

# RESTORING THE GENERATIONS? – A PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW EXPLORING THE EDUCATIONAL POTENTIAL OF THE “ZEUGEN DER SHOAH” DVDS<sup>1</sup>

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## ***Abstract***

*This article is a preliminary literature review undertaken for a proposed research project, surveying the field of research concerning the use of digitised video-testimonies with Shoah survivors in German history classrooms. It is set against the argument that up to now, the perpetration of Nazi atrocities has largely been treated with silence at the family level, and that this has negative psychosocial consequences. The literature review investigates to what extent educational DVDs with Shoah survivors could present an opportunity to break this silence and thus to restore generational relationships at the social level. These educational media allow learners to not only receive first-hand audio-visual accounts of what the Shoah witnesses experienced and thus to be emotionally and empathetically engaged with history learning. Learners are also made aware of the constructed nature of historical knowledge. As a result, they may begin to question how they know what they know, and what validity and consequences this knowing has. Existing pilot studies based on social-psychological analyses of learners' responses to the topic of Nazism, as well as a study about learners' interaction with the DVD series in Germany has shown that learners are interested in this topic, including the question of responsibility, but that they defy external pressure to feel guilty. They tend to develop sophisticated analytical competencies when their empathy is involved. The article could help teachers in other contexts, where sensitive topics need to be taught, to gain fresh perspectives on what to consider when teaching “difficult” content.*

**Keywords:** Emotions in history education; Empathy; Generational silence; Guilt; Responsibility; Shoah research; Video testimonies as educational media.

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<sup>1</sup> *Zeugen der Shoah* means “witnesses of the Shoah” (available at: [www.zeugendershoah.de](http://www.zeugendershoah.de) and [http://www.cedis.fuberlin.de/cedis/projekte/zeugen\\_der\\_shoah/index.html](http://www.cedis.fuberlin.de/cedis/projekte/zeugen_der_shoah/index.html)). There is another, similar resource published by the *Freie Universität* (Berlin) called “*Zwangsarbeit* (forced labour), 1939-1945, *Erinnerungen und Geschichte* (memories and history)”.

## Background

Albert Einstein (1953) once said that “die Welt ist mehr bedroht durch die, welche das Übel dulden oder ihm Vorschub leisten, als durch die Übeltäter selbst”, or “the world is more threatened by those who tolerate evil and are connivers in it, than by the evildoers themselves” (my translation). A more popular version of the above quote reads as follows: “the world is too dangerous to live in not because of the people who do evil, but because of the people who sit and let it happen.” These well-known words rang all too true before and during the time of World War II in Europe. The generation involved directly as perpetrators or indirectly as bystanders in the war atrocities in Germany faced the aftermath with an attitude of dissociation, repression and taboos surrounding guilt (Assmann, 2006a:98) These became manifest as a “veil of silence” (Bittner, 2011:25). This “veil of silence” (see also Assmann, 2006a:103) is what characterises those who “sit and let evil happen”. In the light of European Christian anti-Semitism expressed through large-scale bystander behavior at the time of National Socialism, Bittner (2011:29) argues that to this day this silence continues to manifest itself through indifference and apathy. Both are marks of a “genetic defect”, which Christianity has been carrying with it since its separation from its Hebraic roots. The DNA of Christ is rooted in the God of Israel, but Christianity, by and large, has mutated itself from this root by forcefully cutting out the “Israel” part of its DNA (see Goldstein, 2012, ch.7 on the history of Christian anti-Semitism). What happened to the Jewish people in Germany and Europe during the Nazi period is, I would argue, evidence of what can happen when this mutation is left to take its unbridled course.

The “veil of silence” is the main concern in this research. It has been consistently passed down to generations and has negative psychosocial consequences. Bittner (2011:26) shows that more than three-quarters of all German families are affected by the guilt and trauma of the Second World War. The consequences of the inherited silence, which Assmann (2006a:176-177) argues is to be understood as an “active concealment of the truth” at the family level<sup>2</sup> and as a strategy for the repression of guilt, include psychological alienation, fear and angst, blockages, troubled relationships, inner rigidity (Bittner, 2011:26) as well as a deformed spiritual life (Bittner, 2011:109).

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2 Assmann (2006a:25) distinguishes between communicative (or conversational) and cultural remembrance. Communicative remembrance is established by physical proximity, regular interaction, common living arrangements and shared experiences. Cultural remembrance is passed down through the media and other forms of institutionalisation. As such, they have a fixedness and continuity beyond the family (Assmann, 2006a:32).

According to psychologists, the 35-50 year-olds of today (who could represent the teachers) suffer from diffuse identity: they feel dis-rooted and are on a constant search for securing their identities (Bittner, 2011:167).

