

Global Heritage and Memory Studies in the Present

HISTORICAL DISTANCE AND THE HOLOCAUST

**Interactions between
Historians and Middle-Class
Western Europeans
in Memory Education**

Thomas Van de Putte

 **CEU PRESS**

Historical Distance and the Holocaust

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Europeans in Memory Education*

Thomas Van de Putte



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For Hannah, Ester, and Meme

Then the wing manager came to see me. She said you were impressed by my knowledge, but thought I lacked some emotion and personal attention to victims.

I'm a historian, I thought, *not a social worker*, but I promised I would take that into consideration and try to correct my ways.

—Yishai Sarid, *The Memory Monster*

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Introduction. Distance and the Holocaust: Four Strategies

Abstract: The introduction to this monograph outlines the most important theoretical foundations of the book and the empirical agenda it promotes. It proposes a study of 'historical distance' as a study of practice in which historians practice their professional distance in interactions with laypeople. The book proposes a micro-study based on participant observation and repeated semi-structured interviewing. I observed two modernist Holocaust historians for a year in their interactions with laypeople during study trips and public lectures. The introduction overviews the historians' four main interactional distancing strategies around which the empirical parts of the book are built and explains why these strategies match the expectations of the white, middle-class Western Europeans the historians engage with.

Keywords: practice, memory, historicism, ethnography, education

In the autumn of 2023, I participated in a guided tour of Auschwitz II-Birkenau. Our group was composed of about ten Western European adults and one Holocaust historian from the same country as the participants.¹ When the local museum guide approached the ruins of the former gas chambers and crematoria, she paused and turned to us: 'These are the factories of death'. She then explained in minute detail how Jews were led to their death in the gas chambers. Next to me, the Holocaust historian started breathing heavily and turned red. I asked him if he was fine and needed to sit down. He replied: 'She is making me so angry. The boiling temperature of hydrogen cyanide is 26 degrees, not 36 degrees'.

¹ Participants' nationality has been anonymized. They are residents of a Western European country that was occupied by Nazi Germany during the Second World War.

In the same year, but a few months earlier, I visited the forest of Rżuchów, a site of mass graves of the 152,000 Jews who were murdered in the extermination site of Chełmno. Again, I visited with a (different) group of 10 Western European adults. We were guided by a Holocaust historian. It was our second day on an eight-day study trip to the former extermination sites in Poland. Near the end of the tour in the forest, the historian described the structure of the mass burning of corpses – at the bottom layers of female bodies, on the top layers of male bodies, with wood in between the layers. I felt sick and took a bit of distance in the shade. The historian asked if there were any questions. One participant raised his hand: ‘What is the ideal wood/body proportion in these kinds of burning pits?’ ‘About 3 to 1’, answered the historian.

These two short vignettes, resulting from my ethnographic fieldwork in study trips for laypeople organised by Holocaust historians, describe situations and dynamics where historical distance and the need for factual detail are taken to their extreme, leading to interactions on memorial sites that are analytically puzzling and ethically complicated. The interactions introduced above were not rarities during my fieldwork. Similar dynamics were continuously present in the interactions between professional historians and laypeople that I observed during study trips to the former sites of the Holocaust. In this book, I describe and explain the structural dynamics that enable these kinds of interactions. There are cultural, institutional, and interactional factors that enable these interactions, the norms that are governing them, and the discourses performed in them. This book disentangles these structural factors, aided by minute ethnographic detail. I point at the strong role professional identities and moralities play, as well as how historians negotiate and reconcile their role as historians with other roles and personal and cultural identities they hold. In that sense, this book serves two scholarly aims.

The first aim of this book is to understand what happens when professional academic historians who work from a distance on the Holocaust, the murder of six million European Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators, enter the field of Holocaust memory and memory education, which is more affect and morality driven. The second aim of this book is to understand how historical distance, through practice and discourse, is performed in interactions with laypeople, how these laypeople engage with it, and what its (unintended) consequences are for everyday understandings and meanings of the Holocaust. I investigate four strategies performed by academic historians that steer laypeople away from affective and moral responses to the Holocaust to an understanding of its factuality.

In this introduction, I first outline what I mean by ‘distance’ and how this book contributes to sociological and meta-historical debates about professional

historiography and professional historians. Then I provide an overview of the fieldwork I have conducted and the research participants I have engaged with. Finally, I describe four strategies through which the historians I observed perform distance in their interactions with laypeople: they strip the Holocaust from explicit moral meaning, they treat the Holocaust rationally and try to avoid emotion, they narrate the Holocaust as an evolving system rather than as an experience, and they use sick Holocaust humour to establish distance. In all these instances, these strategies come with profound and (mostly) unintended consequences when laypeople interact with them and reproduce them.

Two Approaches to Historical Distance

There are two ways of thinking about historical distance that are relevant for this book. There is historical distance as a philosophical idea(l), and historical distance as a category of practice.

The first approach investigates if distance to the past is possible at all, and if so, what it should consist of and how it ought to be practised. These questions are of a philosophical, epistemological, and morally prescriptive nature. Philosophers of history have been arguing about the 'right distance' for centuries (see, e.g. Den Hollander et al. 2011; Philips 2013). The second, more emic, approach to historical distance investigates how it is practised in various scholarly contexts. Scholars of historical methodologies, for example, look at how historical distance is conceived of by other professional historians in their scholarly work. In these cases, historians are studying themselves and their colleagues as meta-history (e.g. Grever 2009, White 1973).

But there is also an understudied aspect to historical distance as a category of practice – the discourses, performances, and practices of historians when they engage with other people outside of academia, and the consequences of these interactions for both the historian's and layperson's understanding of the past. Maria Grever (2009, p. 59) argues that the 'relationship between popular culture and historical profession' is 'little-noted'. The issue has been studied in the context of formal education (e.g. Bermudez Velez 2019, Grever et al. 2012, Klein 2017) but very rarely beyond the classroom or textbook. This is counterintuitive because historians play a key role as experts and public intellectuals in public discussions about the meaning of the past. The boom of 'public history' since the 1970s is exemplary of this role historians play in the public sphere (Glassberg 1996, Kelley 1978).

Bevernage (2012) and Klein (2017) are exceptions in the academic literature on historical distance that study it as both ideal and practice. In *History*,

Memory and State-Sponsored Violence, Berber Bevernage discusses the clashing perspectives of historicists and truth and reconciliation commissions. While historicists believe that ‘time is irreversible’ and that the past has really passed, truth and reconciliation commissions assume that the past is very much present and should be accounted for. Bevernage sees these two approaches and practices as ethically and practically incompatible and neatly describes how they conflict with each other in political and juridical realms. Stephan Klein (2017), on the other hand, looks at ideas and practices of historical distance employed by Dutch history teachers who are teaching the slave trade in their high school classes, constantly navigating different positions of distance and closeness towards the past and the present in their curriculum choices and classes. His research stands apart from the mainstream of research in teaching difficult histories, which looks at affective strategies and responses on the part of teachers without relating it to their professional habitus as historians (e.g. Zembylas & Bekerman 2012, Zembylas & Loukaidis 2021).

Much like the work of Bevernage and Klein, this book sits at the connection of these two approaches to historical distance. It studies which moral ideals of historical distance the historians I have observed practise when they interact with interested laypeople. In the cases I am analysing here, these are modernist and historicist approaches to history. The historians I observed conceive of the past as past and independent from the present. This past, for them, is factually understandable from a temporal, moral, and emotional distance and with scientific methods. However, I also go further than Bevernage and Klein and look at how laypeople – not just specialised audiences or professionals – interact with the performances of historical distance by historians in different contexts and about different contents and investigate which beliefs are reproduced across these two publics. But to be able to do so, I first need to outline what I mean by historical distance and its value ethics when it is practised by modernist historians such as the ones that appear in this book.

Historical Distance: Epistemologies and Moralities

Everything looks more understandable from a little distance. This spatial metaphor is a cliché not just in history, but in most of the social sciences and at least some of the humanities. When you take distance, you should be able to see ‘the bigger picture’ and how something ‘really’ functions. In historiography and its theories, distance is a recurring assumption, at least

since the 19th century's historicist professionalisation of the discipline by German scholars such as Leopold von Ranke and Alexander von Humboldt (Den Hollander 2011 et al., Grever 2009, Paul 2011, Philips 2004). In these male 'pioneers' works, historiography can be scientific and impartial if the historian takes sufficient distance from the events of the past (Grever 2009, p. 51). It is only since the postmodern and post-structuralist turn in the 1980s that the possibility of historical distance is being questioned. Historical distance is now something that isn't just 'there' but is being constructed by the historians in their practice, either consciously or unconsciously.

The postmodern turn in historical theory brought about a distinction between realist and irrealist approaches to historical distance (Ran 2023). The realist approach runs all the way from Ranke (1885) until Ankersmit (2005) and presumes that historical distance 'exists' and is ontologically undeniable. The irrealist approach, prominent among theorists of history today, proposes instead that such distance is only possible as construct. However, these developments in historical theory don't necessarily feed back into common historiographical practice and discourse. Despite the distinction between realist and irrealist approaches to historical distance, my participant historians (and most historians in general today) still practice a realist approach to historical distance. As Mark Bevir (2011, pp. 26–30; see also Trouillot 1995, p. 5) has argued, this strong sense of historicism is a residue of the common sense most historians trained in within the modernist paradigm from the late 19th until the late 20th century. Per Lundin (2016, p. 11) claims, when writing about notions of objectivity, impartiality, and disinterestedness, that:

By and large, these old principles and premises of scholarly scientific history have resisted the recent shock wave of postmodernism, and they still pervade the scholarly use of history far more than most members of the professional community would admit.

In the theory and the philosophy of history, distance (either real or constructed) is mostly conceived of as temporal and emotional distance, which then should lead to political and moral detachment: 'Historians are most likely to think of distance in terms of emotional identification and detachment – and, by extension, of the political or social loyalties that engage both historians and readers with their stories' (Philips 2004, p. 128). Mark Salber Philips (2004, 2011, 2013) has looked at historical distance construction as both affective and ideological. But historians also distance the past formally and conceptually. Historians today use different 'forms' (textual media and

representations) than their subjects in the past, and different conceptual vocabularies are employed to understand the past than to understand lived experience in the present (Philips 2011, p. 16).

Historicism and its associated idea of distance are not only systems of knowledge production and epistemological ideas. The active construction of distance also comes with a set of moral imperatives. The distance historians need to construct is not just a distance from the past; it is also a distance from oneself and one's beliefs and desires: 'The historian's professional "I", one might say, has to be dissociated from his or her personal "I"' (Paul 2011, p. 110). Even more, some theoreticians formulate a direct opposition between the distant and unbiased historian and the 'propagandists': 'Every historian brings powerful biases to their labours, many of which – if he or she is a good historian and not just a propagandist – will be dismantled in the course of her work' (Taylor 2004, p. 119).

This statement brings me to a key paradox in historicist distancing practices. Ideals of historical distance prescribe moral detachment from the past. Such moral distance should then endow historians with a greater epistemic authority to understand and write about the past. The irony is, however, that this prescribed distance is itself built on moral foundations. Neutrally researched and presented facts are themselves seen as inherently valuable. They are thought about as good and better than non-factual accounts of the past presented by non-historians. In that respect, the distancing subject is believed to be inherently better than a closer or embedded one. What is at stake for the historians I studied in taking a distanced position is not only knowledge production, but also the creation of such a morally desirable professional subjectivity. Herman Paul (2011, p. 112) discusses these dynamics in terms of virtue ethics:

Self-dissociation in the name of historical distance is an ideal of virtue. This virtue is epistemological in the sense that it is supposed to increase the historian's knowledge of the past. But in disciplining the historian's character and in transforming his or her 'I' into a 'scientific personality', this epistemological virtue also has deep moral implications. It establishes standards of competence, conduct, and self-regulation, and it tells historians not only what sort of persons they need to be – at least within the academic realm – but also that their will must be guided by this ideal of virtue.

Throughout this book, I will discuss examples gathered through observations and in interviews in which historians practice a distant approach to the

past which they find morally superior to other approaches to the past. These other approaches are associated with other actors and groups my participants and I met during fieldwork. In these fieldwork interactions, both the historians and the laypeople construct binary oppositions between their own distant approach to the past, and 'collective memory' which encompasses a closer approach to the past. Distance (affective, moral, formal, and cognitive) is seen as a virtue that is to be practised, regardless of whether it is 'constructed' or 'just there'.

In this book, I will not be providing new answers to ontological or epistemological questions about historical distance, nor will I provide firm moral positions on it. I am not sure about the ontological nature of historical distance and how it should potentially be constructed in research. It is also not my aim to philosophise about better ways to do historiography. These are all important issues that are already addressed by theoretical historians and philosophers of history. This book provides a sociological understanding of distancing as institutionalised practice and performance which operates in interaction with other 'closer' relations to the past in the wider social world, also beyond the academy. This approach takes historical distance as social practice with roots in philosophical and academic contexts, but which is performed in a social world that is much broader than the academy.

Modernism, Historicism, and Distant Historians: The Struggle with Memory

The two Holocaust historians I will be focusing on in this book practise one specific sort of realist historical distance: the modernist and historicist type. Modernism and historicism rely on a few key assumptions. First, time is irreversible and the past has really passed. The Holocaust and its events have happened in the past and in the past alone. Therefore, the present is inherently different from the past (Grever & Adriaansen 2017, p. 82). Second, the pastness of the Holocaust allows for a distanced, disinterested, and scientifically empiricist study of the events. Sometimes, this empiricism is quite radical. One of the historians I observed during my fieldwork described history as a 'Popperian' science, in which historical arguments can be verified with empirical data and then either confirmed or falsified. Third, because of the past's pastness, it is undesirable and unnecessary to identify or be empathetic with the human beings that are studied because that would limit the possibilities of understanding the past. In short, the historians I studied believe that they understand what and how the past 'was' and what

the events in the past meant to the people in the past, but not what the past should mean for us today or how we should feel about it. This epistemological tryptic (the pastness of the past, the disinterested study of the past, lack of identification and empathy with people in the past) is the foundation of my participants' distanced approach to the Holocaust, which they practise in front of the laypeople they interact with. As I will show in the empirical chapters of this book, the historians I studied make a conscious effort to treat the Holocaust as something in the past that can be rationally explained and understood without taking a morally critical position or employing anachronistic concepts and ideas. To say it, again, with the words of Mark Salber Philips (2004, p. 137), they try to be 'historians', not 'polemicists'.

Both the concepts of modernism and historicism encompass more than distance alone. They are deeply cultural ways of thinking about past and present, and they have a profound impact on today's Western society. A distanced approach to the past – the focus of this book – is just one aspect of historicist and modernist approaches to the past. While this book disentangles distancing practices on the part of historians and laypeople, historians also practice other aspects of historicism. Those that I observed have, for example, a strong tendency to explain events in the past (and present) with longitudinal processes that lead up to a respective event. One, for example, always starts his lecture on the history of the Holocaust with the crucifixion of Christ and the anti-Judaic and antisemitic ideas that emerged from it; another historian started his history of the Holocaust with geopolitical relations between the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and the German realm in early modern times.² For both, the actual event in the past that requires explanation (the Holocaust in this case) is metaphorically described as 'just the final chapter of a book'. In the empirical parts of this book, however, I focus on distance specifically, without losing sight of this bigger historicist picture in which academic historians operate.

