guide for conducting and documenting biographical interviews.

Martha Verdorfer's research focused on fascism in South Tyrol, including the German occupation of 1940–1943. Her interviewees revealed new insights into conscientious objectors, deserters and those close to them, as well as their motives, which have not been recorded otherwise.

Annette Lensing conducted research on Green Party co-founder August Haußleiter, who died 20 years before her dissertation project. For this purpose, she spoke to one of his sons and two colleagues. Interviews with politicians and those close to them can be quite challenging, and so Annette Lensing had much to report on the successes and limitations of her interviews.

Silke Mende did not conduct interviews for her dissertation on the founding Greens, but not due to fundamental objections to the method. She considers supplementary interviews to be more useful when studying certain facets of Green history, such as aspects of regional and women's history, than in the context of her research on the founding Greens that tended to focus on intellectual history.

Birgit Metzger did her doctorate on forest dieback in the 1980s and conducted ten interviews with forestry experts, scientists and journalists as part of a major project on forest dieback in which other scientists conducted further interviews.

Christie Miedema interviewed activists in the movement against the bloc confrontation of the Cold War, whose voices and written documents were rarely collected by archives.

Anna Trespeuch-Berthelot studied the Situationist International. The successors of the last main representative of this movement, Guy Debord, keep a close watch over the legacy of the Situationist International and its understanding of the events of May 1968 in France. The interviews with them proved to be as difficult as those conducted by Annette Lensing.

## Conceptual remarks on oral history

The presentations of this year's workshop reflect the great diversity of how, when and why historians and archivists interview contemporary witnesses, and how varied the outcomes of these interviews can be. Equally diverse are the opportunities to use the interviews as material for political education or historical documentation.

The character and quality of an interview as an oral history source depends fundamentally on the method used to conduct the interview. Not every interview of an eyewitness constitutes a contemporary witness interview in the sense of oral history, insofar as oral history is understood to be a method used by historians when conducting and evaluating interviews with contemporary witnesses. «Oral history» as a technical term is associated with certain scientific standards. First and foremost, this means that the use of oral history sources must be verifiable by third parties. Private sources are not a scientific reference. The scientific use of oral history sources also requires an objective relationship between the source and the researcher. These requirements are quite challenging. The first one may easily conflict with regulations and agreements on the protection of privacy. As far as the second requirement is concerned, historical works in which the researcher has contributed to the creation and formation of the underlying sources are generally not considered scientific. For these reasons, methodological care must be taken when conducting and documenting oral history interviews.

The immediate aim of oral history interviews is to create a new contemporary source consisting of narrated memories. The following explanations therefore begin with the not-so-simple question of what constitutes a memory. Furthermore, questions of interview management will be discussed, as well as the follow-up work needed before the newly created source can be used by third parties. The same rules of historical criticism apply to the subsequent use of oral history sources as to the interpretation of historical sources in general. For archives that provide oral history sources, it is therefore important that they can also provide background information.

Recent developments in contemporary history research are also covered here. Notwithstanding the fact that the formation of historical tradition has always included forms of oral tradition – at the latest since Herodotus, who lived in the 5th century BCE – the scientific discipline of oral history, at least in Europe, is not older than fifty years.

For the implementation of oral history projects, it is fundamental to consider that memory does not consist of an essentially reproducible retrieval of data from a certain region of the brain. Memories are stored in the human brain in a very complicated way, so that each recall involves a new processing of a wide range of stored sensory impressions. Recall must

be imagined as a creative act in which cognitive and autobiographical memory functions interact. Autobiographical memories in particular are strongly controlled by emotion. Involuntary protective mechanisms play a role when relating memories of life history. This fact must be considered when preparing and conducting the interview to ensure that an atmosphere of trust – without which a free narration is hardly conceivable – is established in advance between the interviewer and interviewee. Otherwise, such protective mechanisms tend to prompt the mere recounting of innocuous, impersonal statements.

The platitude that people are social beings goes all the way back to Aristotle's day. This means – without going into the fundamentals of sociology, psychology and especially the theory of socialization here – that the groups to which we belong as human beings are powerful actors within our individual selves. The protection mechanisms outlined above can therefore take hold not only in connection with very personal life circumstances and experiences, but in all contexts that are usually the subject of biographical interviews, such as parental homes, friendships and relationships, professions, world views and politics. It is therefore all the more important to establish a trusting environment in which interviewees can recall their biographical memories as freely from blockades as possible.

Interviews with contemporary witnesses should therefore ideally take place in the interviewee's familiar surroundings. The preparatory work includes reaching an understanding on the goals of the interview. It is also necessary to agree on what will happen with the interview afterwards, in particular about who will use it and when it may be used. All of the above considerations hopefully underscore that biographical interviews are very distinct from interviews with experts, even though experts may well be contemporary witnesses themselves. The purpose of interviews with experts is a completely different one, namely to establish facts. The individual life circumstances of the expert are explicitly not of interest.

When interviewing experts, asking the right questions is the key. In this respect, the responsibility lies definitely with the person asking the questions. By contrast, in biographical interviews, the way in which interviewees take charge and take the narrative process into their own hands is crucial. He or she is the determining person. The transfer of responsibility from the interviewer to the interviewee is prepared and encouraged by the way in which the questions are asked. As a principle, the questions are not about facts, but relate to personal experience. Even so, the interviewer still needs to take action: there are sometimes obstacles in the flow of the interview that cannot be surmounted without help. There are times when a topic has been fully covered, and care must be taken to ensure that the intended question complexes have been addressed. It is also essential to keep an eye on the time, as interviews are exhausting for interviewees. In all this, encouraging the free recall of personal experiences remains the central guideline of interviewing.

After the interview, the sound recording should be stored digitally. In addition, a lightly edited transcript should be made. «Lightly» in this case means omitting ums and ahs, but

not interfering with or correcting grammar. If the linguistic quality of the interview leaves much to be desired, it may be appropriate to create a further, linguistically satisfying transcript. In any case, however, a log of the preparation and conduct must be kept for each interview. The audio recording, transcripts and log are archived together and cataloged as appropriate, forming the material that will be made available for future use.

**Further reading:**

- Linde Apel, Oral History reloaded. Zur Zweitauswertung von mündlichen Quellen, in: Westfälische Forschungen 62 (2015), p. 243–254.
- Christian Delacroix; François Dosse; Patrick Garcia; Nicolas Offenstadt (ed.), *Historiographies. Concepts et débats*, 2 Vol., Paris: Gallimard 2010.
- Oliver Dimbath; Michael Heinlein, *Gedächtnissoziologie*, Paderborn: Fink 2015.
- Lutz Niethammer, Fragen – Antworten – Fragen: Methodische Fragen und Erwägungen zur Oral History, in: Julia Obertreis (ed.), *Oral History*, Stuttgart: Steiner 2012, p. 31–71.
- Dorothee Wierling, Oral History, in: Michael Maurer (ed.), *Aufriss der Historischen Wissenschaften*, Vol. 7: Neue Themen und Methoden der Geschichtswissenschaft, Stuttgart: Reclam 2003, p. 81–151.
- Roland Willner, Qualitative Interviewforschung in der Politikwissenschaft. Professionalisierung der Interviewdurchführung als Herausforderung für Forschung und Lehre, in: *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 22 (2012), Vol. 4, p. 625–634.

Martha Verdorfer

## Oral history: stories – history – memory

Oral history is undoubtedly a fascinating way to highlight people as subjects of history.

*«People do not make their own history as they please, but they do make it themselves».*

This loose paraphrase of Karl Marx<sup>[1]</sup> stands for an approach to history shaped by the paradigm shift of the 1980s, the advent of everyday and social history and historical women's and gender studies, to name the most important coordinates.

From the outset, «oral history» has been associated with more than a technically relatively simple method of producing source material – at the same time, it stood for the question of historical subjectivity. The numerous publications on the subject in the 1980s thus not only dealt with methodological matters in the narrower sense such as preparing and conducting interviews, as well as the core issue of interview analysis, they also addressed the theoretical consequences for the writing of history. Oral history brought about a paradigm shift that essentially consisted of historians being equally or more interested in memories of events than in the actual facts.<sup>[2]</sup> The stiff headwind that oral history initially faced in many academic departments helped focus its methodological and theoretical reflection, in balance proving to be more of a stimulation than a handicap.

A brief presentation of specific research projects below will permit us to make a number of general statements about oral history.

