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“When you listen to someone for hours you give them a lot” – conversation with Gabriele Rosenthal about biographical interviews

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Interview with Gabriele Rosenthal – sociologist, Professor (Emerita) for Qualitative Methods at the Institute for Methods and Methodological Principles in the Social Sciences at the Georg-August-University in Göttingen; former President of the ‘Biography and Society’ Research Committee of the International Sociological Association (ISA).¹

Gabriele Rosenthal focuses on methodology in the field of qualitative methods, biographical and generational research, and also on the thematic fields of migration, ethnicity, socio-political conflicts, collective violence and trauma. At the beginning of her academic career, she worked on the experiences of German Society (veterans of both World Wars, and members of the Hitler Youth, Nazi-perpetrators and so-called bystanders) and the life stories of Holocaust survivors. For more than 20 years, she has moved with her interest to regions of the Global South (the Middle East, North Africa, Ghana, Uganda, and Brazil). In our conversation, she gives her insights into the interconnections between biographical research in sociology and oral history, with an emphasis on the ethical dimension of interviewing. She talks about *Gestalt* theory, family interviews and emotions.

The interview was recorded in Göttingen, 2 June 2022, then revised and accepted by the interviewee.



Jakub Gałęziowski: How did it happen that the biographical sociologist publishes in a renewed oral history journal? It is not that common.²

Gabriele Rosenthal: In my case, two things came together. In 1986, a working group, later called *Sektion Biografieforschung*, was established in the German Sociological Association, and besides sociologists also historians, primarily oral historians, were

1 See <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/28238.html> (accessed: 25.08.2023).

2 G. Rosenthal, *8 May, 1945: “The biographical meaning of a historical event,”* ‘Oral History,’ vol. 10, no. 3, 1989, pp. 183–193; *eadem*, *German war memories: narrability and the biographical and social functions of remembering*, ‘Oral History,’ vol. 19, no. 2, 1991, pp. 34–41; reprinted in the 50th Anniversary Issue of ‘Oral History,’ https://www.ohs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/OHJ_50_full_v2_compressed-1.pdf (accessed: 25.08.2023). The Polish reader can access translations of her two articles, which appeared in a volume edited by Kaja Kaźmierska: G. Rosenthal, *Badania biograficzne*, transl. A. Pawlak, in K. Kaźmierska (ed.), *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii*, Kraków 2012, pp. 279–307; *eadem*, *Między pokoleniami następstwa prześladowania i sprawstwa. Rodziny ocalałych z Shoah i rodziny sprawców nazistowskich*, transl. A. Pawlak, in *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii...*, pp. 869–891.

part of this group.³ It was Fritz Schütze⁴ and Martin Kohli⁵ who established this research community together. From the beginning, biographical research in Germany was interconnected with oral history. Lutz Niethammer⁶ and Alexander von Plato⁷ worked with us. It was the same time when I completed my PhD about the impact of the Nazi period on present-day Germany. I started with the question of how members of the Hitler Youth (*Hitlerjugend*) worked through the internalised patterns of interpretation. I was interested in the connection between history and sociology. It very soon became clear for me that I would not understand the former members of the Hitler Youth, if I did not check what they had experienced through the so-called Third Reich. So, in order to understand what they went through, I started to read historical sources. This also included daily press and schoolbooks, which gave me an insight into what they read at that time. I knew I needed historical knowledge. My theoretical background was and still is the so-called *Verstehende Soziologie*, the tradition of Max Weber.⁸ By defining sociology as a science of concrete reality (*Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*), Weber expressed the idea that to study the reality of social life, we have to study it in its historical, individual and concrete uniqueness. So, it also needs knowledge of other disciplines like history, psychology or law; this is different than in the Durkheim⁹ tradition. Norbert Elias¹⁰ had an important influence on me too. He spoke about sociology as a human science

3 It emerged in 1986 from the working group called 'Biographical Research,' founded in 1979. Rosenthal was the president of the *Sektion Biografieforschung* from 1999 to 2003.

4 Fritz Schütze (born 1944) – sociologist, Emeritus Professor for General Sociology/Micro-sociology at the Otto von Guericke University of Magdeburg; widely known as a creator of the autobiographical narrative interview research method. See the interview: "I never thought I could be seen as an oral historian" – Fritz Schütze about the autobiographical narrative interview and oral history in conversation with Jakub Gałęziowski, 'Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej,' vol. 11, 2021, pp. 238–261.

5 Martin Kohli (born 1942) – sociologist, Emeritus Professor for Sociology at the European University Institute (Italy); his research interests are life courses, health and aging, and welfare states.