In the academic literature, the confrontations between modernist and historicist distance and other relations to the past are often presented as interactions between 'history' and 'memory', whereby 'history' captures a distant and scientific position towards the past, while 'memory' is a closer and presentist approach to the past (see, e.g. Zachariah 2023, p. 354). Some historians (e.g. Flinn 2011) even distinguish between 'useful history' and

2 In this book I have used the term 'Holocaust' to refer to the murder of six million European Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators, because it is the term the lay participants in this study used most often. One observed historian (Dr Smith, see below) uses the term 'Shoah' most often, while Dr Jones uses both terms.

'disinterested academic research'. Philips (2004, p. 132) conceived of these different approaches as 'genres' with their own logic. The binary distinction between history and memory has fuelled debate in memory studies in the humanities and social sciences since its very inception. History and memory are often seen as irreconcilable 'routes' to the past (Lowenthal 1985). Academic modernist historiography has been very sceptical about memory studies' epistemologies. With their presentist goals, their interest in affect, morality, and power, memory scholars have been positioned as the opposites of the disinterested and sceptical historians (e.g. Nora 1989, pp. 8–9, Rigney & Leerssen 2000). These historians, then, possess 'questioning ethos and methods', while in collective memory the focus is on 'answers, with public myths providing ways to make sense of the past' (Black 2005, p. 1). In the work of memory scholars like Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, for example, history is seen as a 'superorganic' way of knowledge gathering, and memory as the organic way of everyday life (Zerubavel 1994, p. 72).

Although these binaries still inform debates in the present, there are also reconciliatory academic movements. 'Mnemohistory' (Assmann 2008, and e.g. Proietti 2021), in which the diachronic development of memories in the past has been studied, is one such example. Other examples are research projects in which (meta-)historians study historians and their own practices (e.g. Bevernage et al. 2024). Also in cultural sociology (e.g. Olick 2010, Zerubavel 1994), ideas have emerged that don't see history and memory as mutually exclusive. Zerubavel, for example, sees history and memory constantly informing each other because memory is (or should be) constrained by historical facts and history by the needs of the present. Jeffrey Olick (2010, p. 158), on the other hand, sees 'rationalisation' (inherent to any form of historicist interpretation) as one among many 'mnemonic practices'.

At the same time, memory studies scholars, especially in the humanities, have often looked down on historians and been critical of historians and their distance. They believe that they have captured the various 'turns' (postmodern, narrative, and postcolonial) better than the historians and have treated historians as actors of memory (see e.g. Assmann 2008). Astrid Erll (2024, p. 20), for example, considers history as just another type of memory, just another way to make sense of the past, but with its own epistemological dynamics. Furthermore, postcolonial memory scholars (e.g. Hirsch & Stewart 2005, Mwambari 2023) have criticised the idea of historical distance and historicity as part of the Western and colonial epistemology, which should 'open out the temporal focus to a "past-present-future"' (Hirsch & Stewart 2005, abstract).

Theoretically, I firmly subscribe to the idea that history and memory aren't so diametrically opposite as they are often presented in the literature.

However, in the discourses of the historians that I study in this book, and in the discourses of the study trip participants after they interacted with these historians, the binary opposition between history and memory is a recurring theme, a powerful rhetorical trope used by historians and lay participants to support their own positioning as distant and rational observers. As such, this theoretical debate about academic knowledge production (history vs memory) is salient and has real-life consequences when it is being ‘pulled down’ in everyday practice (Warfield-Rawls & Turrowetz 2021).

The historicist and modernist approach to the Holocaust as a way to produce historical knowledge is neither exceptional nor very intellectually interesting for sociologists. Holocaust historians practice it daily in their research and writing, and it has produced good scholarly historiography. Historical distance becomes interesting for sociologists, however, when these modernist and historicist approaches to the Holocaust meet approaches to the Holocaust outside of academia, where historical distance enters a field in which less morally and emotionally distant approaches to the past are practised as well. When these historians bring groups of interested laypeople to former concentration camps, extermination sites, and ghettos, they are exposed to an audience with different expectations than they themselves have, and who are in search for different meanings that are often more moral and emotional. It is these interactions between different relations to the past (Paul 2014) that allow us to see how people renegotiate, change, and reactualise the meaning of the past.

In that respect, a historicist and modernist approach to the Holocaust and its memory is not altogether obvious in a world and sector in which the Holocaust became the key event for both liberal and nationalist actors alike to focus a significant part of their memory politics (David 2020, Gensburger & Lefranc 2020, Levy & Sznajder 2005). In Holocaust scholarship and education, philosophical disputes about distance (and its affective and moral implications) gain acute relevance. ‘Never again’ sounds loud, also, among the audiences Holocaust historians engage with. To distance yourself from this moral imperative and mission and to treat Nazi Germany and its genocide of the European Jews as ‘a foreign country’ in the past (Lowenthal 1985) requires moral choices. I discuss these moral choices and what informs them in the empirical chapters of this book. In these chapters, I take historical distance as an analytical category to study a certain professional attitude and a set of practices that are both discursive and non-discursive. At the end of this introduction and in the following empirical chapters, I describe and interpret specific interactional and meaning-making strategies for distancing that are put to work in specific situations and contexts. In this

sense, I take historical distancing as a phenomenon that can be studied sociologically and ethnographically, examining the structural and social circumstances in which it is practised and that make it salient and morally desirable for historians and their lay interlocutors.

A Sociological and Ethnographic Study of Historical Distance

An Ethnography of Historical Distancing: Methodology and Context

The two academic historians that I observed are historians who are convinced of the ontological, epistemological, and moral foundations of their historicist approach to the Holocaust. The Holocaust, for them, is an event that is confined to the past and which should be studied by means of scientific methodologies that are emotionally and morally disinterested. But why are these convictions so central to the historians' practices and convictions? And what happens when both the attitude and practice of distance, as practised by these professional historians, encounter lay understandings of the past? How do the two historians make laypeople adopt their epistemic position and connected moral beliefs? And how does that affect the content and form of the narratives that are being reiterated and performed by both the historians and the laypeople they interact with? Under which circumstances are laypeople receptive to the distancing strategies practised by the historians? When do they resist them? These are the questions I aim to answer in this book, studying historical distance as a social practice in an ethnographic study of two Holocaust education projects in which academic Holocaust historians interact with interested laypeople.

Both projects I observed were run by the same foundation, which received both national and regional public funding. The same two Holocaust historians oversaw the contents of both projects. The first project took place in May, June, and July 2023. The aim of the project was to teach the history of so-called Aktion Reinhardt to interested lay participants. Aktion Reinhardt (1942–1943) was the Nazi-German code name for the murder of about two million Polish Jews in the extermination centres of Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, and Majdanek.³ The educational project offered one-day training in the capital of the participants' home country with lectures on the history of antisemitism, the development and structure of the Nazi state, and the

3 I am using the term 'extermination centres' here and not 'death camps', because participants (both historians and laypeople) used their mother tongue equivalent of 'extermination centre' to describe these places.

different dynamics in ghettos, concentration camps, and extermination sites. Then, in July 2023, participants went on an eight-day study trip in Poland. The study trip visited all the major sites of Aktion Reinhardt and a selection of some other significant sites for the Holocaust in today's Poland. These included, in this chronological order of visiting: the Ghetto of Warsaw, the Ghetto of Łódź, Chełmno, the Ghetto of Radom, Majdanek, Lublin, Zamość, Bełżec, Włodawa, Sobibór, the Ghetto of Siedlce, and Treblinka (see Figure 1). The two historians who joined the trip designed it and led all the guided tours, apart from the one in the museum in Majdanek, where a local guide from the museum led the tour. Ten participants joined the project. The price for participating in the project was between 750 and 900 euros per person, depending on the hotel room choice. This attracts adults with enough financial means to spend 900 euros to develop their own interests in their free time, but who aren't wealthy enough to have this trip organised as a private trip. The project repeats yearly in the summer months since 2014.

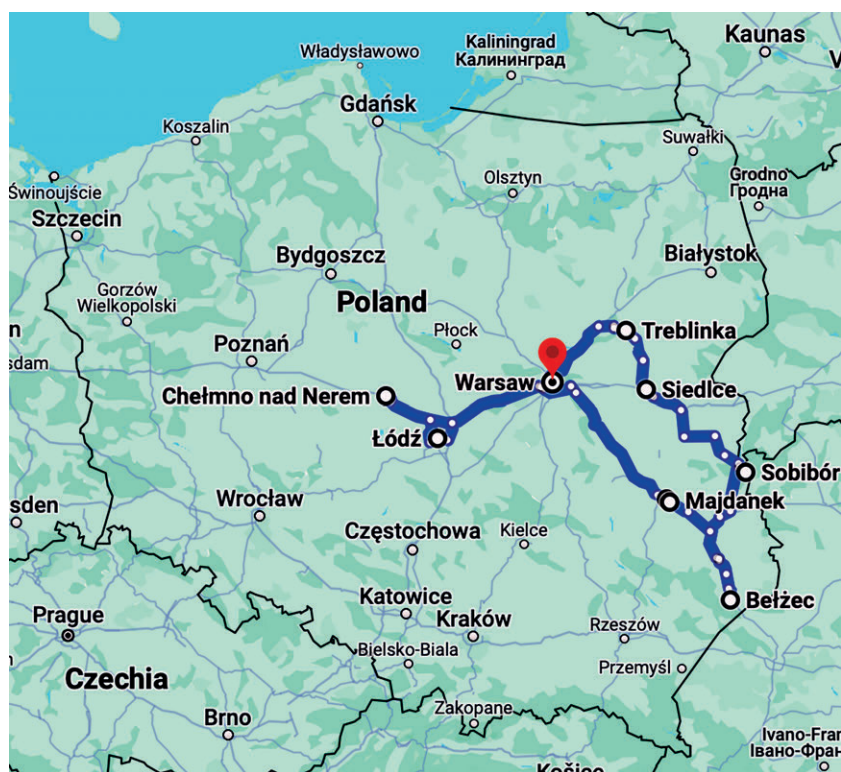


Figure 1. Trajectory of the Aktion Reinhardt Study Trip

The main aim of this study trip was to show laypeople that the Holocaust is more than ‘the symbol Auschwitz’, look at the bigger picture, and historicise the events of the Holocaust in the *longue durée*. The organising foundation writes on its website that:

‘Auschwitz’ is today without any doubt a symbol, an overarching concept that refers to the extermination of the Jews in Europe. That is the case in [country], but also abroad. Without challenging the importance of Auschwitz for the memory of the extermination of [country] Jews, we also want to put the Holocaust in the East in the spotlight.

The second educational project I observed is run by the same foundation and historians but is of a completely different nature. It concerns a five-day study trip to Poland, observed in November 2023, to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum (hereafter Auschwitz-Birkenau) for a group of about 70 participants. The central focus of the project was on the murder of the Jews in these participants’ home country, which happened mostly in Auschwitz and its subcamps. The project started with a three-hour training in the main former Nazi transit camp where most of the Jews of the participants’ home country were gathered before their deportation to Auschwitz. The site is now a memorial and museum. The three-hour training consisted of a guided tour of the museum, a movie screening with witness testimonies (which in this case couldn’t take place because of technical problems), and a practical info session. Then, during the five-day trip itself, the participants visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum (both Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau) and the former Krakow Ghetto. The group stayed in a youth hostel in the town of Oświęcim (Auschwitz, in German). They also watched three documentaries with testimonies. Furthermore, they were given three lectures by the historians: on antisemitism and anti-Judaism, on the difference between concentration and extermination, and on the history of Auschwitz after the Holocaust.

Unlike in the Aktion Reinhardt study trip, the historians were not so much in control of the contents during the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip. While they gave the lectures and the guided tour in the former Krakow Ghetto, it was local Polish guides of the museum who led the tours in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum. During the film screenings, participants also heard and saw witness testimonies that were not mediated by the two historians. In short, the academic historians had to share control over the contents and media of Holocaust memory the participants were exposed to, which made the historians prefer the Aktion Reinhardt project over this

project. This sense of ‘control’ over the ‘transmission of historical knowledge’, as I will demonstrate later in this book, is important for the historians I study (and for historians in general; see Grever 2009, 56). The fee to participate in the Auschwitz-Birkenau project was 550 euros per person, and the project takes place every year.

Table 1. Overview of the Two Study Trips

Trip	Aktion Reinhardt sites	Auschwitz-Birkenau
Duration	8 days	5 days
Preparation training	1 day	3 hours
Period	Summer 2023	Autumn 2023
Cost	750-900 euros	550 euros
People participating	10	70
Research participants	5	6

Both projects were organised by the same foundation and the same project team. The foundation itself was founded in the post-war years as a club of local Jewish survivors of Auschwitz and its subcamps. In the late 1970s, members of the club took a group of students to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum for the first time. This study trip turned, over the course of five decades, into the yearly educational project that I observed in the Autumn of 2023. However, the foundation and its purposes have developed in the last decades. From a friends’ club with mostly commemorative purposes, it turned itself into a documentation centre, research institute, and organiser of Holocaust education projects and study trips. These developments were paralleled by the diminishing role and influence of survivors in the foundation. Now that most of the survivors have passed away, the organisation is run by historians who have little or no personal connection to the Holocaust. In 2019, four survivors joined the study trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau for the last time to give testimony. In 2020, all of them passed away. For the two historians, this marked the end of the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip as a ‘commemorative trip’, which allowed it to be turned fully into a study trip. The 2023 trip was the first study trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau organised by the foundation after the Covid-19 pandemic, and thus the first without survivors present. As I will show in the next chapters, this has an influence on the sense of purpose of the historians and the focus of the study trips.

The funding for the foundation and the study trips comes from three sources. First and foremost, individual participants pay enrolment fees, which cover a large part of the project’s cost. However, apart from that,

national and regional governments structurally support the foundation and its educational projects. The fact that the two projects are (at least partly) state funded makes them important cases in which to study 'state-sponsored history' in practice, in which the state delegates moral education through memory to foundations (Bevernage & Wouters 2018). One of the historians confirmed to me that the two projects are a financial 'zero operation' in which the foundation neither earns nor loses any money.

In the empirical chapters of this book, I present an ethnographic and interactional account of these two study trip projects, in which the ideal of historical distance is put in practice outside the academic realm. I provide descriptive detail and point at the micro dynamics of performances of historicist attitudes and their reception and reproduction. The verbal data that was needed to be able to do that was collected in a four-phase process.

First, I conducted semi-structured interviews with five lay participants before the educational projects. These interviews allowed me to examine which memory narratives and moral discourses participants connected before they entered the educational project and what they expected from the trip and their interactions with the historians. The administrator of the foundation put participants who wanted to be interviewed in touch with me. In both projects, during the preparation session in the home country, the administrator of the foundation introduced me to the whole group and explained to them my role as participant observer and interviewer.

Then I conducted ethnographic participant observation during the educational projects. I attended the educational projects and study trips as a participant, observing how the historians and participants interacted in various contexts and which contents were being uttered and performed. During the participant observation, I acted as an insider to the group, participating in the everyday routines and practices of the groups I observed. When there were statements made or actions taken that I didn't agree with, I retreated from the action without intervening. I noted bullet point jottings (Emerson et al. 2011, pp. 21–43) during the study trips and made more descriptive fieldnotes in the evenings during the study trips and directly after having arrived home from the study trips.

Third, a few days after the end of the educational projects, I conducted another round of semi-structured interviews with the participants. These interviews were conducted with the same five participants as in the first round of interviews, but I added six more participants whom I only got to know during the study trips. I selected these participants because they were central to my observations during the study trip. The aim of this last round of interviews was to see if and how the memory narratives and moral

discourses participants reproduced had changed after the study trip and which discourses they had picked up from the historians.

