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Personal Accounts in Holocaust Studies

An Introduction

Personal accounts offer direct insight into the thoughts, feelings, and the everyday realities of people who lived through past events. In Holocaust historiography personal accounts generally are the main sources scholars use when seeking to examine past events from the perspective of the individuals who experienced them. Personal sources offer perspectives from ordinary people and famous historical figures, whether a Holocaust survivor, a simple bystander, the commander of the Kriminalpolizei, or even scholars themselves.

The stories these sources contain, presented as they are through personal experiences and individual effort, always retain something of their unique character. This is precisely why case studies and biographies based on personal accounts often face criticism regarding their selectivity: what can we really learn from a microhistorical study? What broader conclusions can we draw from analysing a film, examining an album, or reconstructing the life trajectory of a perpetrator? Do we see the institutions and broader contexts lurking in the background behind these them? How do we distinguish the personal from the historical, the intimate from the public? These questions arise for every researcher who decides to explore the story of a diary, a memoir, a film, or an art piece.

Personal accounts and individual representations never exist in isolation: their social context, whether narrow or broad, always surrounds them. Thus, case studies can also be understood as a kind of scale-shift in which historical reality unfolds through individual cases and from their (limited) perspective. And even if it is difficult to distinguish between the microhistorical approach and a case study, the methodological rigor of the studies published in this special issue enables us to draw conclusions relevant for both the meso- and macro-levels too.

The articles presented here are loosely connected to one another, but they nevertheless offer a very broad perspective on what we might call "personal accounts" in Holocaust research. The contributors address a range of questions: How is the Holocaust recounted through personal stories in fictional literature? What kinds of proximity and intimacy are created through perpetrators' accounts and life stories? How are biography, personal experience, and scholarly interest intertwined? And how are the works of survivor-researchers received by the public? In what narrative forms do personal experiences and stories of displacement, be-

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longing, and identity emerge? What can the reception of a film about the Holocaust reveal about post-war society? Whose voices do we hear in media reports, and what do they tell us about the ways in which the Holocaust is remembered and represented? What can we learn from scholars who reflect on their own personal histories and research trajectories? And – last but not least – how can a personal search for a hidden history be uncovered, contextualised, and ultimately institutionalised?

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