6 Lutz Niethammer (born 1939) – historian and oral historian, Professor Emeritus of Modern and Contemporary History at Friedrich-Schiller University of Jena; together with Alexander von Plato, developed a specific approach to interviewing marked by the Nazi legacy of research on the German population.

7 Alexander von Plato (born 1942) – historian, associated with the FernUniversität in Hagen (Institute for History and Biography); coordinator of many oral history projects on slave workers and prisoners in concentration camps in Nazi occupied Europe.

8 Max Weber (1864–1920) – sociologist, historian, and jurist, associated with interpretive sociology (*Verstehende Soziologie*), which aims to show how reality is constructed by people themselves.

9 Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) – philosopher and sociologist; contributed significantly to the legitimacy of sociology as a science; author of the theory of social facts.

10 Norbert Elias (1897–1990) – sociologist, affiliated with British, Dutch and German universities; founder of process and figurational sociology; author of the theory of civilizing/decivilizing processes.

(*Menschenwissenschaft*). So, collaboration with historians who are doing *Alltagsgeschichte*¹¹ – history of everyday life – was crucial for me from the very beginning.

There is no major difference between how we sociologists and historians collect data. A historian cannot understand history without the layer of experience, and *vice versa* a sociologist cannot understand current phenomena without reconstructing history, the genesis of these phenomena and their transformations. Nowadays, I claim that I am doing historical sociology. It is probably a minimum of hundred years you could take into consideration if your research is based on interviews with different generations, the history of families, groups, or specific *milieus*. In my studies I intend to reach a socio-historical timeframe that includes several generations – if possible, of the same family. Usually, this covers five generations in interviews with three-generation families (this happens when grandparents tell us about their grandparents).¹² Such a perspective enables me to reconstruct the processes of development and changes in social phenomena over the *longue durée* and to analyse a family history as it interrelates to the history of larger groupings or collectivities.

So, if you for instance take the war in Ukraine at the moment, in order to understand what is going on, you have to consider what happened in Ukraine in the 1920s. You could start earlier, but at the very least from the starvation period, I mean the *Holodomor*, and the dekulakisation, which shaped the interrelation, better the figuration between the Russian State and Ukraine.

The problem is that German sociologists – after the Second World War – are extremely ahistorical, it is also this influence from American sociology that made it not very fashionable to do historical work. And it also has something to do with our history – that nobody was interested in what was going on during the 12 years of the Nazi period. We have a kind of critical discourse in Germany, but not one looking really at the concrete level of daily life of history and what was going on in families. No interest! It is similar in the US, for example regarding the past of slavery – we all want to concentrate on the present. I think in the West there is this kind of belief that it is better to focus on the present than on the past. And I must say, I have lost a bit of interest in oral history in Germany, because I do not like the way some oral historians researched the daily life in the Third Reich. In my opinion, they did not conduct enough studies, at least in the 1980s, on the Nazi crimes, the antisemitism and persecution of Jews and of other groupings – which were of

11 A branch of social history founded by historians Alf Lüdtke and Hans Medick in the 1980s; related to microhistory.

12 G. Rosenthal, *A Plea for a More Interpretive, More Empirical and More Historical Sociology*, in D. Kalekin-Fishman, A. Denis (eds.), *The Shape of Sociology for the 21st Century. Tradition and Renewal*, London 2012, pp. 202–217; See also: G. Rosenthal (ed.), *The Holocaust in Three-Generations. Families of Victims and Perpetrators of the Nazi-Regime*, 2nd revised edition, Opladen-Farmington Hills 2010.

course also phenomena of the daily life in Germany for everybody. I was extremely influenced by my stay in Israel (first, as a lecturer for one semester, later in the context of my research), and then in Germany I had problems with my need to uncover the hidden past in my interviews and not to follow the apologetic discourse that more or less nobody knew about the Nazi crimes. Another problem I have is that oral historians are not so careful in analysing their interviews.

JG: We do not value interviews enough as historical sources.

GR: For me, this has been an on-going fight. For example, when I wrote my first paper about interviews as a historical source, the editors did not want it. I had two other articles with the same approach, and they were always corrected. A police report from 1930 is more reliable than an interview about what was going on in 1930? We have to start with considering theories of memory – also based on my empirical work, I do not assume that the longer the distance from the event is the more likely it is that the memory is only or always more inaccurate. It can also be the other way round, if the defence mechanisms are no longer so strong. I did interviews with veterans from the First World War, and they were between 86 and 100.¹³ They were so open to speak about what was going on in the Second World War, about the war crimes and crimes against humanity. It was because they were veterans from both the First War and the Second, and they compared them (emphasising, for example, the aspect of soldiers' honour in the First World War). And very importantly: the defence mechanism lessens with age; though, they can remember better than, let's say, 20 years before and are not so much caught up in the processes of denial. This is one point, and the other point is the idea of subjectivity. Could you tell me what document is not produced from a subjective perspective and the context or the framing of the situation when it is written? This is something that historians are still struggling with. As you have already pointed out, they do not see the full value of interviews. If at all, they put interviews in an annexe but not in a chapter – this I have experienced as the second or third supervisor for several PhD theses. For me, this is strange because who, if not historians, learn how to analyse sources – better than sociologists, by the way. Their task is to read archival materials and interpret them; so, why not use this method also for interviews?