Then, finally, almost a year after my observations, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the two historians and the administrator who had joined the study trips. I brought materials from the fieldwork to these interviews, and we discussed fragments and observations that I found either salient for the research or puzzling. As a result, the interview outlines were different for each of these participants. All these interviews were conducted in the participants' mother tongue. The excerpts I use in this book are translations. The methodological micro approach (with just two historians, one administrator, and 11 participants) I employ allows me to investigate and demonstrate the detailed, complex, and heterogeneous nature of the processes that I am investigating. This rich detail would have gotten lost if I had enlarged my sample or if I had opted for a comparative research design. The research design and methodology were approved by ethics committees at the Université Catholique de Louvain (2022) and at King's College London (2023). All participants have given informed consent to participate in this study, and their names have been pseudonymised.

Gathering data immediately before, during, and immediately after the study trip provided me with a good insight into the peculiarity of the study trip as a specific ritual experience. While there is sufficient attention in the literature for the highly ritualised nature of trips to former Nazi concentration camps and extermination sites for descendants of victims (e.g. Feldman 2002, 2008) and of perpetrators, there is only limited attention for trips organised for descendants of bystanders or implicated subjects such as the people I am observing (Rothberg 2019). For descendants of victim or perpetrator groups, the visit to Auschwitz (or another Holocaust site) is a ritual in which they are socialised in collective guilt or victimhood that is specific to the group they are members of. For the middle class Western Europeans I observed, however, it is rather a ritual experience in which they leave their present-day concerns behind to be confronted with the remainders and knowledge of what they consider to be the ultimate and universal evil located in the past to which they have little personal connection.

As with other (religious) rituals, the main aim of the study trip is to familiarise people with a certain sacred and special knowledge and space. Participants visit the metaphorical 'churches' of the Holocaust. Dr Smith – one of the historians I observed – describes these visits as a form of collective 'atheistic spirituality' in which group ties between people become stronger because members have been 'on-site' together, connecting to the

past events that happened there. During these visits, the historians act very much like the metaphorical priests. They have privileged access to sacred knowledge, which they can teach to the study trip participants. This special access to knowledge endows historians with a sense of moral authority that is constantly re-actualised in interactions during the study trip. When they establish their privileged access to sacred knowledge, historians also need to desecrate other actors that claim similar access to that knowledge and compete with them for moral and epistemic authority. Survivors and museum guides are the competing actors that historians aim to desecrate while striving for authority during the ritual of the study trip. Survivors' knowledge is presented as too coloured by emotion, while museum guides are spoken about as not knowledgeable enough. I return to this in depth in Chapter 2 of this book.

Central to the ritualised experience is that what is considered normal and salient in ordinary life is completely different during the ritual experience of the study trip. The participants experience the study trip as a trip from the present to the past, during which different norms are at work and where different things are of concern than in ordinary life. The idea of a 'bubble' of experience and interaction is often brought up by both the historians and the administrator to discuss this experience. For a week, participants were closely focused on the minute details of the Holocaust, thereby forgetting about everyday concerns beyond the study trip. A good example of such leaving behind of everyday concerns is news consumption. During the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip (early November 2023), the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza and the Israeli bombing of civilians in Gaza were just three weeks underway and on everyone's mind. Holocaust memory played a key role in political discourse on both sides of the conflict. However, during the study trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the conflict wasn't discussed for the whole week. Stepping out of everyday life to enter a ritual experience, I believe, is one of the factors explaining the absence of discussion. The news that you would usually care about doesn't feel so salient anymore when you are immersed in the history of Auschwitz for five days.

But, as I will show in Chapters 1 and 2, there is more that is to be left behind when entering the ritual experience of the study trip. What would constitute ordinary and normal morality and emotion are also replaced by new and different ideals and comportments that are salient for the duration of the study trip. For example, while participants are usually exposed to highly emotive and political relations to the past in current news media (see e.g. Tucker 2024), these relations are different during the study trip. It is important to note again that these moral and emotional regimes aren't

shared by other groups co-present on the sites. In Chapters 1 and 2, I discuss how historians' and participants' 'other' approaches to the Holocaust that are different from theirs and their ideas about morality and emotion.

In the interviews I conducted immediately after the study trip, I noticed that the ritual experience was very impactful for the participants. Even when re-entering ordinary life after the ritual experience, its moral and emotional frameworks were, to some extent, persistent. When I asked them to reflect on the experience, they mostly reproduced the moral imperatives and emotional reactions they were exposed to during the trip rather than resignifying the experience from the vantage point of the everyday.

Resignification, contestation, and resistance didn't happen much during the study trips themselves. In general, what I analyse in this book are mostly smooth in-group interactions. The relations between the two historians and 11 participants that I studied are remarkably non-conflictual. I noticed throughout my fieldwork that I was observing a strongly institutionalised and ritualised historical professional practice that a specific sort of laypeople (white, middle class Western Europeans) can accept, endorse, and, in some cases, reproduce after repeated exposure. In this book, I describe and analyse cases in which laypeople are appreciative of the dominant discourse and how it is practised and might even reproduce these ideas and practices themselves in other contexts. However, when studying the empirical materials gathered during participant observation and during interviews, I often found myself struck by the difference between what was present in the material and what was not said, absent, implicit, or not acted upon in these 'smooth' encounters. As I will discuss in the next chapters, salient news facts were not discussed, political discussion was absent, historians retreated from more emotional commemoration, and transgressive Holocaust humour wasn't challenged. These absences pushed me towards a method of interpretation that is both 'positive' and 'negative' (see e.g. Navaro-Yashin 2020, Bille et al. 2010, Fujii 2010). The method is positive in the sense that it theorises from what is present in the data, but it is also negative in the sense that I have sought to infer things from absences and silences.

This book thus outlines both the meaning-oriented and interactional dynamics that facilitate the uncontested reproduction of a dominant historicist and distant approach to the Holocaust with all its emotional and moral consequences for vernacular understandings of the murder of European Jews. It is highly important that we, as scholars and educators, are aware of the circumstances under which this might be happening. In that respect, this book is complementary with my earlier work in which I have been mostly invested in processes of resistance, localisation, and resignification. In

Contemporary Auschwitz/Oświęcim: An Interactional, Synchronic Approach to Collective Memory (2021), I looked at how the inhabitants of the contemporary town of Oświęcim (Auschwitz in English and German) attribute meaning to the memories connected to their town. I looked specifically at how they navigate and subvert ideas of sacred memorial meaning. In my second book, *Outsourcing the European Past: An Interscalar Study of Memory and Morality* (2024), I studied the EU's memory policy, the way NGOs operationalise it in projects, but also how citizens resignify or resist dominant memory narratives when they are exposed to policy outcomes. In these two cases, dominant cultural memories are resignified by 'ordinary people' in their local practices. In the case of this book, however, that doesn't happen to the same extent. Certainly, even in the cases I will be discussing here, some resistance and localisation happen, but to a much lesser extent than in my previous work. The two Holocaust historians that feature in this book are endowed with great moral and epistemic authority by laypeople, and their ideas, narratives, and performances are reproduced across contexts by these same laypeople, almost without resistance.

White, Middle Class, and Male Moralities: The Historians and Lay Participants

Who then are the people that appear in this book? There are two types of participants: a) professional Holocaust historians who design and guide study trips, and b) interested laypeople who attend these study trips.

The foundation that organises the educational study trips employs 10 staff members, of which four are involved in the organisation of the study trips. Two of those are administrators who take care of the logistics concerning the trip (one of them also joins the trips), and two of them are the historians who oversee the contents of the study trip. The two historians are white men in their late 30s and early 40s. Both were in the final stages of their PhD research when involved in the education projects.

The first historian (Dr Smith, pseudonym) specialised in the so-called Aktion T4, the involuntary euthanasia of the mentally ill in Germany by the Nazis in psychiatric hospitals. He was, in 2023, completing his (joint) PhD in both a history and a moral philosophy department. This historian has a personal family connection to the Holocaust, but it is not clear which connection this is exactly. During the two trips, he was hesitant to talk about these connections, which remain unknown to me until today. His mother is Jewish, but he presents himself as a fervent atheist.

The second historian (Dr Jones, pseudonym) specialises in the interplays between forensics and archaeology on former Holocaust extermination sites.

He has no personal or family connections to victims or perpetrators of the Holocaust, and he describes his motivation to work on the Holocaust as ‘the will to learn’ and intellectual ‘interest’. He also operates as the operational director of the whole foundation. He was initially interested in ancient history (during his MA studies) but moved to Holocaust history for his PhD.

Neither historian occupied permanent posts at a university when I was conducting my fieldwork. Nevertheless, I consider them academic historians because they are trained as academic historians and have also produced scholarly work that is recognised and published within the discipline as academic history (Megill 2024, p. 291). I had met both historians and one of the administrators for the first time in my capacity as a journalist in 2016. I had kept professional contacts with them since, which facilitated my access to the field for this study.

Both the historians enter the projects of the study trips positioning themselves as historians, choosing to identify strongly with their professional inhibitions, values, and practices. However, as should be clear from this short introduction, they are more than just historians. They are people with their own personal stories, struggles, and opinions. These other parts of who they are inevitably penetrate their professional, distanced demeanour during the study trips and lead them to perform other roles and identities, which I develop at large in the empirical chapters of this book. There is a constellation of cultural processes and contexts that my participants are part of, and that informs my participants’ positioning apart from their professional identity and roles – cultural socialisation into different memory narratives, political stakes, and debates that are salient for their positioning and identities, biographical contexts, interactional contexts, and conversational histories. In my analysis of their performances, I mobilise these processes as explanations for specific performances of historical distance. This inherent plurality of selves (Van de Putte 2021) is not something the historians perceive as problematic or endangering to the idea they have of themselves.

The two educational projects attracted a different set of lay participants. The Aktion Reinhardt trip in the Summer of 2023 had only 10 participants. Eight of those were retirees; one of them was an employee of a history museum; the final one was me. The reason that that project attracts mostly retirees is because it requires time, money, and engagement during the summer holidays, which professionals and students wouldn’t have. Of the retirees, six were men and two were women. I interviewed five out of those nine participants either once or twice. Of those interviewees, all were retirees, one woman and four men. The participants were exclusively

white and middle class in terms of income, tertiary education, proclaimed values, and lifestyle (see further). Out of the eight participating retirees, six received an education beyond high school. Among those I interviewed, four received an education beyond high school.

The study trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau in the Autumn of 2023 attracted a much more diverse set of participants, with a total of about 70. Most were professionals with a work-related interest in the Holocaust. They included, among others, history and religion teachers, civil servants, and trade union representatives. First-year university students and retirees made up the rest of the group. The first-year university students could attend the study trip for free because they won an essay competition on the topic of ‘anyone of us could be a perpetrator’ in their last year of high school. I focused on six participants – four professionals and two students – two of whom have a migration background. One’s parents moved to the respective home country from Algeria, and the other moved from another EU country. Out of the six participants, four were men and two were women.

The foundation that organises the trips is aware that both trips attract different audiences. The administrator of the study trips described in an interview with me that the participants of the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip were more superficial than the ones who attended the Aktion Reinhardt study trip, which attracts participants who are more invested in the topic already. This causes frustration for him:

Auschwitz that is like, ‘I should have seen it once’. But to go to Treblinka and Sobibór, you have to be more into it. That is the impression I get. You also see it from the reactions after the trips. After Auschwitz ... you get reactions like: ‘Hey [name of the administrator], what a pity that there wasn’t more sauce with the meat’, or yes ‘the towels weren’t smooth enough in the bathrooms’ ... And then you ask yourself: Yes guys, what did you actually take away from this trip?

It is important to stress that the participants in the interviews that I observed and interviewed are not survivors or descendants of victims or survivors. They are neither Jews, nor Roma, nor Sinti. They are non-Jews talking to other (mostly) non-Jews about things that happened to Jews. They are (apart from one) not part of an historically discriminated out-group, and they are middle class. They are also not descendants of perpetrators, and they are not knowingly descendants of collaborators with the perpetrators.

As I will show in the empirical parts of this book, these participants are generally receptive towards historicist distanced approaches to the Holocaust

and reproduce them, the nuances and details of which I discuss in Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4. Dr Smith acknowledged in an interview with me that these people's interest in the Holocaust is intellectual rather than emotional or moral. The interactions between participants and between participants and historians I observed were also relatively non-conflictual. I assume that this would have probably been different if the sociological composition of the group was different. With Jews, Roma, or Sinti, or other disadvantaged and/or (historically) discriminated groups present, more would be at stake when adopting distancing strategies towards the Holocaust.

The explanation I offer for why my participants were receptive to historical distance and its value ethics has to do with class, race, and gender dynamics, local political stakes, and interactional dynamics during the study trip. Andrew Sayer's (2010) concept of 'lay moralities' is well-suited to understand what is at play in my observations of the study trips and brings these various levels of interpretation together. For Sayer (2010, p. 165), lay moralities are the product of several elements, not just the internalisation and simple reproduction of social norms. Some of the elements constituting lay moralities that Sayer addresses are especially salient for this book. One element is salient for its ever-presence in my fieldwork observations (shared dispositions), and the other three are salient for their relative absence (sentiment, moral reflexivity, and fellow-feeling).

First, Sayer argues that there are socially shared moral sentiments and emotions that are key constituents of lay moralities. In their approach to the Holocaust, the historians I studied preach emotional distance from the facts and actors of the past. At face value, when accepted and internalised by participants, that would mean that there would be very little space for affective practice among participants. Very much in line with general Western middle class moralities, emotional self-restraint is key:

Many of the practices and lifestyles necessary to this new middle-class personality involve a controlled de-control of the emotions, requiring the mutual respect and self-restraint of the participants, as opposed to a narcissistic regression which could destroy the social bond. (Skeggs 2004, p. 137; see also Featherstone 2007, Wouters 1986)

The moments when participants could let go of emotional self-control and self-restraint were very tightly regulated in the study trip programmes. In the evenings, after the formal programme had ended, participants drank, ate, and played board games until late at night. These moments were often experienced as liberating and emotionally excessive after a day of distanced

exposure to Holocaust memory. But highly affective practice also (inadvertently) seeped through in the official programme of the study trips. My participants (both historians and the participants) could get angry and frustrated at other people who aren't able to practice the moral imperative of distance and self-restraint. As I will show in Chapter 2 of this book, this led to contentious interactions between my participants and Israeli groups that were co-present during the study trips and indirectly between my participants and survivors and their discourses.

The urge to self-restraint and self-control is, however, not only a matter of emotion and affective practice. It is highly normative and social. Emotional self-restraint can be seen as a '*disposition* to behave in certain ways' (Sayer 2010, p. 165). These dispositions are often internalised and learned through long-term processes of exposure and practice. I see the two study trips that I observed as interactional rituals (Goffman 1967), during which the same norms are performed and practised repeatedly in front of and together with the participants. Through these repeated rituals, they internalise the moral meaning of historical distance and learn how to perform them on-site. I should note that, in that respect, my participants are probably not blank slates. Historicism as a 'world view' (Fulda 2010) is something that they have probably been exposed to in their education and when being exposed to historians in the media. Additionally, what historicists present as 'valuable' (rationality, detachment, stoicism) also ties in with prominent ideas of masculinity, in which 'contemporary masculinity has frequently been understood as unemotional, emotionally impaired, or somewhat stoic, which is seen as a consequence of western gender norms' (Reeser & Gottzén 2018, p. 147). As I will explain later in this book, it is no coincidence that most of my research participants were men, but that women were given key roles in more emotional commemorative rituals (Chapter 2). The interaction ritual of the study trip reactivates these pre-existing cultural ideas, practices, and repertoires.