My dissertation on «Experiences of Fascism in South Tyrol, 1918–1945» mainly revolved around three issues:<sup>[3]</sup>

The question of the continuity of Italian fascism and National Socialism is central to the history of South Tyrol in the 20th century. The people of the country not only experienced Italian fascism from 1922 to 1943, but also National Socialism – the latter as a kind of

**1** See Lutz Niethammer, Bodo Hombach, Tilman Fichter, Ulrich Borsdorf (ed.): *«Die Menschen machen ihre Geschichte nicht aus freien Stücken, aber sie machen sie selbst»*. *Einladung zu einer Geschichte des Volkes in NRW*, Berlin—Bonn 1984, p. 11.

**2** See as an overview: Lutz Niethammer (ed.): *Lebenserfahrung und kollektives Gedächtnis. Die Praxis der «Oral History»*, Frankfurt am Main 1985.

**3** Martha Verdorfer: *Zweierlei Faschismus. Alltagserfahrungen in Südtirol 1918–1945*, Vienna 1990.

parallel administration starting in 1940<sup>[4]</sup> and as a direct power from September 1943 onward.<sup>[5]</sup> Oral history interviews made it possible to understand and explore Italian fascism as a specific biographical experience leading up to National Socialism, for example as it pertains to the socialization of certain age groups in school.

Conventional written sources are inadequate in addressing the questions of consensus and dissent of the people under fascist systems, as well as the systems' specific impact on the relationship between everyday life and politics. Interviewing people about their everyday experiences promised a more subtly diversified access to a topic that had mainly been dominated, and thus significantly limited, by ethnic perspectives.<sup>[6]</sup>

Last but not least, I was interested in the culture of remembrance with its tension between the memories of individuals and the collective/societal memory discourses, whereby the latter were and remain shaped by ethnic segmentation in South Tyrol.

New and differentiated responses – which unfortunately cannot be covered in greater detail here – emerged for all three of these issues from the oral history interviews.

By contrast, the lack of written sources was the starting point for the second oral history project on desertion and conscientious objection in South Tyrol from 1939 to 1945.<sup>[7]</sup> Its objective was to ask former deserters and conscientious objectors about the motives for their decision, their experiences during their time in hiding, and their fears and hopes, as no other sources were available. It was not always easy to encourage them to speak, as desertion and conscientious objection had no real place in the collective memory up to that

- 4 With the Option Agreement in 1939, the German and Ladin South Tyroleans had to decide whether to take German citizenship and emigrate to the Third Reich or keep their Italian citizenship. About 86 % opted for German citizenship. This group was subsequently organized primarily by the *Amtliche Deutsche Ein- und Rückwandererstelle* (Official German Immigrants' and Returning Emigrants' Office, ADERST) and the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Optanten* (Optants' Working Group, AdO), although it also remained subject to the Italian fascist government until their actual resettlement.
- 5 Following the announcement of Italy's armistice with the Allies, the country was occupied by Nazi Germany. South Tyrol was merged with the provinces of Trento and Belluno into the *Operationszone Alpenvorland* (Alpine Foothills Operational Zone) where Germany also assumed political power.
- 6 In multilingual South Tyrol, the writing of history with regard to Italian fascism and National Socialism was long dominated by membership of the respective language groups. This influence is only slowly waning.
- 7 Leopold Steurer/ Martha Verdorfer/Walter Pichler: *Verfolgt, verfemt, vergessen. Lebensgeschichtliche Erinnerungen an den Widerstand gegen Nationalsozialismus und Krieg, Südtirol 1939–1945*, Bolzano 1993.

time.<sup>[8]</sup> Deserters had been long vilified as «cowards and shirkers», so their distrust was understandable. The stories that they then told opened our eyes to a phenomenon that had previously been virtually unknown. Our interviewees themselves led us to essential research questions, pointed out local differences in repression and persecution, and highlighted the importance of the women who supported deserters and thus risked prison or concentration camp sentences.

The publication succeeded in giving people a part of their history back and granting them recognition. One of the outcomes was a decree in which the pension supplement granted to former soldiers for their years in the war was extended to deserters.

More than ten years later, another regional oral history project – on female labor migration – was launched. It focused on young women from South Tyrol who worked as housemaids and nannies in major Italian cities from 1920 to 1940 and again from 1945 to 1960.<sup>[9]</sup> Many former housemaids replied to announcements in village papers and willingly told of their experiences. This clearly showed that the practice of oral history had become more familiar. Women in particular were very interested, as they increasingly realized that their experiences were not usually taken into account or were marginalized in the writing of history.

This project involved issues that were of immediate relevance: motives for (labor) migration, factors that promote or prevent adaptation and integration, as well as cultural exchange and communication processes.

I have been working on the issue of archiving oral sources for more than ten years. The main reason for this is the fact that the interviews for the projects presented here were recorded on cassette tape, a technology that has since disappeared completely. Furthermore, the interviewees were passing away in increasing numbers.

For the digitization of the interviews from the deserter project and other matters related to desertion, I turned to the Office for Audiovisual Media in Bolzano, where the materials will be properly archived for the future.

The interviews with former housemaids and nannies have been digitized and archived by the Bolzano Women's Historical Archive.

- 8 The topic first came to the attention of a wider audience with the publication of the autobiography of Franz Thaler, a South Tyrolean conscientious objector: *Unvergessen. Option, KZ-Dachau, Kriegsgefangenschaft, Heimkehr: Ein Sarnner erzählt*, Bolzano 1988.
- 9 Ursula Lüfter/Martha Verdorfer/Adelina Wallnöfer: *Wie die Schwalben fliegen sie aus. Südtirolerinnen als Dienstmädchen in italienischen Städten 1920–1960*, Bolzano 2006.



The lasting impact that oral history has had on our historical understanding is also illustrated by the fact that archives now include oral sources in their holdings as a matter of course.

Annette Lensing

## Traces of August Haußleiter's past in oral history

### Following the footprints of a lifetime: a profile of August Haußleiter

Haußleiter was born the son of a Protestant pastor in Nuremberg on 5th February 1905. He encountered the National Socialist movement in the 1920s, although he did not go as far as joining the Nazi party (NSDAP). He is said to have sympathised with Gustav Stresemann and the *Deutsche Volkspartei* (DVP, the German People's Party), a national liberal party in the Weimar Republic, without turning to politics. From 1928, Haußleiter worked as a journalist for the Nuremberg daily newspaper *Fränkischer Kurier*, in which he mainly covered local and cultural news from Erlangen and then from Nuremberg, before being sent to the front in 1940. As a military propagandist, he wrote the war diary *An der mittleren Ostfront* (1942) and published reports from the Eastern and Western fronts, which regularly appeared in the columns of the *Fränkischer Kurier* until the summer of 1944.

In the immediate post-war period, Haußleiter devoted himself to politics. Following years of political study in the ranks of the CSU (the Christian Social Union), where he was part of the suppressed German Protestant faction, he strove to develop a new political platform. His aim was to propose an alternative to both the West German democratic model and the multi-party system inherited from Weimar on the one hand, and the totalitarian State on the other hand. Through contact with the *Nauheimer Kreis* lobby group, he developed a plan for a unified and neutral Germany at the heart of Europe, and founded the *Deutsche Gemeinschaft* (DG) in 1949. Belonging to a «new nationalism» (Neuer Nationalismus), his concept of «Volksgemeinschaft» built on ideas from the Conservative revolution. At the end of a societal and political situation that had been, until the start of the 1950s, generally favourable towards the anti-democratic camp, Haußleiter's national-neutralist commitment developed outside of political institutions. He tried to breathe new life into his ideas by joining the *Aktionsgemeinschaft Unabhängiger Deutscher* (AUD, the Action Community for an Independent Germany) in 1965, which failed to moving closer to the *Außerparlamentarische Opposition* (APO, the Extra-Parliamentary Opposition). Against a background of increased awareness around environmental issues, brought about and accentuated by the publication of the Club of Rome report in 1972, the AUD participated in civic anti-nuclear

initiatives, and then in the electoral movement, based on criticism of technocracy, growth and prosperity, in particular.<sup>[1]</sup>

After taking an active part in the European Parliament election campaign in June 1979, Haußleiter was one of the founding members of the West German ecologist party *Die Grünen* (the Green Party) in January 1980, which also marked the organisational death of the AUD. Haußleiter had to resign from his high-profile position in the *Grünen* party following a report by the TV programme *Monitor*, which brought his propagandist involvement during the Second World War back in the political and media spotlight. After being elected to the Bavarian parliament in 1986, Haußleiter quickly lost ground, in a party where the issue of German reunification came second to dealing with environmental issues on a global scale. Less and less credit was given to the neutralist ideas of the «grandfather of the Grünen»<sup>[2]</sup>, especially as the majority of the *Grünen* were, at least from the second half of the 1980s, in favour of the coexistence of two German states.<sup>[3]</sup>