JG: What can a single biography tell us?

13 “Als der Krieg kam, hatte ich mit Hitler nichts mehr zu tun.” *Zur Gegenwärtigkeit des “Dritten Reiches”* in G. Rosenthal (ed.), *Biographien*, Opladen 1990; G. Rosenthal, *Erlebte und erzählte Lebensgeschichte. Gestalt und Struktur biographischer Selbstbeschreibungen*, Frankfurt am Main 1995; G. Rosenthal, *German war memories...*

GR: Every biography, every life story is a social product, so in biographical research we make this differentiation between the experienced life and the told life; that is, how people speak about it. When I am analysing how people speak about themselves, it gives me an insight into societies. Let me give you an example from my recent research. When somebody in Ghana starts to tell me for one hour about the history of his tribe and in another ethnic grouping they start with their own life story, I am not only interested in why this concrete person is doing this or that. I ask myself what it tells me about these two ethnic groupings; and then I realise that the minority ethnic groups in Ghana have a much higher need to talk about their history than does somebody from the majority ethnic group. So, I start with a single interview in order to generalise. The beginning of the research always starts with a single case, and then goes further. But a case could be a single biography or, for example, a family or an ethnic grouping.

JG: Because you also do family interviews.

GR: Yes, they perfectly show a family dynamic. For example, in Holocaust survivor families you often hear from the first generation “our children do not want to listen,” and the second generation tells you “our parents do not want to tell us anything.” I give you an example. We had a family interview, and the mother was sitting with a paper in front of her and was always playing with this paper. And I asked her what it was, and she said “yesterday I wrote it all down, what I experienced in the ghetto.” And I said “do you want to read it?” And she said “it is in Polish; nobody will understand it,” and then the son said “I understand Polish,” and the mother said “no, you don’t understand Polish,” and he said “I understand it.” Finally, she started reading it, and he was translating, and the main painful part – that the German *Wehrmacht* came to the house in the Ghetto, where she lived with her parents, and threw small children out of the window – he did not translate. And at the end of the interview, the son said “they have never told us such things,” and the mother and father said: “they don’t listen.” Both sides protected themselves, and this is helpful to understand how it is working in families, and how these defence mechanisms function. She is reading it, and he is not translating; and I am sure he heard it, and he immediately forgot it. It is too dangerous for him – at least, at the time of the interview – to confront himself with this threatening past.¹⁴ But I have to note – and this was the big difference to the interviews we did with non-Jewish Germans – the Jewish families wanted to give us a family interview. Although they had difficulties to tell several things to their children, they wanted to speak; they felt the need to open the dialogue!

14 See the detailed elaboration of the case: G. Rosenthal, *Veiling and Denying*, in *The Holocaust in Three-Generations...*, pp. 361–371.

Let me also mention that in non-European settings, family interviews are more natural. When you do interviews in the West Bank, you cannot expect that if you are arranging an interview with the mother, nobody else will come into the room.¹⁵ Also, in northern Uganda – where for several years I did research together with my husband Artur Bogner about so-called child soldiers of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) – when we went to the compound of the family of one of the returnees, and we wanted to interview the grandmother of the family, ten other people were sitting around.¹⁶

JG: Does this not make it difficult for you to focus on the interviewee and the interview?

GR: I decided to stop thinking that it is a disturbance. I tell myself “OK, I have to understand who is sitting here and why. Are they controlling or are they interested in what grandma is telling me?” I take it also as a chance to understand the social milieu. I also had this insight about the family dynamics: who wants to speak and who tries to prevent it. When I did the study about the veterans of the First World War, several times it happened that the wife was, for example, standing in the door and listening. I felt disturbed by this, but then I realised that only in the absence of his wife did the man speak about the crimes during the Second World War. For me it became clear that the wife controlled what her husband was telling me. And this is my role, to understand what is going on; who is controlling the discourse; what could you tell, in which situation could you tell, who is hindering it. These are crucial information for the analysis. This is also the reason we usually do not show the outcome to participants of our research.