Sayer (2010, p. 165) also introduces fellow-feeling as a central element of lay moralities: 'the ability to understand others, via not only discourse but also expressions and body language, is a precondition of everyday moral conduct'. Sayer's take on 'fellow-feeling' is salient because the historicist, distanced approaches to the Holocaust I analyse in this book require (at least theoretically) a reduced 'fellow-feeling' with victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and survivors. Such distance should, however, increase the possibility of understanding the factuality of the past. But regardless of the morally prescriptive idea of emotionally distant historian and observer, fellow-feeling is very difficult for my participants. As middle class, white

Western Europeans with no family connections to either victims or perpetrators, they have a lot of difficulty in understanding the feelings of people who treat the Holocaust more closely, such as survivors, Israeli groups, or local museum guides. Additionally, their experiences are very far removed from the life-worlds, experiences, and actions of the perpetrators and victims of the Holocaust with whom it is difficult for them to empathise. All these factors decrease the possibility of fellow-feeling and thus increase the possibility of enacting historically distanced approaches to the Holocaust.

Finally, Sayer (2010, p. 166) also introduces the extent to which people can engage in individual reflexivity and moral reasoning as key elements of lay moralities. With this, Sayer describes the ability of an individual to make moral decisions, both big and potentially life-changing ones, or everyday 'more fleeting and fragmented evaluations as part of the stream of consciousness'. Instances of intense individual reflexivity and moral reasoning were rather rare during the study trips that I observed because participants were not presented with situations that were introduced as requiring serious individual moral decision-making. Distanced and 'factual' approaches to the Holocaust also prioritise descriptive accounts of 'what really happened' in the past rather than making participants judge actions in the past or let the past inform moral reflexivity in the present. The historicist and modernist attitude and practice means that my participants were offered a philosophy that promised to be able to rationally understand what happened in the past – on the other planet that is the Holocaust – assisted by two academic historians who served as a 'conscience' for that understanding and safeguarded it from other approaches (Zachariah 2023, p. 355). This distance allows them their safe space, from where they are neither emotionally affected by the past nor are they required to get involved in the complicated process of political positioning around the meanings of the past.

Thus, when using Sayer's take on the development of lay moralities, dispositions to act and think in a certain way are very much present in my observations. The norms that govern moral ideals and practices are informed by a strict professional ethics of distance. The prominence of these dispositions limits the possibilities of emotion, individual reflexivity, and fellow-feeling.

However, there are also local political positionings and identities at stake for the lay participants in which the memory of the Holocaust takes prominence and which go beyond their middle class lay moralities. The country in which the participants were born was occupied by the Nazis during the Second World War. Just like in any other Western European countries, local authorities collaborated with the Nazi occupiers. With the

current rise of right wing and extreme right wing parties in Europe, this history of collaboration with the Nazi occupier was also a key event for political positioning during the study trips that I observed. Either criticising or justifying this collaboration with the Nazis and their implication in the Holocaust is politically salient. However, taking a morally and emotionally distanced position to the events of the Holocaust allowed my participants to position themselves as disinterested, non-committed outsiders who were able to judge the events by their factuality and, thus, not by their potential political and/or moral salience. In that sense, they take an epistemically authoritative position that is quite contrary to recent tendencies within populist politics, in which the link between history and emotion is intensely cultivated (Bevernage et al. 2024).

Bringing in this cultural and political context is necessary to understand the discourses and practices my participants (re)produce. In line with previous work on interscalarity (Keightley et al. 2019, Van de Putte 2024), I understand my participants' situated performances and discourse by employing both cultural, institutional, and interactional modes of explanation. Culturally, their socialisation into white, middle class, masculine Western European society makes them more prone than others to reproduce historicist approaches to the Holocaust. The moral imperative of neutrality, objectivity, and factuality the historians employ works well together with the middle class and masculine ideals of self-restraint and self-control. However, these participants are also the products of institutions and the normative frameworks these institutions promote. That is not only the foundation and its philosophy but also the professional institutions and families in which my participants have been socialised. Finally, the interactional context, its ritual form and normative framework, inform how my participants attribute meaning to the past (see, e.g. Van de Putte 2021).

I should note that the main sociological characteristics of my participants (white, middle class, and mostly male) are characteristics that also define me. My participants' moralities were easily recognisable for me as a set of ideas, discourses, and practices I grew up with. This also facilitated my access to the participants, who recognised me as 'one of their own' and allowed me to gain their trust relatively easily. This book, thus, is very much an understanding of the white middle class ethics of rationality, distinction, and restraint that I was socialised in and how it shapes (and is shaped by) historical distance. Even more, I am also a trained historian who acknowledges the advantages of distancing when and if we need to study the past, though not when we need to make the past present in education. Does this personal embeddedness limit my possibility of studying the practices

I describe in this book? Is an embedded study of distancing possible? Or is, ironically, more distance necessary to study distancing practices? One of my colleagues suggested that I write a novel with these participants as characters because I am too emotionally involved in what they do and say. The position I try to take in this book is both 'in' and 'out' at the same time. I try to benefit from my insider position to understand the life-worlds of my participants without overtly judging them, while at the same time stepping out to understand and explain their practices and discourses with scholarly concepts and theories. So, for me, this book is not an emotional reckoning with the middle class culture in which I grew up or with the discipline of history in which I was intellectually socialised, but it is an exercise in reconciling two forms of knowledge – from the inside and the outside – in disentangling and understanding a practice.

Chapter Overview: Four Discursive and Performative Strategies to Distance the Holocaust

This book is structured around four interactional and meaning-oriented strategies for distancing the Holocaust, performed by historians and reproduced by lay participants. Each of these strategies foregrounds an element of a desirable relation to the Holocaust, but they also actively silence other relations to the Holocaust in the meantime. These strategies are enacted in both the ritual encounters of the study trips and in the interviews I conducted with various actors. Each of these four strategies makes up a separate chapter in this book.

First, the historians strip the Holocaust of explicit moral meaning and infuse it with factual detail. Doing this, the 'facts' of the Holocaust, they believe, should suffice to morally judge it; additional moral meaning is undesirable. The Holocaust also shouldn't function as a frame for sense-making in the present. 'Never again' does not appear anymore. Instead, the Holocaust as an event in the past should be narrated and explained in the most factually detailed way possible. A key trope in this discourse is its explicit position in contrast to 'collective memory'. 'Collective memory' is said to distort and over-dramatise the past, while the historical approach sticks to the facts.

A significant number of participants in both study trips internalised and reproduced this discourse against explicit moralisation after having participated in the study trip. However, there is a significant gender dynamic to this process. While all my male participants to some degree reproduced

the discourse of the superiority of factuality after the trips, the three female participants were more ambiguous. They endorsed and valued the focus on facts and not morals but also expected more moments of moral sense-making. To de-moralise the Holocaust also means that it is not compared to other genocides or occurrences of violence in the present. Such comparisons, re-actualisations, or resignifications were never done by the historians, and only rarely by the participants. Although the Auschwitz-Birkenau trip took place three weeks after the start of the Hamas–Israel conflict in the Gaza Strip, only one participant (with an Algerian and Muslim background) made the connection during my fieldwork. However, they compared the Holocaust to less politically sensitive and contested events in their own context – Uyghur discrimination in China, the War in Ukraine, and violence in Somalia and Sudan. In short, if the historians' aim was to distance the Holocaust by stripping it of its explicit moral relevance for the present, beyond the historical facts, then they managed well in these projects. In Chapter 1, I describe in minute detail the interactional dynamics of these processes of signification.

In a second strategy, the historians strip the Holocaust of its emotional character and present themselves as rational scientists who are emotionally unaffected by the horrors. This happens through two practices, one 'successful' and one less so. First, they 'other' people and groups who treat the Holocaust in a different, more emotional way. The historians present their own rational approach as superior to that of other groups. Often, these other groups occupy the same physical spaces as the historians and participating laypeople during the study trips. These can be Jewish (mostly Israeli) groups and Polish families visiting the same site. But survivors are othered by historians as well. They are deemed to be too affected by emotions, and therefore distort the factual reality of the Holocaust. These othering discourses are generally well-received by participants and feed into and re-actualise some xenophobic attitudes and stereotypes that already circulate among them. The second practice to get rid of the emotional character of Holocaust memory is to act cynically and critically about commemoration ceremonies, even if the historians participate in them. However, I observed that the study trip participants were emotionally affected by commemorations anyway, which leads to misunderstandings between them and the historians. Additionally, sudden shifts between a discourse of historical distance and a mode of commemoration are often awkward moments, in which neither participants nor historians manage the changing norms that govern the interactions. These processes and interactions are the focus of Chapter 2.

Third, the historians diminish the focus on victims with whom study trip participants could empathise in their narrations of the Holocaust. Instead, they narrate the Holocaust as a 'system' or 'structure' that constantly evolved and was being improved. This system-oriented way of telling the Holocaust impersonalises the actors involved. If individual actors are engaged with, they are either presented as extremely cruel perpetrators or heroic and selfless victims whom participating laypeople struggle to identify and empathise with. This strategy is fully enacted during the study trip concerning Aktion Reinhardt, where the historians are in full control of the narrative, and neither survivors nor local guides have much agency to counter this perspective. In these cases, participants normalise such perpetrator and system-focused perspectives. In the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip, the agency is more distributed between historians, local guides, and survivors. In that case, local guides and survivors add more victim-oriented and experience-based narratives to the contents of the study trip. In this case, participants often find the trip too focused on victims and want to know more about the lives and backgrounds of Nazi perpetrators. Chapter 3 focuses on these narrations of the Holocaust as a system and structure, the absence of understandings of the Holocaust as a set of experiences and actions, and distanced understandings of the Holocaust.

Finally, the historians use sick humour (Billig 2005, Dundes 1987) about the Holocaust on certain occasions to distance themselves from the past. This humour transgressively makes fun of the suffering of others and is therefore different from gallows humour (which laughs at own suffering) and dark humour (which isn't necessarily transgressive). These sick jokes support distancing processes that are very similar to those that I analysed in the previous chapters. Being able to laugh at the Holocaust or Nazi Germany demonstrates that you are emotionally and morally detached from their cruel realities and consequences, and from other people who might engage with the Holocaust in a less distanced manner. Connectedly, the telling of sick jokes also demonstrates a resistance to the sacralisation and ritualisation of Holocaust memory onsite.

But these sick jokes are socially more complex than that. They do more than only support an ideal of historical distance. In Chapter 4, I look at three other functions of sick jokes at work in the interactions that I studied. First, the telling of sick jokes can support a self-positioning on the part of the teller as someone who breaks norms of decency. These positioning strategies are mostly associated in the scholarly literature with adolescents who want to be recognised and valued for transgression. I outline in a few examples how both the historians and one of the participants continuously performed

sick Holocaust jokes to do such positioning in the group. Second, sick jokes can be used to establish and reinforce superiority over other (co-present) individuals and groups. Laughing at someone using terms used during the Holocaust and in Nazi Germany, or comparing this person to historically discriminated groups, can reinforce subjugating dynamics. Finally, sick jokes can also help to release tension and assist in coping with difficult encounters with often cruel representations of the past. Making sick jokes about these events can help a person to ease continuous exposure to representations and narratives of these events.

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1. A Morally Meaningless Holocaust

Abstract: In this chapter, I describe and explain how the two historians I studied strip the Holocaust of its moral meaning when they interact with laypeople. They believe that it is their task to bring across facts, without explicitly moralizing those facts. Lay participants showed to be very receptive of this non-moral approach to the past and reproduced it across situations. However, this also came with some unintended consequences: 1) they become heavily invested in factual details, forgetting about the bigger picture, 2) they focus their attention on the past alone, with only little reflection on the meaning of Holocaust memory today, 3) they don't learn new moral meanings during the study trips.

Keywords: morality, factuality, distance, memory, historiography

The Foundation has no moral character. That means that during the whole trip an apolitical position will be kept and this to avoid all ideological and/or political discussions!
—foundation website

This statement was written by Dr Smith and included in the online introduction package for participants to the Aktion Reinhardt study trip in the summer of 2023. The foundation that organises the two study trips communicates to the participants from the very beginning of the project that they should not expect any explicit moral meaning-making on the part of the foundation. Such a position is also seen as preventing discussion in the group during the study trip.

During the one-day formation session about a month before the study trip in the Aktion Reinhardt project in the summer of 2023, participants were also given this message face-to-face by Dr Jones, who acts as operational director of the foundation. In his statement near the end of the induction day, he stressed that what participants would be provided with during the

trip was only 'factual information' and that there would be no 'moralising'. He stressed that the information the historians would be giving during the study trip should already be sufficient to make a judgement about good and evil. He presented the facts as inherently morally valuable and believed that they should speak for themselves. Participants, he believes, don't need further guidance from the historians in their moral meaning-making. The administrator of the foundation then added to this message that a good group atmosphere is also important during the 'heavy trip'. He stressed that none of the staff are psychologists or medics and that they can't offer any help with morality or emotions. But he also stressed, jokingly, there would be vodka every night to forget everything again. In fact, there was beer and a three-course dinner every night in the hotel during the Aktion Reinhardt trip, which helped to release the tension. The historians and some participants also went for additional beer and food after the dinners during the study trip. To the statement of the administrator, Dr Jones added that participants shouldn't expect to be told whom to vote for at the end of the study trip.

I believe that both the written statement and my description of the interactions I observed during the preparation day suffice to introduce the reduction of morality from the Holocaust memory discourse by the two historians during the Aktion Reinhardt project. They see it as their task to prepare participants for a factual approach, without additional explicit moralising on their parts. This fits in their historicist approach, which prescribes that the past should be factually understood, not morally judged from a position in the present, because the past was inherently different from the present. Participants would be offered the past alone during the study trip, without explicit moralising. However, the historians stress that lay participants could attribute moral meaning to the historical facts by themselves if they wanted to, which they see as unavoidable. Nonetheless, they themselves refrain from doing that. Finally, this apolitical position, in which the Holocaust is stripped of explicit moral meaning, the historians believe, should also positively contribute to the smoothness and a-conflictual nature of the study trip. In the first part of this chapter, I elaborate on this view with material gathered in the interviews with the historians after the two projects that I observed.

In preparation for the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip, four months later, participants were not offered such a clear message. The introductory session in the museum in the former transit camp consisted of a guided tour of the museum by a local guide, during which the historians had no control over the message. During the study trip itself, participants were shown video

testimonies of Auschwitz survivors and were guided by local guides in the museum. These two actors offered a more moralising and affective approach to the Holocaust. Nevertheless, during the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip itself, participants were clearly offered Holocaust memory narratives without explicit moralisation by the two historians. On multiple occasions during the lectures, it was stressed that the aim of the trip was not to 'dramatise' the Holocaust, but that the facts alone and some well-founded concepts (e.g. 'concentration camp' and 'extermination site') were sufficient to understand the Holocaust. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, the discourses of the two historians were taken more seriously by the participants than the ones by the survivors and local guides.

In this chapter, I analyse how this approach to the Holocaust that shies away from explicit moral meaning is practised by the historians, how they bring it across to participants, and how these participants react to it. Throughout the chapter, I focus on some crucial specificities of those discourses and practices.

First, I look at both the historian's idea of 'factuality' and how it is opposed to 'morality'. In both projects, participants almost perfectly reproduced the discourse sketched above, but with some nuances. The participants didn't challenge the historians when exposed to an approach to the Holocaust with only facts.

Second, I focus on two specificities of both historians' and participants' discourses. During the Auschwitz-Birkenau trip, the historians repeatedly introduced the idea that their approach to Auschwitz is diametrically opposite to the 'collective memory' of Auschwitz, which is said to distort the past. Participants picked up this argument and vocabulary in their interviews after the trip. During the Aktion Reinhardt study trip, this 'collective memory' trope was not brought up, probably because the sites visited then (e.g. Majdanek, Treblinka) don't feature centrally in the Western European collective memory of the Holocaust.