The fourth generation, that is the great grandchildren of those who experienced the Nazi period (represented by today’s teenagers), some argue, is ready, able and willing to confront and question the silence of their forefathers. Assmann (2006a:114) notes that the descendants of the perpetrator generation are “not” responding to this dark chapter in their history with forgetting, but instead take on responsibility by stabilising the chapter in collective (or cultural) memory and by integrating it into their collective self-images. Bittner (2011:175-6) shows that the fourth generation is much more open than their parents were to pass down a “more correct” version of their family history. For the fourth generation children the “caricature” of the oppressed German people of the interwar period is fading more and more. They can identify with the victims without feeling that they are betraying their own families or that they are rebelling against them (Bittner, 2011:175-6). They are not indifferent. Don Krausz,<sup>3</sup> a Holocaust survivor who engages with school learners in South Africa, confirmed that German children ask him only one question, namely, “Do you hate us?” (personal communication, 17 September 2013).

### **The educational media to be researched**

It is against this background that I propose to research how a selected group of German youths responds to a new set of educational media about the Shoah. This media consists of video-testimonies of Holocaust survivors on DVDs, derived from Steven Spielberg’s Visual History Archives (VHA). The University of Southern California (USC) Shoah Foundation Institute has worked together with the *Freie Universität* in Berlin to incorporate 12 testimonies of Holocaust survivors into an educational programme especially designed for German school learners. The USC Shoah Foundation’s overarching aim is to overcome prejudice, intolerance and fanaticism, and the sorrow that they cause, through the use of their pedagogical tool, which is the archive of the video-recorded testimonies of the witnesses of the Shoah. Kushner (2006:275) notes that while huge amounts of energy have been

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3 Don is a Dutch/South African Holocaust survivor who came to South Africa in 1946. Since 1985 he has been talking to high school learners about his experiences as a young teenager in the death camps where he spent two and a half years.

spent on creating video archives such as the VHA, the question of how these materials are to be used beyond the merely illustrative seems to have been left unexplored. While from the outset the VHA materials were intended to be accessible to succeeding generations and used for educational purposes, it was not clear how this was to be done (Lücke, 2009). It is precisely this area of need that the research with the DVD series seeks to address.

Not only do learners receive first-hand audio-visual accounts of what these witnesses experienced, they are also made aware of the constructed nature of historical knowledge. Why is this important? Because there are debates within the discipline of history around the question of whether history is a science or an art. The dominant view holds that history is an empirical-analytical-representationalist, positivist science. The role of the historian is to uncover, discover, reconstruct or in any other way to re-present, as truthfully (depending on what the evidence permits) as possible, that which “inheres” in the past (Munslow, 2012). The alternative group’s view, represented partly by White, Jenkins, Rosenstone, Cohen Ankersmit and Munslow, is that history belongs to a different ontology. It is a discursive, inventive, literary, creative, intuitive, fabricated and aesthetic art of narrating stories from the past, as determined by the authorial choices historians make (consciously or not) (Munslow, 2012). It relies to a large degree on “verbal artistry” (Langer, 2006:305). The construction of history by way of life stories belongs to the latter type of ontology: “any life story, whether written autobiography or an oral testimony, is shaped not only by the reworking of experience through memory and re-evaluation, but also always at least to some extent by art” (Chamberlain & Thompson, 1998, quoted in Kushner, 2006:285). If learners understand that the very nature of historical knowledge is contested at the level of creation in academia, then they may also question some of the deep-seated assumptions they hold as a result of socialisation. They may begin to question how they know what they know and what validity this knowing has.

Reiter, who belongs to the “history as art” camp, asks: which linguistic devices, and which genres do the survivors rely upon to communicate their experiences? How does literature in the broadest sense, and language and genre more narrowly, become a means of coming to terms with life?” (Reiter, 2000: 2). These are the kinds of questions posed to learners by the “Zeugen der Shoah” DVDs. A central aim of the learners’ activities is to analyse and understand how the “form” of the medium influences the(ir) meaning-making of the content. The activities require learners to pay attention to

following: ideas concerning the language (how the interviewee uses words, phrases, dialect and to observe what s/he does not say) and also what happens beyond the spoken word (body language, silences, gestures, staring into space); the situation surrounding the interview (how the questions and style of the interviewer influence the interviewee’s responses); the use of technology and setting (how the camera angles and lighting influence what is said); and, finally, to reflect on changes within their own perspective as a result of a second or third viewing. In conjunction with thinking about the content or “what happened”, learners are also encouraged to interrogate the meaning of concepts such as oral history, visual archives, identity, language, memory, commemoration and a host of other highly complex issues when they work with the tasks (“Zeugen der Shoah” - school learning with video-interviews: DVD guide for educators, 2012).