In Ruth Paulig and Klaus Resch, we have interviews from two political personalities who were active alongside Haußleiter in Bavaria at the end of the 1970s and who represented the opening up of the AUD to a new political generation. They had not experienced the long political careers of the first generation of *Gemeinschaftsdenker*<sup>[4]</sup>: born in 1938 and 1949 respectively, Resch and Paulig became committed to protecting the environment at the end of the 1970s. While Paulig had previously been a member of the *Bund Naturschutz*, Resch joined the national-neutralist micro-party directly in 1977. After establishing the AUD's local list and committee (*Kreisverband*) in Starnberg in 1978, they campaigned for the Grünen/AUD, before setting up the regional committee *Die Grünen Bayern* in October 1979, which Resch directed. While the latter left politics in 1983, Paulig entered the Bavarian parliament alongside Haußleiter and thirteen other Green MPs following the legislative elections of October 1986. Member of Parliament until 1994 and from 1998 to 2008, Paulig became head of *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* in Bavaria (1996–1998).

The interview with Otto Haußleiter, August Haußleiter's son, has helped to fill in certain archival gaps. At the end of this interview, I was given access to sources that have been

- 1 See Richard Stöss (ed.), *Parteien-Handbuch: die Parteien der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1945–1980, Vol.I: AUD-EFP*, Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen 1983, p. 246.
- 2 Die Grünen Baden-Württemberg (ed.): *Friedensvertrag – Blockfreiheit – Neutralität. Reader zum deutschlandpolitischen Kongreß in Karlsruhe, 9–11/3/1984*, Karlsruhe 1984, p. 4–20.
- 3 See Alexander Gallus, *Die Neutralisten: Verfechter eines vereinten Deutschland zwischen Ost und West 1945–1990*, Droste Verlag, Düsseldorf 2001, p. 37–384.
- 4 See Silke Mende, «Nicht rechts, nichts links, sondern vorn». *Eine Geschichte der Gründungsgrünen*, Oldenbourg Verlag, Munich 2011. See, in particular, the chapter devoted to the *Gemeinschaftsdenker*, p. 94–134.

indispensable in understanding this biography (letters from the 1920s and 1930s, school and university reports, curriculum vitae, fragments of memoirs and poems, etc.).<sup>[5]</sup> This new mass of sources raised a certain number of scientific and methodological issues since they were selected documents, typed in part and even annotated. Source selection and organisation criteria differ greatly according to the presuppositions and perspectives of those who collect them, be they private individuals, public figures, archivists or researchers. The desire to protect archives shows that there is also still a conscious or unconscious drive to influence and guide the «user».

## The pitfalls of memory: temporality and subjectivity in interview situations

Besides enriching document libraries, the primary contribution of the interview is being able to hear the testimony of people who participated in and were affected by the historical processes being studied.<sup>[6]</sup> Based on experience and memory, oral testimonies are in fact alternative accounts that enable us to fill in missing parts of the past in current historical work and, in this way, they simplify the historian's job. These traces of the past are not rendered in an objective or fixed way. Therefore, the historian must adopt a reflective approach by always questioning the conditions under which the interview was carried out.

As with the written sources that they may provide, the interviewee also has an intention, which influences how they present the past. Whether consciously or unconsciously, they try to justify their choices, their ideas and their political practice and, at the same time, convince the listener of the truthfulness of their memories. While they are shaped by social frameworks, the memories they have of events are specific to them. So, the interviewee has additional evaluation criteria for their own past compared to those who have not lived it. Carrying out interviews helps us become aware of life experiences and social situations that are completely different to our own. Certain events from the past can fade in our memories in favour of other events: this selection and evaluation is made in light of the importance the interviewee gives to these events in their life. This can be accompanied by a reluctance from the interviewee to talk about their past because they think it is less important than the past of other more well-known personalities, as was the case with Klaus Resch. There can also be an inverse tendency to overestimate their own importance or even to fall into

**5** See Otto Haußleiter private sources.

**6** See Lutz Niethammer (ed.), *Lebenserfahrung und kollektives Gedächtnis: die Praxis der Oral history*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1985, p. 8.

self-deception.<sup>[7]</sup> How much the interviewee is inclined to speak about their past as well as how much or little time has elapsed since the event took place can cause difficulties in collecting the testimony. In fact, it is quite difficult to ask an unknown person to «tell you» their life story. As for political interviews, it can be easier to talk to people who are no longer active and/or who are involved on a local or regional level and are, therefore, less visible on the media landscape.

Although the researcher is at risk of being subject to the influence of the interviewee, they also pursue a specific intention while questioning them from a different perspective. They position their questions and responses depending on what they want to «make the interviewee say», devise questions geared towards their issues and scientific, or even personal, focus points. Therefore, they have already worked on pre-structuring and pre-selecting issues to tackle in advance of the interview.<sup>[8]</sup> By working with oral sources, the historian is in fact a contemporary of their source, which is not the case when they «dissect» older sources. The usefulness of oral testimony is inseparable from the conditions under which it takes place because they change the behaviour of the interview partners, affecting their inclination to talk about the past and influencing the final content. Did the interview take place in a closed space or in an open, public space? What was the relationship between interviewee and researcher like? Was it cordial, friendly even? Or, conversely, was it cold or unfriendly? What register of language did the interviewee use and was this mirrored by the researcher? How was the researcher perceived by the interviewee?

## Interview aims and issues

It is often difficult to separate objective facts from personal opinions or hostilities that are brought into play in interviews. This reflects on to the historian, whose greatest occupational hazard is identifying with their subject of study<sup>[9]</sup> and taking on their point of view, which is that of the interviewee in this case. The interviews that I carried out had the same thing in common, in that the interviewees were not the direct subject of the interview: even though their personal experience counted, they were interviewed because they had known August Haußleiter. This had an impact on the interview method employed during the interviews: the interviewees were invited to talk about their own experience first and then about Haußleiter at length. The interviews were deliberately scheduled at the beginning of my research project to avoid too much «directing» in the questions and answers.

**7** Raoul Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, coll. Points Histoire, Seuil, Paris 1986, p. 129–138.

**8** See Ronald J. Grele, «Ziellose Bewegung. Methodologische und theoretische Probleme der Oral History», in: Lutz Niethammer, *Lebenserfahrung, op.cit.*, p. 143–161.

**9** See Lutz Niethammer, *Lebenserfahrung, op.cit.*, p. III.

These interviews were semi-structured and the fact that I asked the same questions to two political personalities meant, on the one hand, that I had material for comparison and ensured greater systematicity. On the other hand, it meant that I interrupted the interviewee as little as possible and took their story into account to then adjust the content and series of questions. This led to the risk of being more inclined to adopt the interviewee's perspective. One of the difficulties of the interviews was being able to rid yourself of the retrospective deception or even the «retrospective handicap»<sup>[10]</sup> specific to the interviewee describing their life as a series of actions, sometimes at the expense of chance and the circumstances that have guided their actions at a given moment in their past. The fact that the interviewees were not the subject of the interviews posed methodological problems insofar as the interview situation encouraged the interviewee to present themselves as the subject of the retrospective account.

The aim of these interviews was to be able to access what had not been said in the archives, the emotional «unsaid things», the interpersonal element, the relationships that they had had with Haußleiter and the marks this had left in their individual memories. The interview should act as a «palliative source»<sup>[11]</sup>, illustrating that which is omitted from written sources and thus helping us to overcome shortcomings in scientific communication, such as being affected by bias from archives and secondary literature. It is about questioning their perception of Haußleiter's political «shifts» and, in the case of Resch and Paulig, the manner of their cooperation with him. These aspects do not appear when reading the minutes from political meetings or programme documents, which only present the result of debates without showing the dynamics of the exchange and the flow, or even the blocking and conflict between the people and groups being studied.