JG: Do you not inform participants about publications?

GR: Only when I am asked. I do not write people the book is out now. And this also has to do with defence management. If the people want to know, they can contact me. If I impose on them my readings, this could have the impact of strengthening their defence mechanism. The other thing is that we change a lot of biographical data, sometimes also a bit the stories, in order to mask the interviewee, and the interviewee might be irritated by the changes. A case study under discussion is rather about the exemplification of a specific type of person, not a concrete individual.

15 G. Rosenthal (ed.), *Established and Outsiders at the Same Time. Self-Images and We-Images of Palestinians in the West Bank and in Israel*, Göttingen 2016, <https://univerlag.uni-goettingen.de/handle/3/isbn-978-3-86395-286-0> (accessed: 25.08.2023).

16 A. Bogner, G. Rosenthal (eds.), *Child Soldiers in Context. Biographies, Familial and Collective Trajectories in Northern Uganda*, Göttingen 2019, <https://univerlag.uni-goettingen.de/handle/3/isbn-978-3-86395-455-0> (accessed: 25.08.2023). For more about Arthur Bogner’s research, see: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/dr.+artur+bogner/650370.html>.

JG: Were you not afraid that interviewees and their families would recognise themselves in stories in your books or in articles?

GR: I was always scared, but usually I had very positive outcomes. In one case, a grandson of a Nazi perpetrator took psychotherapy, and the therapist read an article I had written about his case, and she told him: “Oh, I just have read an article and it’s very similar to your family history.” He read it, and he was extremely angry, and then he called me. I said “OK, let’s have a conversation.” He was angry about what I had written about him, but not what I had written about his father and grandfather. And I explained him “Let us not start to discuss my readings; I accept that you understand yourself differently.” This was clear for him because he was going to therapy, and he knew he had to work on his suffering from the family past and his understanding of different interpretations. So, this was the most critical situation, and the others usually reacted like “I am very happy about how much time you took, how seriously you talked to me and how you wrote about me.” This happened especially with the Holocaust survivor families, that the feedback was extremely positive. Sometimes after several years I got a postcard that the daughter had read the history of the mother and was happy to have more information.

JG: Do your interviewees not feel instrumentalised in order to show a certain phenomena?

GR: I have never had this experience. When I started with the Hitler Youth there were several people who told me “We are happy that you take our generation so seriously.” The Holocaust survivors or the Jewish forced migrants who left Germany before the Second World War told me “It’s so important that the non-Jewish Germans write about us,” and now I have been doing for a lot of years, since the end of the 1990s, research outside Germany, in the Global South, and the people appreciate that we are writing about their history. Of course, different people have different expectations. For example, there are people who try to get some help, and I have to make it very clear that I will not marry him to take him out of Africa or that I can’t adopt someone. I always have to make very clear what I can do and what not.¹⁷

JG: What would you do if an interviewee asked you not to be anonymised?

GR: I would tell him or her that I would not do it. Here, I am very clear. One of my first PhD students, Ingrid Mieth, interviewed a group of women in the former

17 For more about the research in Africa and the Middle East, see: G. Rosenthal, A. Bogner (eds.), *Biographies in the Global South. Life Stories Embedded in Figurations and Discourses*, Frankfurt am Main 2017.

GDR; they were from the opposition.¹⁸ It was a small group, and it was clear that people would find out who they were. They accepted chapters about their families. One woman, with a very problematic family history, wanted to have it published under her name, but Ingrid Miethe refused. After the book was published, another woman who had accepted the publication – of course under a pseudonym – got very angry. She even wanted to withdraw the book from the market, because she realised what it meant that other people would read her story. And I told myself “I will not ask for permission to publish a case study which includes a lot of interpretations which are referring to the latent meaning of the interview, and I will anonymise as much data as possible.” People do not know how they will feel when their words are published. For example, there is one documentary called in German *Unversöhnliche Erinnerungen*,¹⁹ which means ‘memories in conflict;’ it is about a general in the *Wehrmacht* and a communist, and they both agreed to the movie. When it came out, the general realised what he had said and how people were reacting to it, and he went to court...

JG: People are surprised by what they have been told, but it can be even more of a challenge to be confronted with some knowledge about their own family. Have you ever confronted your interviewees with data you found in archives?