The makers of the software had specific competencies in mind when designing the educational activities. These are common to German history curricula and can be summarised as follows:

- Analytical and interpretive competence: critical reading of sources, historical contextualisation of what is seen and heard;
- Judgement competence: relationship between the testimonies and own historical consciousness;
- Media and methodological competence: independent handling of the video testimonies and own design of videos;
- Narrative competence: designing own historical narratives and finding answers relating to the present (see Barricelli, 2012:46-47).

### **Objectives and research questions**

Jonathan Jansen, a South African expert in pedagogy and race relations, points to new post-conflict curriculum knowledge and a post-conflict pedagogy that he terms the pedagogy of compassion or reconciliation. This is a response to critical theory’s tendency to undermine the “... possibilities for a post conflict pedagogy that recognises the pain and trauma on both sides without the need for slippage into moral relativism” (Jansen, 2009:156). At the philosophical centre of this pedagogy is an “epistemology of empathy” that takes seriously the experiences of both the perpetrators and victims (Maodzwa-Taruvunga & Cross, 2012:134, my emphasis). Although the video testimonies are clearly about the victims of the Shoah, Jansen’s argument suggests the need

to consider, with equal weight, the experiences of the so-called perpetrators (whether as active killers or as passive bystanders), which the majority of the fourth generation of German children represents. The research is thus about the children of the perpetrators, and not about the victims as such. If it is true that they still live under the dark veil of silence of their forefathers, then it is imaginable that through engaging with this epistemology of empathy, which is central to the video testimonies, they could be motivated to ask questions, talk, discuss, debate and so to break the silence. In turn, this could lead to transformed relationships.

The objective of the proposed research project is to find out, “firstly”, how school learners aged 15 to 18 in German schools respond to these educational media with a specific focus on empathy (see subsection). The “second” objective is to find out how learners respond to the idea that history is constructed, in this case through video testimonies. To do this, some of the research questions would aim to find out whether the above competencies (narrative, analytical-interpretive, judgment, media and methodological, and narrative) are realised. The activities included in the DVD series require learners to develop and use these competencies. By analysing learners’ written responses, it is possible to assess the degree to which they are developing and using these competencies. What do these competencies imply about breaking the silence between the generations?

These objectives are designed to address a specific gap in textbook and educational media research. The Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research in Braunschweig, Germany states that up to now the main focus of such research has been “primarily with the content of the media, with only occasional attempts to investigate the ways in which media are used in the classroom” (Georg Eckert Institute website, 30 November 2013). There are a range of research methods available to investigate this neglected area of reception studies; namely interviews, questionnaires, ethnographic observations, conversation analysis, and discourse analysis. In general, theoretical orientations draw on social and cultural theories such as discourse and media theories, actor-network theory, practice theory, and theories of memory (Georg Eckert Institute Website, 30 November 2013).

More specifically, concerning the topic of investigation here, there can be little doubt that listening to testimonies by Shoah survivors involves emotional engagement at some level. Given this emotive nature of the subject matter, Brauer & Lücke (2013:23) point out that some researchers start with

the premise that emotions in history learning are cultural constructs that need to be analyzed as discursively generated structures. Others approach the subject from an observational-analytical perspective. All these tie in with the Georg Eckert Institute’s proposed theoretical and methodological approaches to educational media reception studies. According to the Institute, in most general terms, work in reception studies investigates how practices of media-use generate meaning, and to which conflicts of interpretation they give rise. Based on these considerations, as well as the research interest, the proposed research questions of the study are:

1. How do groups of predominantly German learners aged 15 to 18 interact with the “Zeugen der Shoah” educational media?
2. What is the role of the concept of “epistemology of empathy” and the role of the concept of “history-as-art”?
3. Do learners develop the named competencies (analytical, judgement, media and narrative), and how can we measure this?
4. What are the implications of the development of these competencies for breaking the “veil of silence”?

### **Clarification of some key concepts**

#### ***Doing history by using video testimonies***

The genre of video testimony is relatively new, as it started in 1981 with the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale University (Kushner, 2006:276). It can be compared to two other genres, namely biography and oral testimony. When compared to (auto)biography, Assmann (2006b:264-265) points out that video testimonies about the Shoah defy all common patterns in narrative construction. This is because:

... in the case of these video testimonies, memories do the very opposite [of having a coherent construct of a biography]: they shatter the biographical frame. While the genre of autobiography creates meaning and relevance through the construction of narrative, the relevance of the video testimony solely lies in the impact of the historical trauma of the Holocaust. It registers events and experiences that are cruelly meaningless and thwart any attempt at meaningful coherence. It presents an incomprehensible event that defies all patterns of understanding.