## Conclusion

These considerations have demonstrated that oral sources require the same scientific prerequisites as written sources. The historian must verify these sources, find supporting documents, and analyse and compare different testimonies, while maintaining an even higher level of concentration and reflexivity. However, it remains true that they are a sensitive, yet indispensable source for historians today, and that, consequently, they must be understood as objects of study in their own right. They allow us to connect with the «unsaid things» from individual and collective memories and to widen the scope of perspectives on the subject of study. Methodological and scientific contributions can be added to

**10** See Jean-Jacques Becker, «Le handicap de l'a posteriori», *Les Cahiers de l'IHTP, Questions à l'histoire orale. Table ronde du 20 juin 1986*, no. 4, June 1987.

**11** Florence Descamps, *L'Historien, l'archiviste et le magnétophone. De la constitution de la source orale à son exploitation*. Paris, Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France, 2001, p. 561.

the epistemological input, as the interview can lead us to redirect, confirm, or, conversely, invalidate the initial line of questioning while revealing its complexity. Written and oral sources are not unchanging but rather in motion, and so can continuously be enriched. Collecting interviewees' accounts means that they directly contribute to telling a part of history, and this piecing together of the past does not just fall to a lone historian.

Silke Mende

# Oral history and the founding story of the Greens

## The birth of everyday history and oral history out of the spirit of the new social movements?

Oral history as a historiographical method is closely associated with the rise of the history of everyday life.<sup>[1]</sup> Unlike political history (the history of «great men») and social history (the history of anonymous groups, structures and processes), the latter has promoted a return of people into history – not that of the «great men», but rather of the «common man» and, increasingly, the «common woman». Oral history proved a useful method at the interface between everyday life and contemporary history. Narrative interviews were used to «produce» sources that were not left in writing or handed down by the actors in a «history from below».

Looking back on the 1970s and 1980s as a contemporary historian, a relationship becomes apparent between the genesis of everyday and oral history and the advent of new social movements and Green parties. Both phenomena arose in the same historical context and were triggered by similar considerations and ideas of order. The developing Green movements criticized major structures they deemed anonymous, as well as institutions and actors they branded as faceless. Instead, they sought authenticity and praised clarity and subsidiarity. «History from below» as championed by everyday history and oral history corresponded to the concept of «politics from below» with its calls for decentralization, transparency and grassroots democracy. The emergence of everyday history and oral history and the formation of the Green movement were thus in many ways complementary processes arising from the same *zeitgeist*. From this perspective, the history of the Green movement and oral history appear as an almost natural connection. But when and how is oral history suitable for illuminating the story of the Green movement? More broadly, what role can interviews of contemporary witnesses play?

**1** The original presentation nature of the text was retained. I would like to thank Anne Vechtel for her very valuable help in abridging the text for publication.



## As always, it depends on the issue to be explored

Contemporary historians working on the «epoch of living witnesses» are all subject to a paraphrase of Paul Watzlawick's famous line: one cannot *not* communicate with contemporary witnesses. While this certainly applies to those involved in the formation process of the Green movement, random and often informative conversations with contemporary witnesses by no means constitute oral history interviews that meet historiographic standards. And whether these are an appropriate tool for a historian of the new social movements or the Greens depends – as always – on the issue to be explored in the respective work. For the study period of my dissertation on the origins of the Green founders in the Federal Republic of Germany, decentralization and grassroots democracy were classic and programmatic core demands of the Green movement. The conviction of having arisen from a more decentralized and grassroots process than the other parties and upholding those Green core principles remains a significant part of the Green identity. It is therefore important for a historian to not only explore the objective value of decentralization and grassroots democracy for the Green world of ideas and practice, but also to highlight their contemporary idealization, which was a major differentiator and driver of integration in the Green founding process. For myself, it was also a matter of the genesis of these topics: What were the overarching contemporary topics and challenges that provided the background for their formation? And to what extent did – and does – invoking them provide a veritable cement for the identity and cohesion of a Green movement that initially arose from highly diverse ideological traditions?

I did not interview contemporary witnesses in my work, as they did not promise great added value with regard to my research interest. Many of the former protagonists who were central to my chosen perspective on the formation of the Green movement were no longer alive. Other considerations – including, but not limited to the socio-structural background of «my» actors – were more important, which in turn brought a special source situation with them: The Green movement in particular drew and continues to draw its recruits from the educated middle classes that reflected on – and left written accounts of – their own actions and roles in the process of founding the party. This is true not only for the «stars» of the nascent party that undoubtedly existed even among the grassroots Greens, but also for many of the less prominent actors. For the history of the formation of the Green party, we have a wide variety of published and unpublished sources that are generally easily accessible in the *Archiv Grünes Gedächtnis* and other archives related to the new social movements.

These factors raised and continue to raise the question of whether the party's founding processes and the actors' own roles in them can be reconstructed more effectively in oral history interviews several decades after the fact than by using written resources that were produced in the immediate wake of the events. What is the added value to be gained from interviews of contemporary witnesses? Naturally, the history of the Green founders is also subject to the general challenge connected to interviews with contemporary

witnesses – the risk that current positions shape the recollection of observations made at the time. Speaking to contemporary witnesses would above all provide insights on their perspectives in hindsight on the founding of the party. In addition, other advantages of interviews with contemporary witnesses, such as the ability to glean historical details of the events of the party's founding, were not central to the issues I was studying. The question that was important for my research interest – regarding the frictions and animosities within the party establishment process that led to start-ups and spin-offs – had already been documented broadly in meeting minutes, letters and numerous published books.

## «Blind spots» in the written record: gender and region

However, this should not be construed as a fundamental argument against interviews with contemporary witnesses for the history of the new social movements or the Greens. The relevance of this approach for these topics in particular has been demonstrated, not least by the contributions of the other participants in this workshop. I would just like to highlight a point that is particularly central from my perspective. It pertains to those groups that are less present in the written record of the founding Greens for two reasons – either because they produced fewer written documents or because those they did produce have not been incorporated in the *Archiv Grünes Gedächtnis*. The parameters that have accompanied the emergence of everyday and oral history once again come into play here: the will to incorporate marginal groups that did not have a «loud voice» into the story. Amazingly, the categories emphasized in everyday history are often the same as those that constitute the blind spots in the written record of the Green founders. In conclusion, I would like to highlight two of them briefly: gender and region.

While calls for gender equality and greater consideration of local and regional levels have been core demands since the founding phase of the Greens, reality occasionally falls far short of ambitions. A look at the gender category raises the question of whether the perspective of women is reflected reasonably evenly in terms of quantity in printed and published sources. Beyond established and cherished Green memory spaces such as «transparency», «decentralization» and «grassroots democracy», it is necessary to reconstruct the «speech situations» of the time. Numerous written sources of the Green founding phase note that the committees at the time and the debates held in them were often dominated by the same «top dogs», so that their positions and observations presumably occupied a greater space in meeting minutes and the like. On the other hand, the example of Petra Kelly underscores that at least some Green women were among those who garnered disproportionate attention for their written and spoken viewpoints already at the time. Beyond the relevant information in written sources, interviews of contemporary witnesses can help reconstruct contemporary «speech situations» in greater detail in a first step. In the next step, they can help take the perspectives of those groups into account that were

less clearly reflected in the written record, but nevertheless significantly influenced the protest and policy practice of the time.

In my opinion, the second blind spot – region – is more a consequence of archival conditions. At the local level in particular, not all documents from the Green founding days were kept. At the time I was working on my dissertation, the *Archiv Grünes Gedächtnis* holdings related to Green district associations were not very extensive and not particularly helpful for the concrete issues I was exploring. A place like the *Archiv Grünes Gedächtnis* could try to close those archival gaps using appropriate collection practices. At the same time, interviews of contemporary witnesses would come into play here, as anything that was not written down at the time could not have been collected – and the things that were written down but not kept cannot be archived today. It could therefore be worthwhile to also include a number of regional or local party founders who could offer exemplary insights into the founding process in certain district organizations within the context of contemporary witness interview projects already in progress. This would be best specifically within those local contexts that do not have an outstanding organizational or ideological role in the memory of the Green party. Rather than going over the undoubtedly important areas of Wyhl, Brokdorf or Wackersdorf yet again, wouldn't it make sense to explore less prominent areas to attain a more regionally balanced view of Green history?

Numerous paths are thus open to contemporary historians and the archives of the new social movements and the Greens. The history of protest movements like that of the early Greens consists of a wide range of stories, of which certainly not all have yet been told.