GR: I would not do this without being asked, because this is not good therapeutical intervention. It is not good to tell them “I found out in the archives that your father was a member of the *Einsatzgruppen*.” If the second or third generation realise that we are doing this, and they ask us, we explain to them how they can find this out for themselves. I think everybody needs his own time or her own time to be ready to go to the archives. For example, I wrote to the archive about my grandfather, and they told me where the files are, and I needed ten years before I went there, because I was afraid... But a defence mechanism sometimes works so extremely well. I can give you an example of one woman who said that she had always had this dream that her father was a concentration camp commander, and I only said “Oh, maybe you should go to the archive and ask for his files?” And at the next meeting she said “Now I have all the papers, and it is obvious that he is not guilty; he only trained camp guards.” For her, he was not involved in the crimes. And it

18 I. Miethe, *Das Problem der Rückmeldung. Forschungsethische und -praktische Erfahrungen und Konsequenzen in der Arbeit mit hermeneutischen Forschungserfahrungen*, ‘Zeitschrift für qualitative Bildungs-, Beratungs- und Sozialforschung,’ vol. 4, no. 2, 2003, pp. 223–240, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ss0ar-279488> (accessed: 25.08.2023). For more about Miethe’s research, see: <https://www.uni-giessen.de/de/fbz/fbo3/institutefbo3/erziehung/personen/professoren/miethe> (accessed: 25.08.2023).

19 *Unversöhnliche Erinnerungen*, dir. K. Volkenborn, J. Feindt, K. Siebig, Germany 1979. The film was shown for the first time on German television on 13 September 1979 on ZDF. In 1980, it received the German Film Critics’ Award in the category ‘Best Documentary.’

was very clear from that interview that she did not understand what was written in the files. And I think, we should accept this. Learning the entire biography of the interviewee partner helps us also to reconstruct the reasons for denial or for activities in order to open the family dialogue, or to go to the archives. It is important to look at it holistically.

JG: And this is *Gestalt*.

GR: I will tell you the story of the change in my approach to interviews. For my dissertation, I asked people: could you tell me the history of being a member of the Hitler Youth and of the war. Then, I met Fritz Schütze at a conference in Łódź...

JG: Really? Did you meet him for the first time in Poland?

GR: For the first time, face-to-face; and I said to Fritz Schütze “I cannot imagine asking my interviewee simply tell me your life story.” And he answered “Try it.” I tried, and I realised it is much more helpful when doing the analysis. It gives you a chance to get information about parts of his or her reality which influence the topic you are researching. I can give you an example from the already mentioned study about child soldiers in northern Uganda. The topic was about the integration process after they came out of the bush. But in order to understand how they experienced their place back in civil life, I needed to know what they experienced during their time with the rebels and their time before. If somebody was regularly beaten by his father and was unhappy, he experiences abduction by the LRA totally differently to someone who did not want to leave their family. At the beginning, you never know which part of the individual’s life story or the family history, or the clan history you need to understand your researched topic. And this is the idea of *Gestalt* theory.²⁰ In order to understand a single element of your life history we need to reconstruct the *Gestalt* of the experienced life history and also the reconstruction of the *Gestalt* of the told history, i.e. the life story.

JG: Does this help you to understand a phenomenon you are researching?

GR: It all depends how much different social discourses are controlling what people can say and what not, how much your interviewees have to deny, how much they

20 A field of psychology that treats mental life as a composition of certain emergent wholes. Its origins can be traced back to the time before the First World War. Representatives of the so-called Berlin School of Experimental Psychology are considered to be its founders: Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Koffka. For the transfer of *Gestalt* theory to the analysis of biographical interviews, see: G. Rosenthal, *Erlebte und erzählte Lebensgeschichte. Gestalt und Struktur biographischer Selbstbeschreibungen*, Frankfurt am Main 1995; in English see: G. Rosenthal, *Experienced Life and Narrated Life Story* (in press).

are rewriting the history. When I started my research on the Third Reich, it was an on-going lying. So many interviewees told my students and me they were soldiers in the *Wehrmacht*, but our archive queries showed that they were members of the *Einsatzgruppen*. I did not want to repeat an apologetic discourse, everybody can publish their own autobiography. My job as an academic is different; I want to find out what the rules for the discourse are. I always use a big box of tools and methods of data collection, and I need a kind of sensitivity to figure out which tool helps me to understand an individual case. If possible, we conduct at least two interviews with the same person, so after an interview you write your memo and you realise: I forgot to ask about this and this, or I do not understand something. And it is worthwhile to have a second interview.

JG: In oral history, often sound, and when possible also images help us in the interpretation process. Do you work with audio and video recordings?