When compared to other oral sources, Assmann (2006b:266) shows that usually such oral sources serve to ascertain the truth-value of something (she is referring to court testimonies specifically and not to oral history generally).

By contrast, video testimonies about the Shoah are as much, if not more, about the person who puts forward the testimony representatively for the dead, than about the truth-value of testimony itself. In fact, it is well known that video testimonies often veer off “the truth” for various reasons and that therefore they cannot be used as substitutes for “the facts”. This is an aspect that the “Zeugen der Shoah” teacher guides stresses. Having said that, it is equally true that “it is at least as dangerous to rely on [written German documents] as it is to rely on oral testimonies” when ascertaining the truth-value of the past (Bauer, quoted in Langer, 2006:300-301). “Generally speaking”, Bauer argues, “testimonies are one of the most important sources for our knowledge of the Holocaust, because the Germans tried to murder the murder[ed]: they tried to prevent Jews from documenting what happened.” (Bauer, quoted in Langer, 2006:301).

Even written records can be unreliable. Welzer (2007) analysed a large number of written historical documents, namely interrogation reports containing Nazi perpetrators’ defending claims in court hearings when they were questioned about the crimes of mass executions of the Jewish people in the Ukraine. Some of these written documents contain statements about the accused’s supposed acts of “help” and “kindness” towards some of the victims. Welzer (2007: kindle location 3413 and 3259) convincingly argues that the truth-value of such claims must be questioned, firstly because they cannot be verified (seeing that the court hearings happened decades after the event). The second reason is that such claims are completely at odds with the perpetrators’ overall mass-murderous actions aligned with their unquestioning agreement about the “correctness” and support for the “necessity” of the mass shootings. Therefore any historical source, whether oral testimonies or written records, cannot be taken as the given “truth”. Langer (2006:299) notes that historians are trained to work with archival materials as if written documents, with “their texts permanently inscribed on paper, were somehow endowed with an authority denied to verbal sources.” However, as the examples show, one type of historical source is not necessarily more reliable than another. The “history-as-art” scholars stress that there is no such thing as objective, truthful, representational history because the past cannot be re-presented from a perspective outside of present motives. It can never be value-free, in other words.

One major characteristic of the medium of oral testimony is that they are complex, given that they not only have an unusually direct emotional impact,

but also because they are mediated by frame conditions (Hartman, 2006:250), meaning that they are displaced in time. They often touch on issues such as being exiled, involuntary displacement and even being exiled from language itself (Hartman, 2006:250). This opens up a new area of scholarly investigation in that it bridges the gap between social science (represented here by history) and the humanities (represented here by literature). It is because of this bridging that the “history-as-art” concept needs to be investigated further. Kushner (2006:282) argues that how a person puts their life experiences in a coherent way tells us as much about their life now as about their past, “for all are bound together in creating the individual’s identity”.

This is confirmed by Shekel & Urschel-Sochaczewski (2012:40) who note that video testimonies play just about no role in German literature or language lessons, but that there is plenty of scope for overlaps between literary themes with which learners can identify, and those addressed in the DVDs. These are: familiar situations, friendships and love affairs, school and leisure time (Shekel & Urschel-Sochaczewski, 2012:40). By creating such bridges between the victims’ and the recipients’ identities, it is possible that the silence can be broken more easily, especially if learners appreciate that Holocaust oral history is not just about information and communication, but also a “reflection of the courageous effort to overcome silence” (Hartman, 2006:251). If learners see how the breaking of the silence is modelled by the oral witnesses, it is possible that they respond with exploring and expressing that which has been kept silent from their lives. If the video testimonies are regarded as a form of art, then this is not unlikely, considering Assmann’s argument (2006a:216) that “art is not only a medium for the representational portrayal of memory, but also [...] a social impetus for the freeing of blocked memory” (my translation).

What makes the medium of video testimonies advantageous particularly in school settings is that they have a mediating function in terms of the question of responsibility and guilt. Bothe & Sperling (2013:210-211) describe the interaction between the oral witnesses who do the narrating and the listeners who receive this narration as a “secondary dialogue”. It enables listeners to receive the witnesses’ testimonies in more intensive ways, given that they are actively involved as agents in handling the medium. Although the listeners obviously cannot talk back to the witnesses, the concept of a “secondary dialogue” allows for a secondary witnessing in the sense of taking on responsibility for the memories in a way that is “not forced” (Bothe & Sperling, 2013:210-211). This is an important point, given that many

German learners find their teachers' (and other institutionalised) subtle and not so subtle pressure to feel remorseful or guilty rather offensive. They react against it with defiant behavior (more on this in a subsection later). It is important, as Assmann (2006a:202) has argued, that guilt and suffering are not seen as mutually exclusive categories. If we think about them as "either or" categories, we will find ourselves in a "cul-de-sac". She argues that we need to acknowledge that we cannot remove the suffering of the German people during and after the Second World War by referring to their memories as politically incorrect and therefore as invalid. "There is such a thing as a human right to have one's own memories that cannot be removed by censorship and taboos" (Assmann, 2006a:202, my translation).