Third, I look at the consequences of a choice for factuality, not morality: the historians' discourse is heavily invested in excessive factual detail, which is something participants in both projects remembered and reproduced. Another consequence of the 'facts, not morals' discourse is that the historians don't compare the Holocaust to other genocides, nor do they say anything about present-day conflicts. The mass violence perpetrated by Israel against Palestinian civilians in Gaza, for example, which erupted three weeks before the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip, was not brought up by the historians and only seldom by participants. Instead, participants compared the Holocaust to less politically sensitive present and historical events. When participants in

the Auschwitz-Birkenau trip were explicitly asked to attribute moral meaning to the Holocaust in the interviews I conducted, they almost automatically resorted to a variation of the 'Never Again' discourse instead of resisting the urge to moralise. The Aktion Reinhardt participants did this to a lesser extent than the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip participants. Participants in both groups didn't seem to have acquired new or more complex moral meanings during the respective study trips.

Finally, there was also some limited critique of the attempts on the part of the historians to strip the Holocaust of its moral meaning. In my interviews after both trips, three participants complained about the lack of moral meanings provided to them. They also stressed the need for more moments of sense-making during the study trips.

Objectivity, Factuality, and Rationality

For Historians

During my interviews with the two historians after the study trip projects, after having asked some general questions first, I asked them to reflect on the quote cited at the beginning of this chapter. This allowed them to explicitly reflect on their general approach to the Holocaust, its moral meanings, and memory politics.

By and large, the two historians and administrator confirmed their historicist, distanced points of view. Their aversion to moral meanings of the Holocaust is supported by four different arguments. First, they believe that the facts of the Holocaust should speak for themselves and that no additional moralising is necessary. Second, they find 'moralisers' patronising and dishonest and thus want to avoid moralising themselves. Third, they stress the factuality of the Holocaust because they believe these facts are at stake in their discussions with Holocaust deniers. Finally, they believe explicit moralising and political discussion could break group ties and create conflict during study trips. They thus avoid such discussions about politics and morality in their interactions with laypeople and engage in role separation: when they are 'historians' or 'guides' on the frontstage of the study trips, they are neutral and without political opinion, while backstage they do voice their political opinions.

Dr Smith argues that the facts should speak for themselves, without explicit moralising on the part of the historian. However, he is clear to stress that he morally judges the facts of the Holocaust and the actors involved but doesn't express these judgements in public. If participants wouldn't be able

to grasp the facts and their meaning, then they would need a psychiatrist, not a historian, he says:

With Dr Jones, we would keep it very scientific, factual. Surely not take a moral, ethical, political, ideological standpoint ... We assume that when we provide the facts in detail, that then we don't need to afterwards tell like 'this was bad, eh'. That is what we assume. And if there is someone in the group who would say 'that was good', then this person doesn't need a historian or a moral philosopher. Then this person needs a psychiatrist.

In this sense, Dr Smith is, at least on one front, a moderate historicist. He believes that it is possible to factually understand the past if the right distance has been taken. However, he doesn't argue that this precludes moral judgement of these events in the past from the position of the present (what a more radical historicist would argue). Rather, he believes that it is not his role to offer these moral meanings and that laypeople are morally equipped enough to make these moral reflections themselves. Dr Jones almost repeats the same discourse word for word, stressing a factual approach to the Holocaust, in which the facts are valuable and 'speak for themselves':

Yes, that is what we say to the people of the group. That we don't moralise and are apolitical and thus don't take a moralising character. So, apolitical. But that is also, yes, to reassure the people that they shouldn't expect a brainwash of something like that. We assume that the historical facts that we bring, of which we assume that they are correct, are already bad enough. They speak for themselves. So, we are also not going to try to influence people with extreme right wing views. Well, we hope to influence, but not to move them from one side of political spectrum to the other.

Dr Jones admits that he hopes for moral and political change in the participants ('we hope to influence'), but that he would accomplish this by offering participants historical facts, not by explicitly moralising those facts. He is also aware that the participants he is working with are wary of explicit moral discourse that aims to convince them ('brainwash'). For Dr Jones, taking a scientifically historical approach to the Holocaust, without explicit moralisation, also allows him to keep political neutrality, and stay clear of what he believes are both extreme denialist or sacralising positions:

They are real study trips. So, we really want to organise trips that are really historically sound, in the sense that we try to be objective. We

try not to exaggerate. We don't move to sacralising. Of course, we also don't approach the denialist part. So, we try to keep a middle way by, I would not say, as neutrally possible information. To give the most studied information about which we have a historical consensus.

Scientific empiricism and positivism, in this case, offer the opportunity of moral and political distance. Dr Smith endorses this view, saying that the foundation is open to participants with extreme political views, arguing that the historians' discourse isn't ideological and thus requires judgement by scientific (not moral or political) standards: 'We are open to a political spectrum from extreme left to extreme right. Come. But what we are telling is not ideological, so we don't need to defend it. But we can scientifically prove what we are saying'. At the same time, both historians also have strong feelings about people who prioritise the moral meaning of the Holocaust. They find these people patronising and expect that the study trip participants would also perceive such moral approaches in this way:

Dr Smith: Yes, but it is only via knowledge that you can make a full ethical reflection. Anyone can make a moral reflection. I hate moralisers. I hate them. Most of the time they don't stick to their own morality or it doesn't make sense, that is full of paradoxes. So, I hate moralisers.

Dr Smith here distinguishes between ethics, which, he mentions elsewhere, requires serious thinking based on empirically established facts, and morality, which is easy and paradoxical. He sees his own practices as ethical, while he dismisses and says to 'hate' those 'moralisers' for being dishonest and contradictory. Further on in the interview, he mentions that he is also afraid that moralising the Holocaust and introducing politics might cause conflict and 'break ties within a group'. Dr Jones, in addition, believes that moralising the Holocaust in front of the study trip participants would also be counterproductive. They would feel patronised and resist: 'In our Western society, if you clearly push something, then it is like, people will just be resistant'.

At the same time, these two historians feel that the facts are in themselves inherently politically and morally important. As Holocaust historians, they feel constantly put under pressure from Holocaust deniers to prove their facts. This sets them apart from historians of other periods of events that are less politically contested. Dr Jones, who moved during his career from the history of ancient Rome to Holocaust history, reflects on this by drawing a comparison between Holocaust history and ancient history:

Deniers, you have to see which goal they serve. Is it because of pure anti-semitism, or is it to, euhm, be against Israel? Is it to bring back National Socialist ideas, or to make them part of the public debate? From where does it come? Is it just to be against the norm? Because that is what I also thought. The historians, the Holocaust historians, that are the orthodox historians, that is, to whom you can't go against. But the defeat of the Roman legions in 9 AD in the Teutoburger Forest. Nobody will make a point of that.

Dr Jones sees Holocaust historians as representing an 'orthodox' norm, defending the reality of the Holocaust in mainstream scholarship, which makes them targets for deniers. Later in the interview, he argues that sticking to that norm is of vital (ethical) importance. So, the two historians that I observed believe that the neutrally and objectively established facts of the Holocaust speak for themselves, and don't require additional moral meaning. Furthermore, they see their own distanced, neutral, and objective approach as key in the public debates with deniers, which makes Holocaust historians stand apart from other historians. But are these two historians then people without opinions, or do they just not express them around study trip participants?

Both historians said they have political opinions that involve the facts of the Holocaust, but they don't mention those opinions in front of participants. They see it as their professional role to stick to facts and separate that professional role from their own more private and backstage roles, which allow for political opinions (and feelings, see also Chapter 2). Both historians believe that this neutral position is also what is expected of them from the laypeople they interact with. It is, they say, how laypeople perceive the role of the historian:

Dr Smith: No, it is rather towards people. Of course, I have my conviction, and I have my judgements about everything that happened. But I don't need to communicate that. It is rather to people who don't factually know anything about it, to allow them knowledge to judge by themselves.

Dr Smith also spoke to me in the interview about what he does when political discussions emerge during the study trips among the participants. He stresses the importance of not 'stepping out of the role' as guide and historian and not to participate in these discussions:

We just had elections ... of course that was discussed during the trip in July and August ... Of course yes, of course it was about that. But it doesn't

start with us, you see. That not. If people want to discuss that: well, good, mate. But what we do when we are being addressed, then we need to come across as cool and easy. Yes, at the base we take a point of view like, yes, we better don't engage in that. Because at that moment, we shouldn't step out of our role as guide, and that is still, we need to stay professional.

Dr Smith even mentioned some interactional strategies to divert political discussions that involve historians. When they are confronted with political discussion, they try to change the topic:

Yes, we don't go along with that. Finally, we come up with something, something hypocritical: 'Yes, but have to count the group'. Or just to avoid so that, yes, that we are there still for what they [the participants] have initially joined. That is, someone will give historical explanations here.

Dr Smith clearly states that in these cases, he would like to remind the participants that the reason they joined the study trip with the foundation was not to receive political ideas from the historians, but information about the past.

Even when I asked the two historians explicitly to moralise on the Holocaust and tell me why knowing and learning about the Holocaust is important today, they merged historicist explanation and the contemporary relevance of the Holocaust. As Dr Jones constructs it in this fragment, learning about the Holocaust is important because the historical context in which it happened is important for Europe today, and because that specific part of the past involved 'us' and it happened 'here', distancing the Holocaust is not easy:

Interviewer: Yes, yes, another big questions about morality. Why is the Holocaust important today?

Dr Jones: Oh, that is something that marked today's society. We sometimes don't realise that well enough, but the last world war is surely for Western European, for the West, and thus de facto for almost the whole world, because the influence of the West still counts, sets a standard often. That can vary, but that influence still marks us still strongly. That can even influence the caution with we now take towards Israel or toward the Jews, or not. That is also because it is recent history. So that is not just a history. It also happened here, I should say for once, but [country] was surely involved.

When Dr Jones is asked about the importance of the Holocaust today, he sticks to a descriptive and analytical position, outlining that the Second World War is important for the West today and that its memory informs current positions (e.g. towards Israel). In doing so, Dr Jones does not explicitly move from a descriptive to an explicitly morally prescriptive position.

In short, Dr Jones and Dr Smith are very well aware of the sensitivity and (political) importance of the past they are researching and speaking about to laypeople. They see their role as historians as actors that can bring across the facts of the Holocaust, grounded in empirically sound scientific research. Knowing these facts, they believe, should allow laypeople to form a moral judgement by themselves, which, they hope, leads these laypeople away from extremes. In their interactions with laypeople, they are cautious not to slip from describing facts into attributing explicit moral meaning to these facts. This is what they believe is expected of them as historians by laypeople. In other roles, they might act differently, but in their professional role as historians, they stress neutrality and factuality. But how do the laypeople who interacted with these historians perceive them, and which discourses of distance, neutrality, and factuality do they either reproduce, resignify, or reject?

For Participants

When the participants mentioned after the study trips what they appreciated most, they (almost exclusively) reproduced a discourse of modernist historical distance. The key terms that they brought up when they talked positively about the study trips were factuality, objectivity, scholarliness, neutrality, honesty, and detail. In this section, I discuss how these terms are connected to the more overarching discourse of modernist historicism that they were exposed to during the trip, which I outlined in my analysis of the interviews with the historians. As I will show, however, there are also substantive differences between the participants in the Aktion Reinhardt project and the Auschwitz-Birkenau project.

During my interviews with participants before and after the study trips, I tried to tease out moral discourse either through my questioning or by making them reflect on a piece of text that I brought to the interview. Before the study trips, it was quite difficult to tease out moral discourse. I tried doing so in two ways near the end of the interview.

First, I asked participants to comment on the web text cited at the start of this chapter. Then, I asked them which lessons they believed are to be learnt from the Holocaust and why the Holocaust is specifically important as a historical event. After the study trips, I tried to tease out moral discourse

by asking three questions which composed the middle part of the semi-structured interviews:

1. Could you describe to me the way in which the Holocaust was treated during the trip? Did you like it?
2. Was there a good balance between history and commemoration?
3. Which lessons do you think we should be learning from the Holocaust? And why do you think, in that respect, that the Holocaust is important?

In my analysis of the interview transcripts, I found that before the study trips (but after the induction days) participants rarely produced any explicit moral meanings of the Holocaust. After the study trips, they mostly reproduced an approach to the Holocaust which values distance, factuality, and objectivity. I will now look closely into how exactly participants attributed meaning to these events, first in the Aktion Reinhardt project and then in the Auschwitz-Birkenau project. This detailed analysis is warranted because specific practices of historical distance that present explicit moral meaning-making are facilitated by specific interactional, cultural, and institutional contexts that require in-depth analysis and description to be able to understand and explain their occurrence.

Participants in the Aktion Reinhardt Study Trip

John, a retired architect in his mid-seventies, brought most of the key arguments of the disinterested, distanced historian together both before and after the trip. Before the trip, while commenting on the web fragment cited above, he says:

John: Yes, yes, yes I think that, indeed, it is clear that both concerning ideological and political discussions, to avoid them, I think that indeed the foundation stands really for an objectification of everything that happens there. Without choosing sides for someone, so I understand their position.

Here, John endorses the foundation's choice not to engage with morality to avoid tension during the trips. Instead, he says, that the foundation treats the Holocaust ('everything that happens there') objectively, without choosing a side in moral and political discussions. He didn't specify which sides these could be, and I didn't ask him to. After the trip, John reiterated this discourse at two points during the interview, expressing great approval of the historians' approach. While before the trip, John attributed the qualities

of distance to the foundation, he attributed these specifically to the two historians after the trip, linking them to concrete practices on their part:

Yes, of course for me it was extraordinary. I would say better than two years ago to Auschwitz. Much more detailed. Two guides whose every word we were hanging on to. They could keep on digging and it was always fascinating even despite the hours we had to listen

... Yes Yes I am there not, yes, not an expert sort of, so it came across to me as a very objective, but just as facts that you have recorded as scientist and as researcher so I have no doubt about the honesty of their stories.

John's expectations of the foundation and the two historians were largely met during the study trip. His is a case of someone who expects positioning as a distanced Holocaust historian before the trip, accepts it during the trip, and values it afterwards. For him, what is to be valued is the factually detailed way of engaging with the Holocaust. He positions the two historians as scientists who have recorded the facts and have narrated those facts to him in a convincing manner. When I asked Dr Jones to reflect on John's comments, he showed gratitude and satisfaction that John got the point about objectivity, neutrality, and expertise: 'Yes, it is meant in this way, so if it comes across in this way, then that is very good.' Other participants performed very similar discourses to John's but within the context of their own interests, passions, and concerns.

Another participant, Marc, engages in a similar process of signification as John. After the trip, he explained to me that he was afraid that the Holocaust would have been narrated too much from either the Jewish or the 'religious' point of view. He was relieved that that wasn't the case:

I thought about the word neutral but of course I know it is from the foundation. So it means that it comes from the Jews. Dr Smith is a theologian but a lay person, but he studied theology or comparative religion sciences ... actually yes I found it, yes, objective, or as objective as possible ... I didn't hear any lessons from them, or at least not clearly ... yes, take home message. Well, I didn't really hear that from them. Or I don't remember. It was like: look, we tell you our knowledge and we make you part of our knowledge of the facts. They don't tell you 'look, now you do with it what you want', but there were no take home messages. But yeah, what could those have been?