Birgit Metzger

# Emotional recollection: The role of witnesses for writing a contemporary history of an emotional debate

If oral history is controversial as a scientific method, it is because it introduces subjective elements into historiography, the contents of which cannot be fully subject to intersubjective verification. Memories are not only influenced by the respective position of the viewer, they also have subsequent events and experiences superimposed upon them. Individual memory can even be shaped by socially imparted recollections – the so-called cultural memory – to such an extent that media images are conflated with individual experiences.<sup>[1]</sup> Memories of a past event thus often tell us more about today's understanding of the historical experience. Why is it nevertheless worthwhile for historians to interview contemporary witnesses?

## The initial situation

Anyone who studies the history of the West German debate about forest dieback is confronted with a problem that affects many contemporary historical themes: a veritable flood of written and audiovisual sources. This is not particularly surprising, since a significant characteristic of the forest dieback was the fact that between 1981 and 1986, it was the subject of a broad public debate involving a great many different actors: from forest wardens and forestry scientists to environmental activists, youth groups, journalists and politicians ranging from Bavarian conservatives to the Greens. Most of those actors left rich source documentation behind, including forestry articles, flyers, buttons and banners, newspaper articles and radio reports, party programs, election campaign posters and Bundestag speeches, not to mention various draft resolutions and legal texts.<sup>[2]</sup>

So it was not a lack of sources that prompted me to conduct interviews. Nevertheless, I intended from the outset to meet contemporary witnesses, listen to their stories and integrate them into my work as sources. I had systematically interviewed contemporary

**1** See Alexander von Plato, *Zeitzeugen und die historische Zukunft. Erinnerung, kommunikative Tradierung und kollektives Gedächtnis in der qualitativen Geschichtswissenschaft – ein Problemaufriss*, BIOS, Year 13 (2000), Vol. 1, p. 5–29.

**2** See Birgit Metzger, *«Erst stirbt der Wald, dann Du!» Das Waldsterben als westdeutsches Politikum (1978–1986)*, Frankfurt/Main 2015.

witnesses for the first time for an earlier scientific work.<sup>[3]</sup> In doing so, I came across events, connections and personalities that did not appear in written sources or were only peripheral to them, or that had otherwise been elusive. In addition, I had gained the impression that encounters with former actors and the knowledge of their biographies, personalities and social backgrounds opens a level of understanding that would have been difficult or virtually impossible to attain via written sources. For this reason, I also planned to talk to contemporary witnesses for my work on forest dieback. Another central motive was for me to understand the emotionality of the forest dieback debate. Was this emotionality merely generated by the media, or was the repeatedly described fear also a subjective feeling? And how can this emotionality be grasped scientifically?

Finally, I hoped that talking to contemporary witnesses might give me an orientation in the debate that would also help me structure the flood of other sources. This was also the reason why I had several conversations with witnesses from the different groups of actors relatively soon after the familiarization phase.

At the same time, it was clear that interviews of contemporary witnesses should only be one of several sources. My thesis was part of a research project on forest dieback that was not primarily structured as an oral history project.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Everyone is a witness

When studying the West German forest dieback debate, it quickly becomes apparent that almost everyone who was born before 1980 and grew up in the former Federal Republic is a contemporary witness. This reflects the importance that the debate had in the West German public and political arenas for at least six years. The media were reporting virtually daily, and the dying forest was the subject of elections and protest campaigns. But what role did the forest dieback play in everyday life and human experience? When meeting witnesses who had not played a particularly active role in this debate, I gained the impression that for many, the death of the forest was an experience that shaped their lives. That especially holds true for people who were young back at the time – for children, youths and young adults. Many of this generation explained that they had grown up with a fear of the future and in the certainty that they were witnessing an ecological catastrophe. They

**3** See Birgit Metzger, *Creative Milieus. Concepts and Failures*, in: Martina Heßler/Clemens Zimmermann (eds.), *Creative Urban Milieus. Historical Perspectives on Culture, Economy, and the City*, Frankfurt 2008, p. 379–408.

**4** An overview of the project, which was financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG) from 2006 to 2012 and involved five theses on forest dieback, can be found at [www.waldsterben.uni-freiburg.de](http://www.waldsterben.uni-freiburg.de).

did not understand why adults were not doing more to combat forest dieback. Yet older people also recalled experiences that had left similarly deep impressions: of the discovery of a sick tree in a nearby forest or even in their own garden.

On the other hand, there were also less emotional witnesses and skeptics who could not see any change in the forest and for whom the whole debate was overblown and causing panic.

Not all of these conversations were systematically conducted interviews. Many occurred spontaneously after a lecture or in private gatherings. Following such impromptu conversations, I took systematic notes. These conversations also gave me new ideas for my research. For example, I became aware of school books, student magazines and archives of youth groups as sources.

Some of the contemporary witnesses were explicitly not willing to be interviewed. Instead, they preferred to write their memories down and send me material in letters and emails. Apparently, they considered written communication a better way of keeping control over their version of the story.

## Biographical interviews

I conducted a total of ten systematic contemporary witness interviews with journalists, forest wardens, scientists, policymakers and environmental activists. My colleagues in the forest dieback project conducted about fifteen further interviews, mostly with forestry scientists.

The interviews were thus mainly of experts of whom we knew that they had played an active role in the forest dieback debate. Many of them had already published scientific articles, media reports, political speeches and gray literature during the debate. In the interviews, we wanted to find out more about their personal motives and backgrounds. For example, I was interested in how someone like Jochen Bölsche, the author of the famous 1981 title story in the weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel*, came to engage in such high-profile reporting on the subject of forest dieback. What had prompted forestry scientists to study forest dieback and to go public with their findings? What was the mood like in the forestry departments? How did they experience the sudden media interest?

The conversations were conducted as semi-structured, narrative interviews, beginning with open biographical questions and then moving on to the forest dieback debate. Most interviews were conducted in the homes of the witnesses. This helped create an atmosphere of trust and had the great advantage that many of the interviewees showed their private archives of photos, letters, manuscripts, flyers, audio recordings and homemade protest placards. Sharing these objects and documents prompted memories and brought up

interesting details that proved highly valuable for my further research, opening perspectives on the subject that are difficult to find in public archives. It was particularly valuable with regard to local and regional aspects, everyday events and personal, subjective views. Some of these materials could later be used for an exhibition on the forest dieback debate.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Experiences and findings

The interviews with contemporary witnesses provided insights into biographies, politicization processes and motivations in a highly emotional debate. They also referred me to events, people and connections that were helpful for further research.

Many of the witnesses devoted several years of their lives to the issue of forest dieback. Scientists worked on it as part of their research, while activists spent a considerable amount of their free time planning and conducting protest campaigns. For many of them, the forest dieback played an important role in their life memory, and most were pleased by the interest of a historian. Few refused to be interviewed. Some said it would be too upsetting for them to discuss the issue. Others mistrusted our research. They assumed that we would be taking a position in our work, and possibly one that would put us on what they considered to be the wrong side of the debate. Others feared being misunderstood yet again. We did not anticipate the great emotional charge that the subject still held, especially among forestry scientists.

Political activism was recalled in a predominantly positive way. Former environmental activists – including forest wardens – went through a politicization process in the course of this debate. They recalled it as an awakening experience that marked the start of a new way of reflecting on political contexts that shaped their future lives. Activism is remembered as an adventurous and exciting period in their lives. On the other hand, events that were experienced as pressure from the public or from colleagues, or as a withdrawal of scientific or social recognition, remain linked to negative emotions.

**5** See Roderich v. Detten (ed.): *Das Waldsterben. Rückblick auf einen Ausnahmezustand*, Munich 2013.

## Dealing with interviews

The full interviews were recorded digitally. The durations range from one to six hours. They were partly transcribed and summarized in writing for the purpose of further evaluation. The interviews are archived on private and university computers and are only accessible through personal contact.

For my scientific evaluation, I compared the interviews to written and audiovisual documents from archives. As far as historical events are concerned, the subjective memories are often inaccurate or false, and the written and audiovisual documents are more reliable. Nevertheless, the interviews with their subjective perspectives were helpful in sorting through the enormous volume of documentation of the great debate without having to accept the various narratives of the contemporary witnesses. I was not able to confirm some of the experiences on the basis of documents. This was above all true for memories of being put under intense pressure because of political or scientific statements and being passed over for positions as a consequence.

## Perspectives

An archive on forest dieback is currently being set up in the forestry department of the University of Freiburg. Whether and to what extent the interviews can be archived and made accessible there has not yet been clarified.