### ***Addressing questions of conscience through empathy***

The idea of conscience is a difficult topic to discuss within the discipline of (history) education, but it is a central part of this research. "Conscience" could well border on the raising of theological questions. For example, Don Krausz, the Dutch/South African Holocaust survivor mentioned earlier, who confesses to be an atheist, nevertheless uses the idea of "God within" when teaching teenagers about the concept of conscience (personal communication, 17 September 2013). I would argue that conscience has something to do with empathy, moral understanding and emotions (Morgan, 2013:55-56). Briefly stated, empathy is about "...feeling what the other person feels, understanding the other from a distance (telepathy), or more generally to understandingly engage in other people's lives" (van Manen, 2008). At its basic level empathy is a feeling of the world in and through another person and it is bodily experience (Mensch, 2011:21). Empathy allows us to "tune into the interpretive patterns of others" (Marsal & Dobashi, 2011:91). Three related considerations emerge from this working definition of empathy.

The first consideration is that empathy, because of its attachment to emotions that are experienced by all human beings, plays a role in almost every known culture and religion (Weber, 2011:8). Moreover, because of its bodily or sensual characteristic, it has significance for aesthetic understanding (Weber, 2011:8) and is crucial for learning (Mensch, 2011:21). This way it can fall within the broad study of reenactment as applicable to the study of history (Agnew, 2007:300). Reenactment involves "reinserting the body into history", (De Groot, 2011:597), which is what these video interviews do through the

narratives of the witnesses.<sup>4</sup> This reinsertion occurs through an emotive or affective connection because “we do not experience our belonging to history as knowledge but first as a ‘sensation [*Empfindung*], a feeling” (Walser, quoted in Von Moltke, 2007:17). Or, another way of putting it would be to accept that it is possible to emotionally “know” something because, as some argue, the very process of writing history is a sensory, emotional or affective process, seeing that emotions govern both the choices of topics and the ways in which research is approached (Robinson, 2010). In her review essay on how archival work is essentially emotional, Robinson refers to Watson’s appreciation that “bodies also think, minds also feel” (Robinson, 2010:515).

The second consideration is that empathy is not opposite to rationality. Seeing that it is:

*not just a feeling “in” the other but also responding “to” this other, [but that] empathy requires rationality. Thus, the empathy that opens us up to the plight of the other can be felt as the call of conscience. Empathy allows the other to call us into question in our positing of the world. Having raised this call, however, empathy cannot evaluate it. It cannot tell us whether the call is legitimate. Neither can it inform us how we are to respond. Only reason can provide this service. It gives “sight” to empathy, allowing it to transform itself into practical action (Mensch, 2011:24).*

The connection between emotions and rationality was evident in a pilot project at the Freie Universität Berlin, where between 2008 and 2010 school learners participated in working with the video interview materials. Wein (2012a:36), a researcher working with the high school learners, found that empathy and analytical competence did not show up as opposites, as it has been conceptualised until recently by professionals.<sup>5</sup> The study showed results contrary to such expectations: the learners worked with the oral reports of the witnesses with more sensitivity, insight and accuracy (in terms of developing and communicating arguments on evidence) “because” their empathy was involved in such a direct way. Hartman (2006:254) describes how testimonies by Shoah survivors speak to a wide variety of audiences, because they “are able to touch heart as well as mind: they appeal to a human commonality that does not imply uniformity.” Hence, another advantage of empathy is that it can help unite the heart and the mind through the conscience.

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4 Bruner (1996:90) notes that the stories we tell are very powerful in that they can lead people to either live together, or to maim and kill each other.

5 It should be noted that this dichotomy is losing its hold. The newly published book edited by Brauer & Lücke (2013) contains 14 essays from authors with very different methodological and theoretical orientations. However, what they have in common is that all of them dissolve the dualism between emotions and cognition in the context of historical cultural epistemologies.