GR: I work mainly with audio recording, but the analysis is mainly based on a careful transcription of the tape including paralinguistic signs. I believe, based on my experience but also as Ulrich Oevermann²¹ always taught us, that the structure is also in the text, so if you do not have sound, you will find it in the carefully transcribed interview. Secondly, what is much more important – if I do an interview, I am deeply involved. I am also misled, because during such encounter I follow that person and trust him or her. Where I should be more critical is when I analyse the interview, so I need an analytical distance – I must be more detached, as Norbert Elias calls it. For the detachment, I need to go out of this interaction; and therefore for me, it is easier to work with a text – transcript – than with a recording.

JG: Do you think emotions disturb the researcher during an interview and in analytical work?

GR: During the interviews, it disturbs only when your emotions are totally in contrast to the emotions of your interviewee. Let's say, somebody tells you in a very cold manner about a mass shooting. I had an interview with an adult child, who survived, her grandmother and sister were shot in front of her. She was in the second line and not shot, and she related it like cooking recipes. If I started crying, this would be disturbing. So, it is better when I try to be with my interviewee, and when I do not feel totally different. It would be disturbing if you were too much with your own feelings. For example, when I began interviews with Holocaust survivors in Israel, I had feelings of guilt because I have a gentile German background.

21 Ulrich Oevermann (1940–2021) – sociologist; he developed the method of objective hermeneutics as part of research in socialisation theory and family sociology.

And then one of my interviewees told me “You are making the same mistake as the Nazis; you think it is transmitted by blood; you are not guilty.” So, the guilty feelings were disturbing, and I had to overcome them, because this was my problem and not the problem of my interviewee that I am a non-Jewish German.

JG: It is also important at the level of analysis.

GR: If you have emotions, then you should analyse them. For example, I was interviewing a Holocaust survivor, and I had four meetings with him, and every time I had the feeling I must go out after four hours or so; it was too much for me. And I went to the main shopping street in Tel Aviv and bought something for myself, a dress which I did not like afterwards, and I thought to myself what is going on? First, I am escaping, and then I am doing something in order to punish myself, to do something negative for myself. Then, back in Germany, when I did the analysis of the interviews with this man, I realised that I always went away from the interview. I was able to analyse this behaviour on two levels: I could do it during supervision (what it has to do with myself, with my own biography) or in the analysis of the interview I could ask “Does my feeling give me any hint about to understand what’s going on with this narrator?” In order to get more information about him, I spoke with his granddaughter, and she told me that she had the same reaction, when her grandpa started to tell the story of his escape from the ghetto. So, my hypothesis was, this man does not feel liberated even today. In other words, he is psychologically still in the ghetto. In one of the interviews, he talked for two hours in four languages which I did not understand about escaping from the ghetto. He left his mother behind, and she was executed because of this flight the next day. I learned from his family he had been telling his liberation story to the members of his family every *Rosh Hashana* (the Jewish New Year) for several years but did not mention the death of his mother in this context. So, I interpreted my reaction to his feeling of ‘still being in the ghetto’ as a kind of countertransference; I also wanted to escape, and I had to punish myself for this escape.²²

JG: How can we protect ourselves against this kind of influence of our interviewees’ stories on ourselves?

GR: What a delicate question! Let me answer first referring to this case in a somewhat provocative way. In contrast to what this man went through, what harm is there for me to behave in this way? In this way, I also answered when my interviewees asked me how I could listen to their terrifying stories. We always have to take

22 See the elaboration of the case: G. Rosenthal, *Exkurs: Überlebende der Shoah*, in *Erlebte und erzählte Lebensgeschichte...*, pp. 128–129.

into account that we will have distressing feelings during and after an interview and of course also during the process of analysing someone's story, otherwise we could not do research about such themes. Of course, we need to be careful regarding a kind of secondary traumatising, which could be caused by confrontation with some extreme details from situations where an interviewee was traumatized. Therefore, I recommend professional supervision, which in my case for example helps me to write about it. I know now that if I cannot do this, I am in real mental stress. For me personally, it started with one experience I had after an interview with survivors of medical experiments in Auschwitz. Because of this experience, I always ask my co-workers to write memos after the interviews and to write about their feelings and also that we should speak about it in the team.

JG: You note all these feelings in memos, but do you use this information later in your writing? Or rather analyse free of your emotions?