It would be interesting to carry out an independent oral history project in the future on recent environmental history and to study aspects such as the life paths of former activists systematically and from the perspective of collective biography. Such a project should also include actors who were originally environmental activists and who became critics of environmental protection and the environmental movement in the 1990s. Women should also be specifically included, since they were generally not in the front line of activists.<sup>[6]</sup>

**6** It is striking how few women appear in the ranks of scientists, journalists, politicians and environmental activists – never mind foresters – who shaped the debate about dying forests.



Christie Miedema

## Tapping into hidden layers of misunderstanding: oral history and the East-West dialogue

Eight years ago I conducted my first oral history interviews. I was living in Berlin at the time, and finally gathered the courage to approach some members of the East German oppositional milieu of the 1980s about which I wrote my masters' thesis. In my first interview in a café I did not dare to turn on my recorder because I was afraid to remind my interlocutor of the Stasi. In my second interview I was just baffled by meeting a person I read about for so long in real life and being invited to his home as well. Luckily, he was the kind of interviewee who talks no matter what. Both the difficulty and appeal of oral history became clear to me even in these first two attempts.

My first interviews started almost accidentally, as it seemed such a shame to live so close to my subject and not tap into the readily available knowledge all around me. My interest in the method, however, predated these first experiences – triggered by inspiring examples, such as Nanci Adler's interviews with Gulag survivors.<sup>[1]</sup> It had materialized in several student papers on the topic, which had made me realize that oral history offers a lot to the contemporary historian. Beyond the hurdles of reliability, interviews are an important source of information, a way to come closer to history, and to discuss and question your sources with the protagonists of your story. This preliminary research made it easier to start conducting the interviews later and turned it into a self-evident part of my research.

The topic of my research also made the turn towards interview a logical one. Throughout my masters', PhD and post-doc projects, I always focused on social movements, both in the Eastern Bloc and Western Europe, as well as on transnational dialogue and cooperation. Although archives have done a great job in collecting materials, much of this dialogue on individual and societal levels is not preserved in written sources. It is to be found in people's heads. Especially in the Eastern Bloc, the best sources on social movements are the archives of the secret services, whose material is biased by official ideology and selection from a security point of view. Furthermore, dissidents and even exiles often did not systematically collect material, or they deliberately destroyed it as not to fall into the wrong hands.<sup>[2]</sup> Oral history therefore offers a valuable and unique point of access to the experiences and impressions that people had when meeting and discussing.<sup>[3]</sup>

**1** Nanci Adler, *The Gulag Survivor. Beyond the Soviet System*, New Brunswick and London 2002.

**2** Nanci Adler, «Oral History in the Soviet Union: Bearing Witness to a Story That Should Not Die with the Witnesses», *Theoretische geschiedenis* 19 (1992) no. 4, p. 449.

**3** Alessandro Portelli, «What makes oral history different», in: A. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli. Form and Meaning in Oral History*, New York 1992, p. 50, 52.

These important advantages convinced me to do oral history, but did not turn me into an oral historian. Oral history never became the main source of my research, nor is remembering my topic. The interviews were part of a corpus of sources. They were meant to give the written sources more body, to give them some colour, but they also explicitly remained a source of information next to the written sources.

As a source of information, however, it faces contention. Reliability issues haunt any historian, but those using oral history are especially called upon to explain themselves. They create their own sources and influence them. On the gliding scale of historical reliability, the memories reminisced in an interview tend to be in the lower range. The lack of reliability, however, lies not in the oral component but the memory itself: the same counts for memoirs. All written texts post-factum (as well as many contemporary texts) have omissions, judgements, mistakes and double agendas. The act of putting things into writing often gives a false sense of authority, which oral history does not have. In all cases it is therefore vital to remain critical, look for confirmation in other sources and be aware of the effects of temporal distance. I therefore encouraged my readers to make their own judgement about temporal estrangement by always noting when a statement (written or spoken – in interviews of my own or others) was made after the event.<sup>[4]</sup>

At the same time I believe that the interviewing historian has the advantage, that they know exactly in what context and for which public a source was created, and the opportunity to unmask faulty memories and stories learned by heart.<sup>[5]</sup> In interviews with Dutch peace activists, German social democrats, and Polish oppositionists, I more than once stumbled upon stories that were available verbatim in the same person's written memoirs. Breaking through the facade of the «professional eyewitness» is one of the crucial tasks of the oral historian.

Researching transnational dialogues and activism meant finding the people that mattered. Numerical representativeness or sampling were no option. I needed those people that had the foreign contacts, that could travel, that cooperated across borders. Finding them meant extracting the right names from the sources and then conducting a thorough internet search, as well as hoping for a snowball effect. This left an uneasy but hardly solvable question: Was I interviewing those that most fitted my topic, or those that were easiest to find?

**4** Christie Miedema, *Vrede of vrijheid? Dialoog, misverstanden en meningsverschillen tussen Nederlandse en West-Duitse linkse organisaties en de Poolse oppositie 1980–1989*, Amsterdam 2015, p. 24–25.

**5** Portelli, *What makes oral history different*, p. 54, 56–57.

My tour around Dutch and German left-wing activists and politicians, Eastern European former oppositionists and Polish emigrants gave me insights into the profound misunderstandings that existed between these worlds. The 1980s had created a time of simultaneous mass mobilization on both sides of the Iron Curtain: in the West the peace movement and in the East the independent Polish trade union *Solidarność*. But both sides appeared to have radically different ideas about vital topics such as peace, human rights and the nature of the East-West conflict. When these sides met, they clashed.<sup>[6]</sup>

A crucial question in interviewing is how much a historian tells his interlocutor about his research. It can be a strategy to leave an interviewee deliberately in the dark about the goal of the research in order not to influence the interview. It can, however, also mean the eyewitness will leave out vital information as they think it is not important. That is a thin line: not influencing someone to remember conflicts that were not there, but at the same time unearthing those that existed.

Oral history brings you closer to history, but also to people and their lives. That means that oral history is more than questions of reliability and openness to your peers. It is about dealing with people's life stories and expectations. Especially for those that have not become famous politicians or activists, the interviewer might be the first person beyond their own immediate circles showing interest in a vital period of their lives – even turning that interest into a written project. I came back several times to some interviewees; some gave me their memoirs, several of them were present at my PhD defence and one even handed me my certificate.

It is to them that the interviews essentially belong. My use of them is based on trust and oral consent – on the condition that I would not change anything, but only leave out things deemed too personal. In consultation with the interviewee, I have entrusted several interviews to the institutions that helped me establish contact. Although I believe that accessibility is essential to peer review, the effort of contacting dozens of interlocutors to request them to extend their trust to anonymous visitors of an archive, as well as the poor quality of a large portion of my interviews that makes them virtually useless to anyone not present at the initial conversation, has made me reluctant to hand over the full corpus to an archive. For the sake of transparency, however, all my interviews are listed in my dissertation and are available upon request.<sup>[7]</sup>

**6** Miedema, *Vrede of vrijheid?*; Newer projects are probing similar instances of misunderstanding and there are still pending publication focusing on support of Polish migrants in the Netherlands for their home opposition and dealing of Amnesty International with the emergence of Amnesty groups in the Eastern Bloc.

**7** Miedema, *Vrede of vrijheid?*, p. 622–623.

Oral history is more than a historical source. Historical interviews are a risk and a pleasure, as well as a link between history and present, that as a researcher I would be hard-pressed to do without. They create a relationship with the protagonists of the research. This makes the historian both more sensitive to their thinking, as well as possibly biased in judging them. For interviewees, interviews are a dive into the past, with the emotions that are part of it and a revisitation of long-lost contacts – those that the interviewer has met before or requests to meet afterwards. Above all, the relationship does not end with the interview, which usually ends in a question to the questioner: Will you let me know what comes out of your research?

Anna Trespeuch-Berthelot

## Oral archives in the French historiography of new social movements

In France, the historian Annette Wieviorka proclaimed the «Era of the Witness», the present giving social importance to testimonies. In fact, oral sources have increased and witnesses may be more willing to reveal their stories to journalists, on their blogs, on the internet – or to other historians.

This is an opportunity for the historian to use this source of information, but it also raises specific questions. In France, oral history has really expanded since 1978, when the Institut d'histoire du temps présent (Institute of Recent History) was created, to 1992, when the institute organized a symposium to present conclusions of its studies. During the 1980s, some historians such as Danièle Voldman and Philippe Joutard<sup>[1]</sup> were very keen to prove that oral sources were useful and, above all, as legitimate as the written public archives. They struggled with this, so the French historians joined oral historians from the United States, Italy, Spain and Latin America, where the use of oral sources has been substantiated for a long time. In France, oral history as a field disappeared in the 1990s, but the collection, creation and use of oral archives has spread out in the scientific practices until today.