Following on from this connection between emotions and rationality is the third consideration, which is that empathy can also involve active engagement, or at least, a feeling of compulsion towards action. This was shown in an example from the “Zeugen der Shoah” pilot project in a response by a 15-year old female pupil to one of the oral witnesses who was a rescuer of Jews during the Nazi period: “Then I recalled all the anger that I had towards Hitler and his consorts. I then had the desire to help [the witness to rescue victims]” (quoted in Wein, 2012b:33, own translation). Connecting emotionality with compulsions to act can of course also go in different, less desirable directions, such as terrorism or extremist hate-crimes. However, because empathy is not just pure, raw emotion, but a combination of emotions with rationality, it should not be connected to negative action like hate-crimes. Nevertheless, this “danger” does come up in some researchers’ analysis of empathy. For example, Brauer (2013:89-90) explains that empathy is not just about walking in another’s shoes, but also about slipping back into one’s own shoes and feeling irritated at how different it feels. This irritation, she explains, could ideally be the starting point of historical learning. It implies that empathy is not just a bridge to the world of another, but also that one learns more about “oneself” than about the other. By first perceiving and then possibly integrating the other into the self, Brauer reasons, learners increase their awareness and thus improve their judgement competence.<sup>6</sup> Better judgement competence arguably leads to better-reasoned action.

### **Some findings about Shoah education in Germany from recent studies**

Whereas in previous decades history and history education could be understood as belonging to the “textual turn”, as informed by textuality and theories of language, there can be little doubt that the last fifteen years or so have been characterised by an “affective turn”,<sup>7</sup> based on models learned from performance, cultural studies and other humanities disciplines (De Groot, 2011:598). Indeed, emotions, affect and subjectivity have become central concepts in the study of the didactics of history. Just a few months ago a book was published in Germany, collecting essays on this very topic (see Brauer & Lücke, 2013). These essays explore the function and place of emotions

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6 Judgement competence does not mean judging historical actors, but rather an ability to assess whether an opinion, thesis or action is reasonable or not.

7 In addition, Assmann (2006a:115) - in the context of describing transitions in political history - refers to an “ethical turn” in the cultural praxis of remembering, where concepts such as recognition and responsibility play a special role.

in individuals’ past lives that have been appropriated as history. Part of this exploration is based on the idea that emotions are not only topics or themes in the learning of history, but that they are also a “constitutive part” of the learning process itself (Brauer & Lücke, 2013:14, my emphasis). “It is always the idiosyncratic, productive handling of the dimension of emotionality as part of combining experience, knowledge and communication, that makes history learning a unique process of appropriation” (Brauer & Lücke, 2013:22, my translation).

Just over a year ago (2 September 2012) the “werkstatt.bpb.de”<sup>8</sup> called interested teachers and other educators to test the “Zeugen de Shoah” DVDs, and to participate in their further development. It is this call to which the proposed research is responding. The DVD series are also designed to be used in English lessons (especially for the teaching of media analysis), given that four of the interviews are in English with German subtitles. The kinds of issues that emerge from such a study can be illustrated by Lücke’s (2009) essay about how learners in the mentioned pilot study worked with an English video testimony. Issues central to this study were around translation, meaning making and the relationship between subjectivity and language.

There are other German publications authored by the researchers who were in some way involved with the DVD production. These publications do several things: they theorise about the genre of video interviews in relation to the pedagogy of Holocaust-teaching; they offer critiques about the “Zeugen der Shoah” DVDs as historical sources; and they document initial responses from learners who participated in pilot projects in Berlin (as mentioned earlier). Unlike the DVDs sold for school use, the pilot projects included a video-making component during which the learners created their own short productions based on the unedited video testimonies. The DVDs for school use do not contain such a production task and neither do they contain the full two hour-long versions of the video testimonies. The school DVD video interviews are edited to half hour each. In the section below I will concentrate on how learners responded to the materials in these pilot projects as I summarise and translate the most important findings in three of the German publications (Brauer & Wein, 2010; Barricelli, Brauer & Wein, 2009; and Lücke, 2009).

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8 DBP stands for “Digitale Bildung in der Praxis” (Digital education in practice) and is an online workshop aimed at communicating contemporary history in the everyday lives of German schools as well as in non-school education against a background of current challenges such as migration and digitisation (own translation) (available at: <http://werkstatt.bpb.de/uber-2/> and <http://werkstatt.bpb.de/2012/09/neues-ausprobiert-material-zeugen-der-shoah/>).

German children are generally sick and tired of “the way” the topic of Nazism is repeatedly hammered into them. This is an important finding because it stresses that learners are generally not sick of the subject matter per se. There is indeed a great deal of interest in the topic and learners appropriate this history as something different from other history, given that it is their own national past (Cisneros, 2008:1). So while there is interest in the subject matter, learners disprove of the way it is taught. Social-psychological analyses of how school learners respond to Holocaust education have shown that what learners disprove of is the “hidden agenda” of the teachers, when, for example, they are visiting Holocaust memorial sites (Langer, 2008:7). This “hidden agenda” concerns teachers’ expectations, implicit as they are, that learners should feel a sense of remorse, guilt or sadness, or at least empathy. Often these expectations are not met, which is expressed through perceived “inappropriate” behavior at such memorial sites, such as making jokes or being noisy and thus “disrespectful” to the dead. Mostly such underlying tensions are not discussed or reflected on by either teachers or learners (Langer, 2008:7). What worries learners is that they may have politically incorrect positions towards the subject matter, and thus it becomes impossible to have open and honest discussion in class (Brockhaus, 2008:2). Teachers tend to steer learners’ responses in certain directions, do not permit questions about “the positives of Nazism” and are afraid of being labeled if they allow a wider discussion (Brockhaus, 2008:5). The “veil of silence” is thus perpetuated at the institutional level.