GR: It is a myth that we can be distanced. We have a specific perspective, and it is important to reflect this, also how it is changing through the whole process, but I am ambivalent about writing about my emotions. Why should I say in every paper that I come from a non-Jewish family and how I feel about my background? Why should I do this? Others do not talk about where they come from. I think it is valuable only if it has an important influence on our analysis, or if my feeling gives me a hint to understand the case. For example – returning to this man who “is still in the ghetto” after the third interview I did not know what happened with his mother, because she had been vanished from the narration. So, I asked his granddaughter, who was a student in my seminar “Could you ask your grandfather?,” and she said “No! Then he will speak for hours, he will not stop.” She had the same feeling as I had. So, here my emotions helped me to understand the case. Then, I asked him about his mother in a further interview, and he told me about her execution and that he was only informed about it some days after his escape. Emotions can influence our analysis, but we can control them, by noting for example “I have problem with this case because this and that...” Emotions also give us a sign about why we are so involved in a situation. I have several PhD students who are writing about topics they are involved in. For example, Ahmed Albaba, who completed his doctorate about the Palestinians in the West Bank, he comes from a camp in the West Bank.²³ And of course, he writes about it in his PhD, also how his perspective

23 A. Albaba, *Palästinensische Familien in den Flüchtlingslagern im Westjordanland: Eine empirische Studie zum kollektiven Gedächtnis und den transgenerationellen Folgen von Flucht und Vertreibung*, Dissertation, Göttingen 2020, eDiss-Repositoryum der SUB Göttingen, <http://hdl.handle.net/21.11130/00-1735-0000-0005-1518-9> (accessed: 25.08.2023). For more about his research, see: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/dr.+ahmed+albaba/349065.html> (accessed: 25/08/2023).

changed through the process of the PhD project. The fact that he comes from camp and not from an old established West Bank family is important when analysing the influence on the process of interviewing and for the analysis of materials he obtained as well.

JG: Should it be necessary to have psychological training to work in such sensitive contexts?

GR: It is helpful to have interview training, but I would not say psychological training, because I think we all as human beings should learn to listen to each other and to have conversations without harm. I would not restrict this to psychologists, although a narrative interview is already a first intervention, because people sometimes do not believe they could talk for so long about their life. The Holocaust survivors were often very astonished they could speak about it. And you should accept what and how they speak.

JG: But then, we can do harm posing inappropriate questions.

GR: I think you can do more harm if you do not ask questions. This could be a kind of second traumatisation, if you experience something very difficult like for example rape and you try to talk about it, but nobody is listening. So, it is much better to ask question like “do you want to talk about it?,” instead of ignoring the topic.²⁴ Also, we have to be careful, how not to – as Thomas Gordon²⁵ puts it – close the door for narration. For example, comforting someone in an emotionally difficult situation can stop the process of talking about it; narrative questions can then be helpful – “would you like to tell me more about this situation?”

JG: It is also a sign of empathy.

GR: Which is, I think, a precondition, also if you interview a victimiser. Let’s take child soldiers – to be with them and understand what it means for them that they have to kill their own parents. This is necessary, and not only to go and think “Oh, gosh, what kind of people are sitting in front of me.”

JG: Not easy.

24 See G. Rosenthal, *The Healing Effects of Storytelling. On the Conditions of Curative Storytelling in the Context of Research and Counselling*, ‘Qualitative Inquiry,’ vol. 9, no. 6, 2003, pp. 915–933.

25 Thomas Gordon (1918–2002) – psychologist and psychotherapist; affiliated with several US universities; internationally renowned for his training programmes for parents and educators, placing particular emphasis on the principles of interpersonal communication.

GR: That is why me, my co-workers and my students go to supervision to talk about it.

JG: Could you tell a little bit more about this experience? Is it a group supervision?

GR: In the past, I did team supervision but now I recommend individual supervision, because everybody experiences the interviews in a different way, and it is good to have a safe place to talk about one's own emotions. I always apply for this in all the research projects, so that we have money for supervision with a trained specialist.

But I would like to stress that in general, a narrative interview is not good for someone who is actually in the phase of traumatising. Let's say, if I had an interview with somebody who just was coming out of the war in Ukraine and gave me the impression he or she was traumatised, I would not ask narrative questions – in the sense of asking for a longer story! If the people start to tell me about what they experienced, I will listen to them carefully, ask questions relating to what they said and would be very careful with questions about the untold parts. And I think it is important to be clear it is not a disaster when somebody starts crying, and I always tell my students “other people need ten years of therapy in order to be able to cry, so don't take it as a problem.” Sometimes I also cry with people.

JG: Critics of oral history would rather recommend against conducting interviews under such difficult conditions.

GR: Then, you should also stop having everyday conversations because it could always happen that you meet somebody who you can harm. When sometimes students come to me and talk about some symptoms, why they could not work, I cannot say “I am not trained as a psychotherapist, and I cannot talk with you.” I remember one situation at a workshop in Germany, when a psychiatrist said “You are doing interviews and create harm to the people who then come to us, to the hospital,” and a social researcher, Dan Bar-On,²⁶ who was a professor of social psychology in Israel, reacted spontaneously “It is good that they came to the hospital! Then, they have the chance to get help.” If people realise that they have severe problems, this does not mean that we damage them; we can for example give them addresses for where to receive some professional help.