For Marc, factuality and neutrality are very important, and he perceives being taught moral lessons as patronising. Marc is in his early sixties and just retired as a psychologist who worked in a hospital. After retirement, he developed a very peculiar interest in so-called fake Holocaust testimonies – people who write and speak about having survived Nazi concentration camps or extermination sites but haven't experienced them. He is interested in the malleability of history and memory and the dynamics of lying about traumatic events such as the Holocaust. This makes him very sceptical of any narrative, sometimes involving conspiratorial thoughts on his part, which is also partly visible here and which I investigate more in depth in Chapter 2. That he endorses the 'objectivity' of the approach by the two historians means that they were very persuasive for him. Even more, he mentions that he didn't hear 'takeaway messages' from the historians and rhetorically asks if it would even be possible to have such takeaway messages about the Holocaust. However, questioning the possibility of moral takeaway messages from the Holocaust is at odds with the intent of the two historians. As I argued in the previous section, the historians believe that there are clear moral messages to be taken away from the Holocaust, but that these should be informed by the facts alone and don't need an additional discursive elaboration on their part. Marc, however, misinterprets this absence of explicit moral discourse as an endorsement of a morally relativist position that questions the possibility of moral meaning of the past.

Marc's older brother, Patrick, also joined the Aktion Reinhardt trip. Patrick is a retired language and literature teacher in secondary school. Patrick has worked as a tour guide since his retirement in various locations abroad. Often during the Aktion Reinhardt project, Patrick used this personal and professional experience to position himself as a critical evaluator of the historians' work as guides. Recently, Patrick has developed a specific interest in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s and Bosnia in particular. Just before the Aktion Reinhardt project, he guided a tour in Srebrenica, where armies from the Bosnian Serb army of the Republika Srpska killed 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys in 1995. He missed the introductory day for the Aktion Reinhardt study trip for that reason. Patrick has thus a better knowledge of memory politics and its institutions than the rest of the group. Because he perceives and positions himself as a critical expert, he is someone who isn't easily convinced by the historians. Nevertheless, after the study trip, Patrick perfectly endorses a discourse in which small, factual detail and knowledge is highly valued:

Ah, I found it richer than expected. Really, thus better filled thanks to the, well, the very many details that were added.

...

Yes, well, in any case these two, these two guides were very enthusiastic guys, very well informed. Even when people asked small details. I remember that, at the end, I asked in that symbolic burning pit, the remains that were laying there, that was some kind of volcanic oxidian-type glass. Also that they knew and so forth. So, it seems that they know that matter for the full one hundred percent. And I was really astonished by Dr Smith's knowledge of Yiddish and his obsession to explain everything philologically iota after iota.

I also asked Patrick during the interview if he thought that there was enough of a balance between history and memory, to which he replied that 'for me, facts were more important than testimonies'. Factual detail, he argues, is key and valuable. When I let the two historians read Patrick's comments during the interviews, both perceived them as compliments. Dr Jones said that 'this is, as such, surely positive feedback'. Dr Smith said that they didn't talk about all their research during the study trips and that they could have given even more facts if they wanted to:

We tell only, but maybe, half of all our research. Half. So, we really need to cut in it because otherwise we could 'spread out' our mouths forever there. Yes, then it is really, we have to then, I think, that we bring across the most essential.

Michael, a retired teacher in his 60s, fused morally distanced and close approaches to the Holocaust after participating in the Aktion Reinhardt study trip. Michael is generally someone who is very concerned about the growing popularity of nationalist movements and their xenophobic discourses. Right wing, nationalist movements historically collaborated with the Nazi occupier and have thus been implicated in the Holocaust. So, when Michael thinks about undesirable moral lessons that could be drawn from the Holocaust, he is afraid of descendants of collaborators with the Nazi occupiers infiltrating the group during the study trip and is satisfied that that didn't happen. Instead, the study trip was neutral and 'with scientific grounds':

Michael: Within the possibilities they are doing a lot, well, I will say it like this—

Interviewer: Yes, yes, yes and from a political point of view—

Michael: I don't feel anything there.

Interviewer: No.

Michael: it seems to me a neutral organisation with scientific grounds. I will say it like that, politically I didn't feel anything. I cannot say that it were all ex-collaborators, or politically ... but that is not expressed. You feel that, for us no one has said you are a red or you are a green or that is a little bit like a [nationalist]. That didn't appear at any point during the trip.

Michael's endorsement of 'neutral' and 'scientific' approaches is remarkable because he is also receptive of more emotional and artistic approaches to the Holocaust. He is interested in Jewish culture and was amazed that Dr Smith could read and speak Yiddish and contextualise the Holocaust within Jewish life in Poland. This, he believed, was very valuable:

Michael: Yeah, who is speaking Yiddish, I mean—

Interviewer: Yes.

Michael: Also that part I found enriching. Because we are going to take a look at how all those Jews were killed and where. Ok, but he also puts a bit of life wisdom and culture of the Jew in it and that is for sure a plus.

'Wisdom' and 'culture' are terms that are not directly associated with historical distance, but rather with closeness, morality, experience, and subjectivity. That Michael also values those approaches shows that he can endorse and appreciate both a historically distanced and mnemonically close approach to the Holocaust. Even more, looking at both of Michael's quotes, we might say that he fuses both distanced and close approaches, without seeing the contradiction that the historians have constructed for him. For him, Dr Smith is both someone neutral and wise.

The last participant I want to introduce in this section is Mary, a retired secondary school mathematics teacher who was, in many ways, an outlier during my fieldwork. First, she was one of only two women who joined the Aktion Reinhardt study trip project. She is married to Patrick and mentions a few times that she joined the study trip to do

something together as a couple. Secondly, out of all the participants, she had by far the least pre-existing knowledge about and interest in the Holocaust. She is also very self-aware of that, and in contrast to her husband Patrick she positions herself as an outsider who doesn't know much and doesn't need to intervene in the discussions. Her motivation is also more emotional than that of the other participants. She mentions that, apart from doing something as a couple together, she is participating in the project to honour the victims. Throughout my observations and the interviews, she blended an emotionally close approach to the Holocaust with a historically distanced one. I return to this blending on the part of Mary later in this chapter and the next chapter. Here, I want to briefly highlight how Mary was also susceptible to the historically distanced discourse and its factuality when she talks about what she liked about the project:

Mary: It was, for me, well done with practical information.

Interviewer: Yes, yes, yes, ok.

Mary: And I like to listen to correct information and those two people could give that of course, he. That were experts on that front so, euh, yes, yes that is something that I enjo— enjoyed, I shall express it like that.

Expertise and correct information are what Mary mostly valued in the two historians who led the study trip.

This section allowed me to introduce some of the key participants in this book and their motivations for participating in the Aktion Reinhardt study trip. The participants in the Aktion Reinhardt project endorsed and, to some extent, reproduced the historians' discourse. They stressed the importance of facts, neutrality, and objectivity, and they valued the fact that no explicit political or moral meaning was attributed to the past. They were exposed to this discourse for a day in their country's capital during the introductory training and for eight days on a trip to Poland. But these participants weren't simply brainwashed by the historians. I have shown that they brought their own life experiences, knowledge of politically sensitive matters, and moral values into their practices during the study trip and their reflections in the interviews. These, together with the strong presence of an ideal of distance performed by the historians, made them endorse the disentangling of the Holocaust as a fact in the past from its possible moral meanings in the present.

Auschwitz-Birkenau Study Trip

During the eight days of the Aktion Reinhardt trip, the two historians were almost completely in control of the approach to the Holocaust that the participants were exposed to. That differed from the Auschwitz-Birkenau project, where control over contents, discourses, and performances was divided between three collective actors. The same two historians who led the Aktion Reinhardt project had to share control over the content and form with local guides and with survivors and their testimonies that were presented to the participants through video documentaries. The historians performed the distanced approach to the Holocaust. However, contrary to the Aktion Reinhardt project, they had only limited space in the programme to perform that discourse in front of the participants. Between the two of them, the historians gave three lectures and one guided tour of the former Krakow Ghetto. However, contrary to the other two actors (local guides and survivors), the two historians stayed part of the group for the whole duration of the study trip, which allowed participants to talk and socialise more with them outside of the official programme and in more informal encounters.

The group of study trip participants also interacted with local Polish guides who gave guided tours in the participants' mother tongue in the museums in Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau. Both tours covered half a day in the programme. These guides treated the Holocaust more morally and emotionally closely than the historians did. They did so in two ways. First, the guides were Polish and focussed primarily on the suffering of Polish, non-Jewish victims in both Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau. This is in line with the turn towards the nationalist approach to the Second World War and the Holocaust in Poland more generally in the last decade (Grabowski 2016, Kucia 2019, Ray & Kapralski 2019). Second, they used a discourse that aimed at both moral and emotional responses from their audiences. Later, I discuss the usage of the expression 'factories of death' in this respect.

Auschwitz survivors from the participants' home country also 'addressed' the group in three video documentaries that were shown during the trip. In these documentaries, they talked about their experiences in the transit camp, the transports to Auschwitz, and about surviving Auschwitz and its subcamps. In one documentary from the 1970s, some survivors were also shown discussing their experiences with students on-site in Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau. These stories are deeply personal, affective, and moralising. They provided participants with the opposite approach to the ones performed by the historians. But because of the specificity of these interactions, through video and from the literal past (all the survivors

that gave testimony in the documentaries have passed away), participants couldn't interact with them and ask questions. As I will argue later in this book, I believe that the programming of the video testimonies is an institutional residue of a time when survivors were still very prominent in the foundation. All the documentaries date from before the 1990s.

Despite the distributed control over the contents and performances of memory during the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip, the distanced approach performed by the historians is by far the most well-received by the participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau project. This sometimes even happens quite radically, even with participants who had initially, before the trip, taken a very moralising and emotional approach to the Holocaust.

Take Ibrahim, in his mid-twenties, who is studying to be a translator and teaches languages part-time in a primary school in the capital. His father is of Algerian descent, and he is a practising Muslim. Ibrahim joined the Auschwitz-Birkenau project as a translator to translate the lectures of the historians for some participants with a different mother tongue. The costs of his trip were covered by the foundation. It was his first time joining the foundation to do translation work.

Before the study trip, Ibrahim appreciated 'close' treatments of the Holocaust. He attended the introductory session in the former transit camp, where we were guided by a local volunteer who was a retired police officer. When discussing his experience of the guided tour in the former transit camp, Ibrahim stressed his appreciation of the possibility to 'get close' to the events and people of the past:

But this time the guide was incredibly interesting. And he really had yes. You got close to the events because he told all kinds of things that happened to certain people. And again, provoked a bit the empathy because you knew the name, the age and the situation of those, of the person about which he was talking. So yes, I found it very interesting. And I learned many things and numbers and statistics help me to understand things and he was giving many interesting ones.

But after the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip, Ibrahim instead stressed that he preferred a 'factual', 'objective', and 'distant' approach, reproducing the historians' discourse, talking about both the guided tour in Auschwitz II-Birkenau and the historians' lectures:

Yes, it was interesting also it was really interesting. They gave all kinds of interesting facts. You know, like I said in the first interview, facts really

interest me a lot, uhm, in these kind of tours. And so, because, because I find this very important to have as well a factual aspect. And yes, the facts they gave were very, very interesting, very impressive the things. Well, what, what the Germans did. Also the numbers I always find very impressive.

Ibrahim's talk here is less smooth and more hesitant than in the first excerpt, with some doubtful reformulations and pauses ('uhm', 'well', 'very impressive the things'). He also uses a very limited vocabulary here – interesting, facts, and impressive are the only key terms – compared to a much richer vocabulary when talking about a close approach in the first excerpt. He also searches for my confirmation ('you know'), showing that he is on less secure ground than in the first excerpt. Nevertheless, the focus in Ibrahim's discourse shifts from empathy to factual distance. However, with the notion of 'impressive' facts, Ibrahim might also be fusing factuality with emotion and morality here (much like Mary in the previous section) without conceiving of this as the contradiction that the historians made of it.

The other participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip reproduced a very similar discourse as Ibrahim after the study trip, in line with the historians' idea of historical distance, stressing academic rationality, lack of explicit moral meaning, factuality, and objectivity, among other things. Nathalie, a secondary school teacher in her early 50s and a historian (master's level) by training, shares the historians' concern for facts and scientific rigour:

No but that is again the academic part, well yes, about which I care a lot. But apart from that I find it super important that they really purely work with facts and don't get into that [moral and political arguments].

The same counts for David, a first-year bachelor's student (19 years old) in law. On multiple occasions during the interview after the study trip, David strongly endorsed a rational approach to the Holocaust that didn't moralise. Here, he speaks about the reactions he received from his family and friends when he told them about the study trip and the distanced, 'factual' and 'rational' approach to the Holocaust:

Uhm the reactions yes, also like yes that they say, like yes, it is good that you went with that organisation, that you really got the information.

...

But I find it also very good that they treat the matter rationally.

...

I think it depends on the person. I prefer a rational approach. Not that I don't find it bad what happened there, that of course not, but I love things. It happened, it is bad, but now we go to look at the facts. And I understand, for example, that other people need the moral side more, yes that moral side, I really think that depends on the person.

David recognises that moral and emotional approaches to the Holocaust are possible and justified, but he positions himself as someone who doesn't need them. David is one of the participants who was prone to reproduce the perspectives of the historians almost literally. As I will show, there are some specific tropes uttered by the historians that David was very eager to reproduce. For example, he would contrast 'his' approach to the Holocaust with inferior collective memory approaches, and he would also be sceptical of the epistemic authority of survivors, which I discuss in Chapter 2.

Finally, there is one more participant I want to introduce. Frederik is a 24-year-old freelance journalist. Before becoming a journalist, he did an internship at the foundation while studying for his master's degree in philosophy. During the internship, he was mostly working with video recordings of survivor testimonies. Frederik is someone who knows the dynamics within the foundation quite well and is aware of the professional habitus and personalities of the two historians.

In the excerpt that I cite below, we are discussing an episode that we both witnessed during the last dinner of the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip. Traditionally, the last dinner of the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip is a festive occasion presented as a celebration of life. This idea was introduced by the current president of the foundation, who is of Jewish descent, but who wasn't present during this specific trip for medical reasons. Participants are offered a three-course dinner accompanied by wine and vodka. The dinner was preceded by two speeches. First, Dr Smith took the floor. He took a full shot glass of vodka and lifted it facing the group. He asked everyone else to do the same. He said that he wanted to continue a tradition instated by the president of the foundation. He then lifted the glass and said, 'l'chaim, to life', and drank the shot of vodka. Some of the participants did the same thing (me included), and others sat down again. I felt that this was an important moment for Dr Smith, an emotional, though ritualised, reaction against the murder in Auschwitz. Dr Smith, as I will discuss in the next section,

slips occasionally from a strictly distanced approach to the Holocaust and bursts of emotions.

Then, the administrator who joined the trip and who organised the essay competition for high school students took the floor. The administrator mentioned that it was the first time this study trip was organised without survivors physically present and participating. The last four survivors who joined them on the study trip in 2019 had all passed away in 2020 – three from Covid-19 and one from another illness. But then, the administrator said, ‘we have new witnesses now: the laureates of the competition’. He argued, almost religiously, that these students had borne witness to what happened in Auschwitz and would now spread the word. He asked all the laureates (about 10 people) to come to the front of the room and introduce themselves and the arguments in their essays. The essay competition’s topic was ‘we are all potential perpetrators’. The audience was very impressed and appreciative of the presentations and applauded intensively.

During our interview, Frederik and I discussed these two speeches and the idea of the ‘new witnesses’ as introduced by the administrator:

Frederik: The witnesses will never return again. But as a term I can appreciate it. I will, yes, I will. I understand what he wants to say. But indeed it is, that comes then, you try. The moral part. That is really interesting. That they end the week with a moral call, a task or something like that.