Apart from the silence, there are also other strategies used by German learners for repressing guilt. They are sick of being constantly accused by “foreign” learners of Nazi crimes and being made to feel guilty all the time. Often their response is that the others are also guilty, for example the Turks murdered the Armenians and the Americans murdered the Native Americans (Brockhaus, 2008:7). Such responses represent one of five strategies of the repression of guilt; they are examples of what Assmann calls compensation (2006a:169-170). Compensation in this context means distraction from (or even excuse for) one’s own guilt by emphasising the guilt of others, as in the above example. However, when talking about guilt repression, Welzer (2007) reminds us that this is premised on the rather optimistic assumption that the first generation perpetrators felt anything like guilt or remorse to begin with. Based on his analysis of available historical evidence, he argues that this was not the case: “indeed, the most striking and depressing common characteristic of the perpetrator statements is that an admittance of personal guilt is nowhere

to be found” (Welzer, 2007, kindle location 3818, my translation). If this source is trustworthy, then this could give us an idea about the magnitude of the generational problem.

Nevertheless, apart from compensation and silence (which has already been discussed), Assmann (2006a:170-179) identifies another three guilt-repression strategies. They are externalisation, falsification and blanking out. Externalisation involves finding a scapegoat or blaming others for the guilt. Falsification is denying the weight of the crimes of the Holocaust in German families and instead focusing on being victims of the war. Such victimhood involved three events: the bombing of German cities by Allied forces; the expulsion of Germans from east-European territories; and the mass rape of German women (Assmann, 2006a:184). Blanking out implies a kind of denial by referring to the national ideology of anti-Semitism of the time and the way this was fed into the people to such an extent that prejudices have come to live “under their skin” (Assmann, 2006a:174). They have thus become embodied into their very flesh. This type of “indoctrination” is said to impede one’s ability to perceive the injustices of the system.

Given these well-developed strategies of guilt repression, it is perhaps unsurprising that attempts to develop democratic attitudes and to immunise learners against anti-Semitic and racist attitudes through the teaching of this topic cannot be demonstrated to be successful. On the contrary, the moral simplicity and unambiguity with which the topic is presented in conventional educational media prevents learners from real cognitive and emotional engagement (Barricelli et al, 2009). Clearly new methods and materials are needed, and this is a gap that the video testimonies try to address. Although there is some (German) literature on how to use video testimonies in classrooms, there is generally still a lack of experience, theorisation and recommendations when it comes to knowing how to handle the complexities of these video interviews.

The first major finding based on the pilot studies with high school learners in Berlin was that the videos are a medium that motivated the learners. The learners felt that the video interviews spoke to them directly and they felt taken in by the interviewees’ visual expression of the remembering process. They engaged enthusiastically with the testimonies and debated among themselves in quite controversial ways. For example, some of their responses suggested that they view “Jewishness” as something foreign: some responses could be interpreted in a way that indicated that even during the time of the

events portrayed, somehow being Jewish must have been “abnormal” and that this perception has taken root in some learners (i.e. it has been internalised as a “truth”). The point is that because the medium was motivating, learners got engaged and expressed deeper-seated perceptions. In addition, learners showed an ability to concentrate for long periods of time (two hours of watching the unedited videos), even though this contradicts their digitally determined viewing habits. Such habits are restricted to much shorter bits and pieces of information of YouTube videos or texts on social networking sites. Even though they complained about the demanding written assignments, the researchers were astounded by the concentration that the learners showed when completing such tasks. Overall, learners found the narrated life experiences in the video testimonies more interesting, credible and memorable than textbook representations of the same subject matter.