JG: What else can we give to our interviewees?

26 Dan Bar-On (1938–2002) – psychologist, therapist, social researcher; well-known for his work with the children of Holocaust survivors and children of Nazi perpetrators, as well as promotion of dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians.

GR: Listening. When you listen to someone for hours, you give them a lot. I know this from feedback I got. People have their own reasons they want to talk. One Holocaust survivor told me “I know, I will not sleep for another three nights, but I decided to do it, because I think it is important that you write about it.” We should allow our interviewees to be responsible for themselves; if they want to give me an interview, my task is to listen to them, to give them attention. When somebody tells you he or she was always silenced, then this is something you can give back to him or her: make their story public. I always say to my interviewees in Africa, the only thing I can do for you is that I speak about your situation in the Global North.

JG: But the message often depends on who hands it over; so here, it is also important who the interviewer is.

GR: Yes, I will give you an example. Together with my Palestinian co-worker Ahmed Albaba, I did an interview with a black man from Mauritania. Here, we have to know that in Mauritania we still have slavery by the Arabs. During the first meeting he only spoke with Ahmed, he never looked at me; he did not give me his hand. I thought, ok, he is religious, it has something to do with the fact that that he is a Muslim, and I am a woman. In the second meeting I started the interview with the remark “The last time we did not speak about slavery in Mauritania...” And then the interview was totally different from the first one. While in the first interview for example he spoke about “black and white people,” in the second interview he referred to “blacks and Arabs,” and he started to tell a story about self-experienced slavery. That time, he mostly kept eye-contact with me and not with Ahmed Albaba, who was for him a representative of the Arabs. It was easier for him to tell a German interviewer how he was enslaved in the Koran school by his imam, who was an Arab.²⁷

JG: A different interviewer can produce a different interview with the same person; and then, the message would vary.

GR: Exactly. But there is no interview that is better than another; though, in this case the first interview give me an insight into the relationship between a black Mauritanian and somebody who represents the Arab world, and the second interview shows me more about the discourse inside the black community in conversation with

27 See the detailed analysis of this case: G. Rosenthal, A. Albaba, L. Cé Sangalli, *Migrants from Mauritania: On the existence of slavery today and the unequal power changes of the Bidhan, the Soudan and the Haratin*, in G. Rosenthal (ed.), *Transnational biographies: Changing we-images, belongings and power balances of migrants and refugees*, Göttingen 2012, pp. 81-114, <https://univerlag.uni-goettingen.de/handle/3/isbn-978-3-86395-571-7> (accessed: 25.08.2023).

a white woman and not a representative of the established grouping, which there are still Arabs. This is why I prefer when two people do an interview, and when we have more than one meeting; sometimes even changing an interviewer is an option in the follow-up interviews.

JG: You started your research career doing interviews with the oldest generation from Germany, where also the age distance from the events was long; then, you directed your attention to Africa and the Middle East, where you met people much younger, but also closer to the events you were interested in. How do these situations differ for you as a researcher?

GR: First, let's talk about similarities. I ask people to tell me their family and life story, and I always accept everything that comes out. I do not have a strict formula; I have no expectations about how they should react. If somebody starts with the last day, I accept this. The major difference with interviewing in Africa and the Middle East is not the age difference. It is that I do every interview with a field assistant, who acts as an interpreter. At the beginning, I perceived this as a disadvantage, and only in time did I start to see it more and more as an advantage. If you are interviewing traumatised people, you always have to be careful that they are not back in the situation. I ask them "Tell me some sentences, and then it will be translated." So, there are breaks in their narrations, and there is interaction between me and the field assistant. And this keeps them more in the present than going too much back in the past. The difference is of course if you interview people who are still in a very insecure situation. It is emotionally difficult that you cannot help them. But we always think if and how could we help and discuss this with our field assistant. In northern Uganda, for example, our field assistant gave advice about how to cultivate the land, because often the family had lost this knowledge due to the long period of the civil war. We also helped the interviewees to get the medical care they needed or to establish a self-help group.

These experiences in Africa give me a clear impression about the privileged situation we are living in, how established we are, and I see achieving this awareness as a profit from my research. But regarding the age, let me say, I assume that doing interviews in Africa as an elderly lady is much easier than in Europe, because I feel a kind of respect because of the number of my years.

JG: It is fascinating how many circumstances, both those dependent and those independent of us, influence the final outcome of our research.

GR: Exactly!

JG: Thank you for the conversation.

GR: Thank you.