Testimonies are particularly useful to in studying the New Social Movements. In fact, these movements are not channelled through political parties or trade unions, although these organizations used to be quite powerful in French political history. New Social Movements were born with the student movements of the 1960s and in the 1970s, and a new form of commitment arose from such different causes as anti-war demonstrations, feminism and gay liberation movements or by Maoists, Situationists and New Left activists. More recently anti-globalization activism – for example the «Nuit Debout» movement last spring in France – gave new forms of political involvement and expression. But all of these social movements refused to have any leader or structured organization, so their archives haven't always been deposited, are difficult to locate and are often disorganized. In these cases, interviews are not only interesting but necessary to figure out these unconventional political groups.

The question I would be interested in posing is: What are the specific questions raised by using oral sources, especially applied to the French New Social Movements?

**1** Philippe Joutard, *Ces voix qui nous viennent du passé*, Paris, Hachette 1983.

## The selection of respondents

Which criteria can be employed to choose the right respondents: The leaders? The followers?

The problem with the leaders is that they tend to tell the same stories previously repeated in their books and in the media, with the same regular lapse of memory.

The followers are especially attractive because they know unwritten information. But the first difficulty is to find them. Often they aren't really selected. One person leads you to another. There can be a stroke of luck.

There is a second problem in the political environment, and especially in radical ones. A lot of the persons you want to talk to are annoyed with each other and the historian is expected to be partisan.

I encountered this dilemma with Herbert Holl. He was a young Situationist expelled by Guy Debord in 1967. The Situationist organization had very strict rules to obey. When I contacted him, he was a Professor of German at Nantes University. At the beginning he was very happy and proud that I had read his early political texts. We were ready to schedule an appointment but he declined to be interviewed at the last moment. I suppose he didn't feel capable and justified to give another point of view other than that of Guy Debord. The Situationist myth is a barrier no one dares to cross, even 40 years later!

Furthermore, the followers have a tendency to emphasise the time they spent with the leaders and finally tell the stories they read in the mean time.

At times, the interviewees might also be shy and almost speechless. This was the case in my seminar «Histoire des prémices culturelles de l'écologie politique<sup>[2]</sup>». In 2014 I had invited a former Terre vivante publisher (a publishing house specialized in ecology and political ecology subjects since 1982). She gave a very short testimony, because she hadn't realized the historic role her publishing house had played and the framework of the seminar wasn't the best to reassure her. There was not enough time and it was not intimate enough.

Finally, historians cannot struggle with persons who refuse to co-operate, whether they have something to hide or they just do not feel legitimised.

**2** <http://histoire-sociale.univ-paris1.fr/spip.php?article612>; The recordings of this seminar are kept by the Association d'histoire de la protection de la nature et de l'environnement (AHPNE).

## The relationship with the interviewee: between complicity and objective distance

An oral source is a living source. This involves a lot of curiosity, respect and empathy to obtain the trust of witnesses.

On the one hand, you have to show the feeling that you're close to the person, that you share the same political involvement and the same values. But on the other hand, you have to have a distance so that you can conduct your interview in a way that lets you identify what they've forgotten, what is impossible or inconsistent in their accounts.

In practice, however, it can be very challenging. Let me share with you a situation I experienced: Gérard Berréby was a publisher I met very early in my research on the Situationists. He was a Situationist devotee in his youth. With him, I couldn't get his authenticity. He remained very suspicious and he finally asked me the questions and not the other way around. Because of this bad first interview, I never dared ask him for another one.

## The point of view of the witness

The historian can have a fascination with the one who says «I was there!». But of course, he has to bear in mind that the point of view of the witness isn't neutral.

First of all, for the witness, the historian is a means to attain posterity. There are very important stakes of injustice, remembrance and power.

Interviewees thus try to get control of their narrative and sometimes try to create a myth out of their stories. In this case, conflict is never very far away. With the Situationists, my interviewees demanded their own conditions. René Viénet asked me by e-mail to send him what I had written about him. It didn't satisfy him, so he stated that he would never agree to meet me! Raoul Vaneigem only accepted a written questionnaire but no meeting.

Moreover, testimony is a changing source compared to written archives. The witnesses can change their minds. Sometimes they change just a minor detail but sometimes they may profoundly change the sense of their account. In any case, they give a recollected memory of the past, like anyone of us would.

For example Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who was a leader of the French Student Movements in 1968 and now is an Ecologist member of the European Parliament, has been interviewed every ten years since May 1968. He tells more or less the same story, but not in the same manner. In his book written directly after the «events», he had a slightly rebellious standpoint, whereas today, he has a more sentimental look at this period of his youth.

Finally the interviewee gives an individual testimony, whereas the historian is searching to write a collective history.

However, these interviews provide us with information: What kind of information, and under which conditions do the testimonies supply evidence?

## What kind of information can we hope to obtain from oral testimonies?

The interviews offer a different point of view than the trade unions, the political parties or the movements' directions. The historian Xavier Vigna considers «the factory as political space». It's important to raise the former workers' and the militants' voices. This is the goal of the subaltern history.

For Daniele Voldman, who promoted oral history, the fieldworks supply ethnographic information we couldn't otherwise get: About the collective representations and about the way people used to live daily, for instance at which pace and where did they have political meetings? What kind of relationships did women and men have? Did they regularly celebrate or did they have a very serious way of life?

But we have to keep methodological precautions.

First, testimonies are a raw source. As for any source, the historian must cross-reference his/her different sources (written and sound archives, others' testimonies). He/she has to do his/her work of internal and external criticism.

Second point, history doesn't have to be confused with memory. Social groups ask that some events be remembered. For example, the 1968 commemorations in France every 10 years since 1978 are so important that it looks as though every 20-year-old boy or girl at the time had been a revolutionary. But historians should not be influenced by this social desire, even if he/she is a man/woman of that time.

In conclusion, oral sources are one available source of material among others. The historian must treat them with the same methodological precautions and respect.

Historians may also have another use for testimonies. It's interesting to analyse the way people tell their stories, the way they remember their past. What kind of legacy do they want to leave? Why do they need to remember some parts of their past and hide others? What happened between the Seventies and today? What are they proud of or ashamed of? How do they try to make peace with the story of their generation? How do they justify it?



# APPENDIX: LIST OF INTERVIEW PROJECTS AND HOLDINGS

## Major oral sources at the Etopia Private Archive Centre

The first seven were produced by the Etopia Private Archive Centre. All of these sources are available at the centre: 52 avenue Marlagne, 500 Namur, Belgium. [archidoc@etopia.be](mailto:archidoc@etopia.be)

- Interview *Jean Liénard* (18/04/2012)
- Interview *Ghislain Delwiche* (09/04/2013)
- Interview *Georges Trussart* (28/03/2013)
- Interview *Paul Lannoye* (12/06/2013)
- 12 interviews *Jacky Morael* (2014)
- Interview with the founders of Inter-Environnement: *Mark Dubrulle, Michel Didisheim* with *Gérard Jadoul* (30/05/2013)
- Interviews with the key people in the history of Ecolo to mark the party's 30th anniversary in 2010.

### **In addition:**

- *Mémoire pour le futur ECOLO, 30 ans d'évolution* (Recollections for the future of ECOLO, 30 years of progress), produced by Philippe Brewaeys, production: Zebra images, 2010, 28 min.
- *L'âge de Pierre, montage audio-visuel réalisé à l'occasion du 25 ième anniversaire d ECOLO* (The Stone Age, an audiovisual presentation to mark the 25th anniversary of ECOLO), produced by Isabelle Meerhaeghe and Thierry Meunier, production: Ecolo, 2005, 18 min.