Interviewer: Yes, and it is interesting that the administrator is doing that and not the two historians.

Frederik: Haha, yes, yes, maybe yes. Again, well, that is a sign for that historical perspective that they give. The last that last call has to come from the administrator.

Frederik expresses here the view that the past is irreversible and that the witnesses of the Holocaust have passed away and will not return, but he appreciates the usage of the term ‘new witnesses’ as a moral call to arms to provide study trip participants with a mission, as it were. Frederik and I agree that it is telling that the final, moral call to arms comes from the administrator, not from the historians who have had the word for most of the week-long study trip. The historians seemed to have taken a prominent role during the academic and lecture-style encounters during the trip, while the administrator took the lead in closing the study trip by providing some

moral meaning. This separation of roles also appears when I discuss the commemorative ceremonies in the next chapter.

In the rest of this chapter, I analyse the (sometimes unintended) consequences of this strong distanced perspective against explicit moralising on the part of the historians and its internalisation and reproduction by participants. These include the importance of excessive factual detail when discussing the former extermination sites and concentration camps, a positioning against inferior 'collective memory' of the Holocaust, the lack of references to contested political events in the present, and the usage of the 'Never Again' trope when participants have, in some situations, no other choice than to moralise.

Excessive Factual Detail in Narratives of the Holocaust

Participants in both study trip projects were metaphorically bombarded with factual detail. For example, during the one-day preparation session for the Aktion Reinhardt project, participants received lectures on antisemitism vs anti-Judaism, Polish history, the structure of the Nazi German state, and concentration camps versus extermination sites. Often, these lectures were given by the two historians with an eye on meticulous detail. In the lecture on Polish History, just before lunch on the training day, the transformations of the Polish state (and its various partitions) since the Middle Ages were overviewed. In my field jottings of that day, I wrote that there is 'super much info given in short time. I can't imagine that everyone is still following'. Participants also didn't ask questions during or after the lectures. Furthermore, the historical factual detail wasn't delivered in a progressive temporal narrative during the preparation day for the Aktion Reinhardt study trip. The historians used a lot of flashforwards, whereby they stressed how important some historical developments would later appear to be when the Holocaust and the Second World War would take place. After lunch then, in a two-hour lecture, participants were given a complete overview of all Nazi German police forces and other related offices, including their roles in the bureaucracy of the Nazi state and their changes in leadership throughout the war and Holocaust: the KdF, SS, Gestapo, SD, KriPo, SiPo, SiPo-SD, OrPo, RSHA, and the SSPF.

Participants in the study trips and historians' colleagues were often in awe of the historians' detailed knowledge. This is the administrator of the foundation talking about Dr Smith, who designed the trajectory of the Aktion Reinhardt study trip:

Dr Smith designed the whole journey. I admire what that guy has done. And how he managed to fit all the pieces of the puzzle. That all of it is correct. And you can also ask that man a thousand questions, he can answer everything. And never will you catch him with an approximate answer or something that he knows only half. All of it is correct.

Participants, especially for the Aktion Reinhardt project, were thus exposed to a historical discourse that centres on and values factual detail. The excess of factual detail and its importance also guide participants away from either moral or emotional reactions to the Holocaust. I find in my data that when, as a participant in Holocaust study trips, you are repeatedly asked to focus on factual detail, it seems that you stop considering either moral or emotional reactions and meanings.

In Majdanek, for example, four days into the Aktion Reinhardt study trip, we visited the former crematoria. For most of the participants, this was the first time in their lives that they saw former Nazi crematoria. Inside the former crematoria, we were given an extensive explanation of their functioning by a local museum guide. One of the specificities of the crematoria, he stressed, was that frames of old trucks were used in their structure. When leaving the former crematorium, one of the participants addressed one of his colleagues and said: 'but using frames of old trucks isn't economical at all'. There are many things to think and feel when visiting the crematoria where the bodies of tens of thousands of victims were burned for the first time in your life. But if you are repeatedly being told that the Holocaust should be approached as a distant historical fact, a system that can be understood in factual detail, then it is these detailed 'facts' you focus on when you visit the sites, not potential other meanings that can be attributed to them or experiences suffered on these sites.

Similarly, when I asked participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip what they had learned from the project, they almost exclusively mentioned very detailed 'facts'. Nathalie, for example, says that: 'What I found very interesting. What I learned, and that sounds stupid, but so these kind of things: I didn't know for example that the people that were transported from Theresienstadt [to Birkenau], that they were put separately.' Nathalie shows awareness, however, of the peculiarity of her statement. She shows self-reflexivity and prevents a potentially negative judgement on my part by saying that it 'sounds stupid' what she is going to say. She seems to be aware that her interest in detail isn't the norm and might be inappropriate.

Other participants demonstrated similar self-awareness about the 'stupidity' of their need for detail but mentioned it anyway. David, for example,

repeatedly mentions that he learned that the barbed wire that you can see now in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum in both Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau is not the original one, but it is replaced every few years by the museum. For him, this knowledge is 'stupid' but nevertheless salient:

Again, this nuance I find very good. Uhm, that for example, Dr Jones gave some nuances. For example, that little story about the barbed wire. That are things that, yes, are handy, well, important to know. And that you will never get to know if you just go to the camp on your own.

...

That, yes that of that barbed, of yes that barbed wire is really a stupid example of course. But with this one gas chamber, the guide doesn't talk about the chimney that was built afterwards. But I think that if you tell this it gives added value. Because it is also part of the story because they wanted to hide it. And that actually is the reason that the gas chamber still exists. I find it so sad that it wasn't told because then you start understanding the story better.

In the second part of this excerpt, David talks about the visit to the former gas chamber at Auschwitz I. This gas chamber was turned into a bunker near the end of the war, to provide shelter to SS officers. In the process of repurposing the building, the Nazis removed the chimney from the building. After the war, when Auschwitz I became a museum, the authorities reconstructed the chimney so that the building could be visited as a former gas chamber. When we visited the site, the local guide did not mention this process of repurposing but presented us the building as the original gas chamber. Two days later, Dr Jones discussed the repurposing of the building and the reconstruction of the chimney in a lecture. This belated knowledge disappointed David. He believed that the local guide should have told a more detailed and truthful story about the building.

Another participant, 25-year-old Philip, who migrated to the respective Western European country from another EU country to study and stayed there after his studies, expressed similar ideas. He joined the Auschwitz-Birkenau project as a translator, together with Ibrahim. When Philip is asked what he learned during the trip, he says: 'What Dr Smith said about the trains that didn't directly arrive inside Auschwitz II, but first. And this sort of things. Also, the use of third class wagons that were not directly meant for animals'. Philip summarises here what he learned about the

visit to Auschwitz II-Birkenau. He gives two examples: first, that most of the transports arrived outside of the camp in Birkenau, from where the deportees were walked into the camp, and that most of the transports happened with third-class wagons, not with cattle wagons. Both these ‘facts’ are very detailed, but they also show that for Philip, the trip challenged some of his expectations and ideas he had about the Holocaust. These ideas and expectations were proven wrong during the study trip. Further on in this part of the interview, Philip brings up the corrective to the idea that the transports arrived directly in Auschwitz II-Birkenau and that they were exclusively animal wagons, as an important fact in order not to dramatise Auschwitz even more, and to stay as close as possible to the historical reality: ‘Yes, yes, I don’t want to say that it isn’t important, but just that it is a problem that we pass this on and make it bigger. Yes, historically, what concerns history, that is not right I think’. These ‘wrong’ and pre-existing expectations, images, and ideas such as the ones Philip is discussing here, are often presented by the historians as ‘collective memory’ which ‘distorts history’ and that needs to be challenged during the trip. Participants, especially in the Auschwitz-Birkenau project, explicitly reproduced this discourse ‘against collective memory’ in their interviews after the project.

Reproduction of a Trope: Against Collective Memory

During the Auschwitz-Birkenau project, the two historians often contrasted Auschwitz as a symbol and Auschwitz as an historical fact. Auschwitz-Birkenau, the place where the majority of Western European Jews were murdered, became an iconic site in the 1970s and 1980s (Pettitt 2021). The fact that the camp structures remained almost intact after the war and were almost immediately musealised also played a role in this process. All of this is in contrast with the extermination centres of the Aktion Reinhardt (especially Chełmno, Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka), where mostly Polish Jews were murdered, on sites that were almost completely destroyed and covered up by the Nazis, and where intensive musealisation came many decades later. For the historians I studied, the iconic place Auschwitz has in the West’s collective memory caused significant distortions of historical reality, of which participants are generally unaware. Dr Jones said in an interview that ‘that is one of the problems, also with Auschwitz. That is a known name. “Yes, yes I already know that.” “No, you don’t know anything about it.”’

During their lectures in the project, the two historians often repeated that ‘Auschwitz as collective memory’ is something that needs to be challenged

and corrected. 'Auschwitz as collective memory', for them, is connected to the 'dramatising' and 'moralising' that they want to avoid and which distorts the historical and truthful reality of Auschwitz. They see it as their mission to challenge that 'collective memory' when they interact with laypeople. Factual details such as the ones cited in the previous section are examples brought up by historians of such distortions.

The argument against 'collective memory' is something participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau project strongly reproduced after the trip, during which they were extensively exposed to this trope. When I asked David, for example, at the beginning of the interview what his general impression was of the trip, he brought the trope up immediately:

David: General impression. Broad question. Uhm, I mostly learned a lot. It was not like the expectation. Why? Because you, actually a little bit with that image of Auschwitz, the collective memory, yes, that you are doing this journey. Then I find it good that that image is being nuanced. That is also the added value of the journey, I think.

Interviewer: What exactly is being nuanced? Well, what is happening in your head?

David: So, uhm, that actually it isn't the biggest extermination site. Because, that distinction is being made. And that are things that I as a simple 18-year old didn't realise yet.

For David, factual detail helps correct the collective memory of Auschwitz. This, however, also leads to downplaying the significance of Auschwitz: 'actually it isn't the biggest extermination site'. This is incorrect: out of all the extermination sites and concentration camps, Auschwitz-Birkenau counted the most victims. These distortions are an unintended consequence of the historians' vehement criticism of the dramatising dynamics of Auschwitz as a symbol of collective memory: participants start downplaying the importance of Auschwitz in the Holocaust. Later in the interview, David says that a 'rational approach' also helped to correct some misconceptions he had about Auschwitz:

The image of Auschwitz was actually Auschwitz II Birkenau. I had not. When I entered Auschwitz I, I thought: 'Oh, that is here in stone'. Because indeed you have maybe again that collective memory of wooden barracks. And then I find it important to have a rational approach. To look yourself what it really is.

David saw his collective memory-informed image of Auschwitz corrected. He didn't expect barracks in stone in Auschwitz I, an expectation that was informed by collective memory, but was corrected because he saw the places himself. David is also convinced that the historical approach is inherently superior to the one of 'collective memory'. The historical approach requires more effort and motivation than just visiting museums; you also follow lectures:

Yes, so you need to have a certain inner drive to go there, he. Because I think many people go because of that collective memory. Like, we just go there. That is the image and just visit the museums. But the lectures around it where it is being explained, then I think yes, that is not anymore collective memory.

For David, we didn't just get our pre-existing imaginations confirmed and illustrated in the museum but also attended lectures 'where it is being explained'. The more information is gained by David, the more the relation to the past is perceived as moving from collective memory to history.

David is not the only one of the participants who sees their own practice as study trip participants as a corrective to collective memory. Ibrahim brings up the argument against collective memory three times in his interview after the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip, every time without being prompted to do so by me. First, he does so when I ask him about his general impression of the study trip:

We learned a lot of things and I surely got more context. Because yes, as Dr Smith explained it, we all have that collective memory of everything that happened in Auschwitz. Everything happened like that, that and that. But I got more and more, I got more context and now I have a more precise idea of how the things happened during the Second World War.

In this case, Ibrahim argues that the study trip allowed him to move from collective memory to more precise knowledge about Auschwitz and the Second World War. When I ask him to describe how he thought the Holocaust was approached by the foundation, he reproduces the collective memory argument again within the broader discourse of historical distance, factuality, and objectivity, stressing that the facts need to be 'restored' and not exaggerated or lied about:

If I would need to give one key word than it would be objectivity. I found it good that it is more objective than our collective memory. Because at a

certain moment Dr Smith said in his presentation, yes, sometimes facts get disformed because think so, like, yes, they did it anyway. So, let's disform the facts. Dr Smith said that it shouldn't be like that. We have to restore the facts as they are and have to be. And lies, and yes, and exaggerations aren't part of that. I found that very, very good and I was very happy with that. That they stayed really objective and also factual.

Ibrahim also told me that he talked about the importance of correcting the collective memory to people where he lives after he returned from the study trip:

Now that I am back from the journey, I talked a lot with the people around me. Yes, how was it? What did you learn? Yes, these are signs to talk about it more, certainly about those facts like Dr Smith said. The things we remember in the collective memory are not per definition correct.

Ibrahim picked up a central trope that was provided to him by the historians during the study trip and reproduced it outside of the ritual experience of the study trip. And then, Ibrahim also started correcting the 'collective memory' of those who hadn't participated in the study trip back home. Finally, Frederik also endorsed the discourse against collective memory:

Just explaining and clearly explaining as such is also already an added value. Or just the correction of some mystifications that emerged around it. Or as Dr Smith said it, to 'puncture' the collective memory. I think that is already a good task in itself.

Frederik argues here that the foundation could do more, but that correcting some mistakes in the collective memory of Auschwitz is already a 'good task in itself'. He thereby endorses a key philosophical idea of the historians, that factuality is already morally valuable, and doesn't require additional explicit moralisation.

Among the Aktion Reinhardt study trip participants, on the contrary, this explicit argument against collective memory didn't come up, neither in the historians' discourse nor in the interviews with lay participants. The former Aktion Reinhardt extermination sites were presented by the historians as something to discover, not something whose representation in collective memory needs resignification. However, it was stressed on multiple occasions that the former extermination sites of the Aktion Reinhardt were completely different from Auschwitz and that participants shouldn't be

misguided by their ideas of Auschwitz. The former Aktion Reinhardt sites are relatively small spaces that were constructed only to murder, without concentration or forced labour elements. For many participants, this came as a surprise. Only Majdanek (which functioned both as a concentration camp and extermination centre) could be seen as comparable to Auschwitz-Birkenau. John, who has visited Auschwitz-Birkenau before, said in Majdanek that 'if you have seen Birkenau, then this visit is useless'. John joined the trip because he was curious to learn more about the specificity of the Holocaust beyond what he had learned from a visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

In short, the argument against 'collective memory', explicitly introduced by the historians during the study trip, was reproduced by participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau project. They presented the study trip as a corrective to collective memory – publicly circulating representations – of Auschwitz that are historically and factually incorrect. The contrast between distorting collective memory and correct history also fulfils an argumentative function in favour of rationality, objectivity, factuality, and thus distance. Morality and emotion should not be part of such an approach according to my participants. Such a strict separation between past and present, history and memory, becomes difficult, however, during the study trips when Holocaust memory becomes politicised in the present.

Complicated Comparison: Israel, Palestine, and Holocaust Memory Education

One week after the eruption of the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza on 7 October 2023, the participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip met in a musealised former transit camp in their home country to receive their training before the study trip. First, the participants were given a guided tour of the museum of the former transit camp, the place where most of the local Jews were gathered before their deportation to Auschwitz. The group was led by a guide from the museum, not by one of the historians of the foundation. After the tour, which took about two hours, the guide thanked the group for their attention. He mentioned that he was afraid that the tour would have been more contentious because of the 'circumstances', clearly hinting at the conflict in Gaza between Israel and Hamas, without explicitly mentioning it. One of the participants then took the word and said that it was confronting to see police guarding the museum from the outside. To this the guide replied that he felt similarly as during the wave of terrorist attacks in 2015 and 2016, when 'everyone was thinking about other things'.