The second major finding was that learners showed a longing for a “positive” turn of events, which could stem from their familiarity with Hollywood movies that invariably have happy endings. But it could also (or additionally) be interpreted as a desire for an acquittal of guilt or responsibility for the Holocaust, which is regarded as part of their own history. The fact that many learners commented on the “vastness” of the number of survivors (the VHA contains some 52 000 interviews) also points to this wish for “disburdening” of this past. Another point made by Lücke (2009:5), through his analysis of learners’ work with an English video interview, is that language is a factor that can be interpreted as a tool that is used in the “desire for disburdening” thesis proposed by Lücke. He found that the German youth deemed an English interview more “authentic” than the German ones. He surmised that the learners’ higher valuation of the English language acted as a barrier protecting them from having to transfer the horrors of the Shoah into their mother tongue, which then would make this past a much more personal and emotional part of their identities. This, ironically, Lücke (2009:5) suggests, would not make the DVDs an ideal source for approaching the Shoah in an authentic and subjective manner. Nevertheless, his research shows the importance of the connection between language and identity, which I think are important topics to explore further, especially in the context of the “affective turn” (De Groot, 2011:598) in history education.

The third major finding could be loosely grouped as those pertaining to the “history as art” perspective. Although learners showed very different responses to the “same” interviews, on the whole, they understood what it means to

treat the video interviews as “memory sources” (“Erinnerungsquellen”). They pointed to factual inconsistencies or contradictions to those of “official” (or scientific) history, and these have provided useful topics of discussion in class. However, analysing video sources that deal with such traumatic experiences requires excellent facilitation and guidance by expert teachers. After first viewing, learners often expressed irritation with the seeming “detachment” of the survivors – they should show more emotion, be more sad or more “affected”. But when viewing the testimonies a second or third time, learners were able to note linguistic details and those that go beyond language and that talk to the sadness and consternation of the survivors, which they missed the first time. Overall, learners learn quickly how to notice and interpret non-linguistic details and why it is necessary to be careful with hasty interpretations. They understand the limitations of the medium and that those who have not personally experienced the horrors can never be in a position to fully understand the scope and consequences of the events (Barricelli et al, 2009:8).

The authors concluded that working with the video media could be an important experience for learners because it opens up new perspectives for engaging with history. This medium has the definite potential to enrich the learning process about Nazism and Holocaust, both in terms of content and methods. However, this is conditional upon careful preparation and guidance (a good teacher is irreplaceable). This type of work can also be used as enrichment for the preparation of learners who will visit Holocaust memorial sites.

## **Conclusion**

I would like to return to the beginning of the article where I talked about my understanding of the problem of the “veil of silence”. It seems important to assess what has gone wrong with today’s generation. Bittner (2011:182) outlines it as follows: The problem in modern western democracies is that there is an advanced dissolving of all values and norms and this has become a trademark for a young, enlightened generation. The request for forgiveness seems to have been settled. Self-righteousness is booming. The modern person decides what seems attractive to him- or herself. Anything absolute seems to him or her like “a monster” that wants to force him or her in ways that compromises that person’s freedom. As long as s/he does not recognise this

“monster” in him- or herself,<sup>9</sup> s/he is in danger of being misused, like his/her forefathers, as a hater of Jews (or another group of people), a mass murderer or a silent bystander. It has to do with establishing the concept of “This I don’t do” (the absolute), as is central to Don Krausz’s presentation to high school youth as part of his “moral regeneration” programme.

Once an individual makes self-(re)discoveries, for example what it is that “I don’t do”, it could be carried to the next level, which is the family, and then the community, cities, and finally nations as a whole. This process of discovery from individual to the collective level cannot happen either by continuing to live under the veil of silence, or by being constantly “Bible-bashed”, so to speak, by hypocritical moralising voices from people in authority who do not live by the very principles they preach. People in authority could also be discarded by youths because of their possible uncertainty of their own moral standing or state of conscience in terms of processing the guilt of their forefathers. Given the well-established strategies of guilt-repression as discussed by Assmann, (2006a:1169-182), children cannot be expected to develop a sense of empathy, if their noses are constantly being rubbed in the guilt of their forefathers, as is the case with much of Apartheid education for white youths in South Africa (Hues, 2012:213). However, I surmise that empathy can be learnt through an inner brokenness. Or, to use a more apt but untranslatable German word, without a degree of personal “Erschütterung” (a type of inner trembling through shock) the monster of relativity will be difficult to recognise and question. At the same time, the veil of silence is not broken by “seeming” (fake for the sake of political correctness) discussions, where it is obvious that heart and mind are not in sync. For example, Wertsch (2000: 39) shows, through interviews with ethnic Estonians regarding their perceptions of official and unofficial history, that there is a pattern of “knowing but not believing” in the case of the official history, and “believing but not knowing” in the case of unofficial history. Could the DVD series, or resulting research for which the DVDs could possibly serve as a springboard, disrupt this pattern?

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9 Based on the context of the whole essay, I think what Bittner means here is that as long as people don’t realise that the “monster of absolutes” is not a monster, or rather that is a “monster of relatives”, they will not have the moral strength to withstand the small steps that lead to the type of degeneration we have witnessed in the context of the Shoah.

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