# Green Memory Archive

## List of interviews with members of the founding generation of the German Greens:

- **Eva Quistorp**, born in 1945, was active in the students', peace, women's and environmental movements. She played an active part in the EU election campaign and later in the founding process of the Greens. From 1986 to 1988 Quistorp was in the party's steering committee and in the European parliament from 1989 to 1994. She is still active in social movements.  
**Interview date(s):** 2 public talks, Oct. 1, 2009, Jan. 12, 2010  
**Duration:** 3 hours each  
**Interviewers:** Christoph Becker-Schaum, Robert Camp
- **Roland Vogt**, born in 1941, was active in the peace and environmental movements. He played an active part in the EU election campaign, was one of the candidates for the European parliament in 1979 and played an active part in the founding process of the Greens. Vogt was a member of the steering committee from 1981 to 1982. He was among the first members of the parliamentary group in the German parliament from 1983 to 1985. Since then, he has been active in the party in different positions.  
**Interviews date(s):** Mar. 29–30, 2012  
**Duration:** two afternoons  
**Interviewers:** Christoph Becker-Schaum, Robert Camp
- **Milan Horáček**, born in 1946 in Czechoslovakia, fled to Germany in 1968, was active in the EU election campaign and became a founding member of the Green party. He was a member of the German parliament from 1983 to 1985 and of the European parliament from 2004 to 2009. Horáček later worked for the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Prague.  
**Interview date(s):** Apr. 29, Jun. 2, 2014  
**Duration:** two afternoons. The second afternoon Christoph Becker-Schaum conducted the interview alone.  
**Interviewer(s):** Christoph Becker-Schaum, Robert Camp, Eva Sander
- **Wilhelm Knabe**, born in 1923, fled from East to West Germany. He is a forestry scientist. Knabe was active in the environmental movement and solidarity movement, became a founding member of the Greens and speaker of the steering committee from 1982 to 1984. From 1987 to 1990 he was a member of the German parliament. Later he became the first Green mayor of his hometown.

**Interview date(s):** Nov. 24–25, 2014

**Duration:** two afternoons

**Interviewer(s):** Christoph Becker-Schaum, Robert Camp

- **Sibylle Plogstedt**, born in 1945, was active in the students' and women's movements. In 1968 she was arrested in Prague for taking part in the revolution. Plogstedt became a founding member and co-editor of the feminist journal *Courage*. Later she worked for the Greens and the unions as an expert on violence against women. Today she works as a journalist.

**Interview date:** Nov. 7, 2014

**Duration:** 3 hours

**Interviewer(s):** Christoph Becker-Schaum, Anne Vechtel

- **Lukas Beckmann**, born in 1950, was active in the environmental, solidarity and peace movements. He worked for the Free International University, was active in the campaign for the EU election and became a founding member of the Greens. Beckmann was the party's first executive director from 1979 to 1984 and was on the steering committee of the Greens from 1984 to 1987. He served as the executive director of the Green parliamentary group for many years. In 1987 he was one of the founding members of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

**Interview date:** Oct. 9, 2016

**Duration:** one afternoon

**Interviewer:** Christoph Becker-Schaum

- **Mechtild Jansen**, born in 1948, was active in the students' and women's movements. She worked for the church and later in the field of political adult education. Jansen is active in the Heinrich Böll Foundation's state organization in Hesse.

**Interview date:** Oct. 20, 2015

**Duration:** 3 hours

**Interviewer(s):** Christoph Becker-Schaum, Anne Vechtel

- **Franziska Eichstädt-Bohlig**, born in 1941, is an architect and urban planner. In the 1980s she worked in West Berlin in the field of urban renewal. She was a member of the German parliament from 1994 to 2005 and later a member of the state parliament of Berlin from 2006 to 2009.

**Interview date:** Jul. 1, 2011

**Duration:** 2.5 hours

**Interviewer(s):** Christoph Becker-Schaum, Claudia Dreier

## Interview projects of the Green Memory Archive

- **Alternative Liste für Demokratie und Umweltschutz Berlin (AL):** In preparation for the 30th anniversary of the party's presence in the Berlin state parliament in 2011, the archive was asked to interview members of all of the AL's parliamentary groups that have sat in the state parliament in Berlin and produce a source that could be used for a documentary on the history of the AL. In 2011, fourteen interviews were conducted by Christoph Becker-Schaum and Claudia Dreier.

**The interviewees were:** *Franziska Eichstädt-Bohlig (2.28 h), Martin Jänicke (1.5 h), Elfi Jantzen (1.25 h), Rita Kantemir (1.25 h), Sibyll Klotz (1.1 h), Vollrad Kuhn (1.1 h), Ingrid Lottenburger (1.25 h), Özcan Mutlu (1 h), Hilde Schramm (1.35 h), Alice Ströver (1 h), Sibylle Volkholz (0.30 h), Jürgen Wachsmuth (1 h), Wolfgang Wieland (1.25 h) and Elisabeth Ziemer (1 h).*

The interviews were semi-structured life stories that lasted between 30 minutes and two and a half hours. They are saved as audio files and transcripts, which are not accessible for further use.

Parts of the interviews were used for the publication *30 Jahre für Berlin* published in 2011 by Djuke Nickelsen and Heiko Thomas for Bündnis 90/Die Grünen Berlin. The interview with Franziska Eichstädt-Bohlig was edited and published in the 2012 yearbook and on the archive's website.

- **Grüne Liga:** Grüne Liga is a network of environmental movements with its roots in East Germany. In the process of the revolution and reunification, East German environmental movements, peace movements, urban ecology groups and conservation initiatives united in 1990 and founded Grüne Liga. Today the Green Memory Archive is the archive of Grüne Liga. The cooperation started in 2013 with a series of five interviews with activists who were born in East Germany, active in the East German environmental movement and stayed active during the revolution. Some of them are still members of Grüne Liga. They are now living and working in Denmark, Potsdam, Dresden and Berlin.

**The interviewees were:** *Else Tonke (1.4 h), Mareile Löber (1.33 h), Annette Grunwald (2 h), Norbert Wilke (1.2 h) and Stefan Schönfelder (1.2 h).*

The interviews were conducted by Christoph Becker-Schaum and Anne Vechtel. They were theme-oriented and concentrated on events in 1990 during the time of the revolution and reunification. They focused on the experiences the activists made when organizing a network of alternative initiatives and environmental associations.

The interviews are kept as audio files and transcripts. They are not accessible.

The interviews were produced as source material for a publication on the history of the Grüne Liga. This project could not be completed.

## Interviews in private holdings in the Green Memory Archive

- **The holding of Joachim Raschke:** Joachim Raschke is a political scientist and writer. His holding contains 57 interviews of German Green politicians in the form of audio cassettes and transcripts. These interviews were produced in conjunction with Raschke's research and publications on the German Greens between 1989 and 2000. The interviews are not life stories, but rather theme-oriented interviews. The transcripts are very diverse. For the most part they are summaries of the interviews. Some of the transcripts are close to the original spoken word. Raschke's handwritten comments can be found on the transcripts.

Permission of the interviewees to use and evaluate the interviews was obtained by Raschke at the time of the interviews. This permission included the transfer of the rights to the archive.

- **The holding of Charlene Spretnak:** Charlene Spretnak is an American author. Her holding contains 21 interviews. They were conducted in 1983 for the joint publication of *Green Politics. The Global promise*, 1984 with Fritjof Capra.

If the interviewees could speak English, then the interviews were conducted in English; if not, then in German. For many of the interviews, an interpreter was present to either translate between English and German, or to offer help in cases where the interviewees were not secure in their English. The interviews are theme-oriented.

The holding contains two further interviews conducted with representatives of *Agalev*, the Belgian Green party, and with representatives of *AGÖF*, an umbrella organization of ecology research institutes in Germany.

The interviews are saved as audio cassettes and transcripts. The transcripts are partly English and partly translated into German. Some of the interviews are literal transcripts, others are summaries. Spretnak's notes are included.

The interviews are, like the holding, accessible to the public.

- **The holding of Jörg Wischermann:** Jörg Wischermann is a political scientist and writer. His holding contains audio cassettes and transcripts of 14 interviews he conducted with politicians of Grün-Alternative Liste Hamburg in conjunction with his PhD in the early 1980s. The interviews are theme-oriented. The transcripts are very diverse. Some are handwritten, some typewritten.

Permission of the interviewees to evaluate the interviews was obtained by Wischermann at the time of the interviews. This permission included the transfer of the rights to the archive.

## Authors

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He studied history, philosophy and sociology in Frankfurt on Main and defended his thesis in 1983. He was Child Welfare Officer and Local Councillor at Frankfurt, member of the Steering Committee of Heinrich Boell Foundation Hesse, Research Associate at Goethe University Frankfurt and Assistant Professor at Berlin Free University and Potsdam University of Applied Sciences.

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**Silke Mende** is a historian and research assistant at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte München – Berlin. In 2009 she finished her PhD thesis at the University of Tübingen which dealt with the formation of the West-German Greens in the 1970s and early 1980s. Later she worked on the History of Francophonie in France and its Empire between 1880 and 1960. Her current project deals with the history of European parliamentarianism in the last third of the 20th century.

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