For the guide, public debate about both the events of the 7th of October in Israel and the consequent Israeli bombing of civilians in Gaza was apparently the elephant in the room during the guided tour of the former transit camp. He thought that he might receive questions about the conflict in Gaza during the tour, which didn't happen. In fact, not all the participants understood that he was hinting at the conflict in Gaza when talking about 'the circumstances'. Not everyone was aware of the same elephant in the room. Ibrahim reported a conversation to me he had with Philip while walking to the car park after the training session in the museum, during which they were trying to figure out what the guide meant by 'the circumstances', in the end assuming that he was referring to the situation in Gaza. However, Ibrahim wasn't so sure and checked with me to be sure if that was indeed the case.

There are three reasons, I believe, why participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau project rarely brought up the mass violence in Gaza, despite that being the main news at that very moment and despite political actors' constant mobilisation of Holocaust memory narratives to talk about the conflict in both the participant's home country and by Israel and Hamas. First, I believe my participants know that talking about Israel and Palestine can be contentious. Comparing either the actions and discourses of Hamas and/or those of the Israeli government to events during the Holocaust is key to political positioning and political subjectivity in the local (and Western European) public sphere. Generally, they prefer to avoid such sensitive positioning and discuss and compare the Holocaust to other events in the present or recent past that are less contentious or salient for their own political subjectivities. When they do so, they can remain on safe ground in the interaction and rest assured that no arguments will emerge. It should also be noted that in the early stages of the Israeli bombing of Gaza (October and November 2023), when my fieldwork took place, the Israeli violence in Gaza was not yet broadly framed as genocide in the public debate, making analogies with the Holocaust even more politically sensitive.

Secondly, during the trip, they are exposed to a historicist discourse that explicitly avoids comparison between past and present. For the two historians, the factuality of the Holocaust is unique, should be studied as such, and is radically different from the present. I haven't heard either of the two historians comparing the Holocaust to other historical events or actualising its meaning by comparing it to events in the present. Such 'presenting' is also perceived as dangerous by the historians:

Dr Smith: That is also dangerous, specifically, well. With that, that is very dangerous especially, again, if you don't have pre-existing knowledge.

Then it happens quickly that these things will get mixed up. That I find dangerous because then you decontextualise things. Or worse, to put them in the present. For example, the use of the word genocide. No, it is bad what happens, but a genocide is something else. That is what I especially stress, you see. Here as well, with explaining everything so there are words but there is also a meaning that sticks to a word. And if that factually can't be established, then don't use that word.

In this case, for Dr Smith, the use of the word 'genocide' in Gaza is a dangerous anachronism and factually incorrect (or impossible to factually establish). The word 'genocide', for him, is only something that refers to the past, and he uses the Holocaust as a standard to judge if an event is genocidal or not. The pastness of the 'Holocaust' is also something that is shared among other employees of the foundation. Comparing these two periods (in past and present), which are seen as different, is against the historicist mindset. The administrator of the foundation stressed clearly that 'our story stops in 1945':

Look, we are in a difficult period in which it is becoming very difficult. And of course, all my colleagues and I have our own opinion about what is happening there in the Middle East. But can we tell that to the people who visit Auschwitz with us? No, of course not. First of all, our story stops in 1945. The other story begins in 1948. That is the first thing. What should we say, like: 'Oh boy, these Palestinians, oh boy these Israelites [sic]'. No, no, each of us we have our own thoughts about that, and some have stronger ones than others. But it is not the goal to pass these on to people who go with us on a study trip.

In this case, the administrator acknowledges that everyone on the staff has their own opinions about the conflict and mass violence in Gaza but that it isn't their role to talk about those opinions to study trip participants who are on a Holocaust study trip. He also presents the Holocaust as a process that ends in 1945 and is locked in the past, disconnected from the conflict between Israel and Palestine that started in 1948, he says, and, unlike the Holocaust, continues in the present.

This limiting to the past alone is also appreciated by the study trip participants. Frederik, for example, appreciated the strict focus on the historical 'reality' of Auschwitz and the Shoah without comparative angle:

And also the fact that they purely restricted themselves, restricted is maybe negatively formulated, restricted to, to Auschwitz and the Shoah

I also find a good choice. Because you can be tempted to compare or to open it up to other genocides. Or yes, to contemporary conflicts and that it will be becoming more complex. It is already complex enough by itself.

Frederik discusses the urge to compare the Holocaust to other events in the past and present as a 'temptation' that is to be resisted. If you are disciplined enough to resist, then you can focus on the complexity of the Holocaust itself. This, for Frederik, is a relief because he believes that understanding the Holocaust 'by itself' is already 'complex enough'.

The aim of the study trip was limited to understanding the distanced past as such. I believe that, after days of constant exposure to such discourse and practices, participants internalise this distancing and stop making the links between past and present. In fact, that happened also to me during the trip. Just after my return to London from my fieldwork, I made this field note in my diary:

Actually, we almost never talked about the Hamas-Israel war, apart from one moment in Birkenau when we discussed the incident with the UN Israeli ambassador with Dr Smith. We entered a bubble of a specific historical experience and made almost no connections, I didn't even think about making them.¹

This fieldnote also indicates a third factor that can explain the absence of discussion of the conflict and mass violence in Gaza. When participating in this kind of study trip, you step out of ordinary life and enter a ritualised experience in which you become immersed. During that experience, meanings (and thus news) that are salient in ordinary life disappear in the background. The ritual experience itself is foregrounded. When you leave the ritual (as I did by going home to London) and re-enter ordinary life, you can reflect on the peculiarity of the ritual experience and see its oddities.

In my interviews, both the historians and the administrator stress the fact that they stop thinking about everyday life and the news when they are on the study trips and don't make connections with the present:

Administrator: I have it every time when I return that my son says like: 'Have you seen that?' 'No.' 'And do you know what happened there?' 'No.'

¹ Incident with the Israeli UN ambassador who was criticised for wearing a yellow Star of David in October 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/31/world/middleeast/israel-erdan-yellow-star-of-david.html>

Because you are really there with the little group in a little balloon, in a piece of a time machine that brings you back to there.

But it is not just their ritualised travel to 'there' in the past that keeps administrators and historians from making connections to the present, and thus the conflict and violence in Gaza. During the study trips, they are intensively focused on the logistics of the trips and their own presentations:

Dr Smith: We are busy with the study trip. It is not only that we want to escape that [the news about Gaza]. But it is rather yes. We are there. So, first of all, that is making sure that practically everything works well. But also, you are there in a place where that doesn't immediately. Then thinking about the present, what happens there now, but rather what happened here. So I am really independent from that [the present].

Dr Smith narrates here how he gets immersed in what happened 'here' in the past on the sites that he visits. He refers to these spaces as 'here' when he uses the narrative present and talks about the visits to the camp but refers to them as 'there' when he speaks from the position of the interview context after the study trips. Such a localised approach, focusing on the specific sites you are visiting and their past, ensures a focus on the past and precludes you from making connections to conflicts in the present that happen elsewhere. In this fragment, Dr Smith verbalises this focus on the past alone as an 'independence', which is a much stronger formulation than, e.g. a detachment. Independence assumes that he sees himself as uninfluenced by the present when he investigates and teaches the past.

Participants experienced the study trips in the way the historians intended it – as a ritualised 'trip to the past' and a project aimed at 'just' understanding specific historical events without linking them to events in the present. But some of them also regret that links to the present aren't made. This is Ibrahim talking about his expectations for the trip. He expected more links to the present, which he regrets were not made:

I fully understand that we are making a trip to the past, so we really learn things about the past. And this is maybe outside, outside the topic of the journey but if there is a link being made, then I would like it at bit. But I don't expect it really. I don't expect there to be a link made.

Other participants talk about other events in the present and recent past and make explicit comparisons with the Holocaust. These are events that

they consider safe and uncontested in the context in which they operate and speak. Uyghur repression in China, for example, is mentioned a few times by participants. I see these explicit comparisons as both resistance to the historicist approach to the Holocaust and residues of a strong moral imperative that sees Auschwitz as a symbol of what should happen 'Never Again' (see next section). The study trip participants are socialised in this moral discourse in other contexts separate from this specific study trip (e.g. in the media, in school education). Anna, a 19-year-old student in criminology who participated in the Auschwitz-Birkenau project, said that:

That is important because it can't be forgotten. Because otherwise it will surely happen again. That is mentioned a few times. If you forget is the chance that it happens more, bigger. And it is something terrible that happens. And imagine that it happens again, and there are also places where something somehow comparable is happening. I think China, there is something with camps and that is actually the same that happens again.

Anna here links the duty to remember and 'Never Again' with events in the present, Uyghur repression in China in this case. Nathalie makes a very similar connection with a series of other events:

But I have also been thinking about what happens today elsewhere. Also in Darfur, in Somalia and so forth. So actually, is it like a bit like someone who goes to a space to reflect

...

... if it concerns the Shoah, about what has been done in Japan or what has been done or what they are doing today in China, these examples help you a bit to stay a critical person.

The names 'Darfur', 'Somalia', 'Japan', and 'China' are safe references to genocidal and/or mass violence events that, for Nathalie, do not require additional explanation and that I should understand just by hearing the names. The Israeli bombing of Gaza, happening at that very moment and front-page news, is not mentioned.

Ibrahim is the big exception throughout my fieldwork when it concerns engagement with the conflict and mass violence in Gaza. In the interviews, he brought up Gaza multiple times, both before and after the study trip. For him, visiting Auschwitz is a salient experience when thinking about the

conflict in Israel and Palestine, which (unlike the other participants) he feels personally impacted by. However, there is a big difference in Ibrahim's discourse before the trip and after the trip. Before the trip, Ibrahim discussed 'Israel and Palestine' and compared it to the Holocaust by positioning himself both as an expert in the matter, as a student of Islam and Arab language, and as a member of his 'culture':

Well, I always learned at school that Auschwitz had a heavy history, and that is a really important, is a central point concerning what happened to the Jews during the Second World War. And we all learned it at school, I think, and it made us a bit scared ... we also learned how dark life was there. And yes, when I heard about this trip and about the activities, I thought that is the perfect, well the perfect way to learn. Yes, to sensibilise about discrimination and what the Jews actually learned. And I also myself have a bit a bit a bit a feeling about everything that is happening in Palestine Israel, is happened. So the link in our culture happens a lot, like what happened during the Second World War and what happens now in Palestine.

...

The history that I always learned at school itself, at my university when I studied, because I have a bachelor in Arab language and Islam. So, the topic of Israel Palestine was covered in the classes. And we see, we all know what the Jews have experienced during the Second World War. Palestine, Palestine has welcomed them, has welcomed the Jews, and now it is a bit, yes. How should say it, could I say it. It is what the Jews have lived, some Jews for sure, because there is a distinction between Jews and Zionists, uhh, what some Jews have experienced, they are doing again to other Muslims. That is a bit how I see it.

Ibrahim starts his narrative here by establishing that he learned at school about the darkness of Auschwitz and the Holocaust and its importance to Jews. This history, he then argues, serves well to teach about discrimination in general. Then, having established his epistemic authority, he moves on to compare the Holocaust to the current conflict in Palestine. He 'feels' that the Holocaust is happening again in Palestine. This view, he states, is dominant within 'our culture', with which he implicitly refers to Muslim communities in Western Europe.

In the second part of the fragment, the narrative follows a similar logic and structure. First, Ibrahim established his epistemic authority as a student

of the Arabic language and Islam, as well as the Israel-Palestine conflict. After this, he argues that Palestinians have welcomed the Jews after the Holocaust and that some Jews ('Zionists') are now repeating their 'experience' of the Holocaust on Muslims.

After the trip, Ibrahim positions himself again as a member of the 'Arab culture' and part of a family in which the conflict between Israel and Palestine is discussed often. But now, after the trip, he argues that he has a role in the family that is focused on complicating, nuancing, and contextualising the historical comparisons between the Holocaust and the Israel-Palestine conflict other people in his family often make. This role was absent in his discourse before the trip:

My father found it very interesting, he asked me some question. Also a bit saying like 'ah, you know, you see, it is like that'. That happens a lot in our Arab culture, no for the moment, people don't make the distinction between what happens in Israel and what happens. I mean with that that you, one says a lot, people say like 'yes, but look, they have experienced it all, now they are doing it again, you see'. Then I say: 'no, there is a distinction between Zionists and Jews and so forth and so forth and so forth', you see. That was the specific discussion I had with my father.

For Ibrahim, it is clearly impossible not to talk about the conflict in Palestine when discussing Auschwitz and the Holocaust. In contrast to other participants, he feels personally affected by it through culture and family. This feeling of the 'presence' of the conflict trumps the potentially contentious nature of the topic in specific interactions. In this fragment, he also describes how he can use factual information in very affect-heavy situations at home. In the interview, I observed that once Ibrahim has sufficiently established his epistemic authority in the matter, he feels confident about engaging with Israel-Palestine. Other participants, however, don't bring Israel-Palestine up, either because they are not thinking about it or because they consider other events safer to discuss.

Never Again: Reproducing the Macro Cultural Norm

During both projects, my participants were barely exposed to explicit moral meanings attributed to the Holocaust on the part of the historians. It is only during my interviews, when I explicitly asked them to moralise, that they had to mobilise moral vocabularies (Lowe 2006). Curiously, what I find is

that on these occasions they exclusively resort to 'Never Again', as a ritual phrase, encompassing all the culturalised morality and affect that should be connected to Auschwitz without further discursive elaboration. Only in the case of some participants does 'Never Again' function as a starting point to formulate some moral discourse about tolerance and equality.

It seems that when the participants in these two study trips are somehow forced by me to moralise during the interview, they resort to the specific moral meanings and discourse that are already culturally dominant in their contexts, even though these specific meanings were not reiterated during the respective study trip projects. They pull down dominant cultural meanings in specific interactions when they are required to (Swidler 1986, Warfield-Rawls & Turrowetz 2021). In that respect, they didn't learn anything new in the projects. Their 'catalogue' of potential moral meanings that could be attributed to the Holocaust didn't grow and didn't become more diverse during the trip (see also Van de Putte 2021). It was especially with participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau that this dynamic happened, and less so with participants in the Aktion Reinhardt project.

Anna phrases it like this when I ask her after participating in the study trip why she finds the Holocaust important:

So it never happens again. That every human is equal. And there isn't something like people who are of lesser value than us. Or people who are superior. Everything like that doesn't exist. We are all people and no one has more rights to live than anyone else.

For other participants, 'Never Again' is tightly linked to the learning and understanding of the factuality of the Holocaust. They believe that learning the facts of the Holocaust should lead to further genocide prevention. Nathalie makes this connection when she talks about why she finds it important to teach the Holocaust in the secondary school classes where she teaches history: 'but especially empowering students to not make it get to that point, and to realise which mechanisms are taking place'. Nathalie doesn't elaborate on which precise mechanisms these are and how students should be empowered. Philip, however, makes the connection between historical understanding and generalisability and 'Never Again' when we talked about perpetrators and their motives after the study trip. He believes that studying history and the Holocaust is important to recognise similar patterns in the present and future:

Philip: It is a good idea to read *Mein Kampf* not to—

Interviewer: [Yes.]

Philip: become a Nazi but to better be able to understand what they thought, what they did.

Interviewer: Aha, yes, yes, yes ok. And in general, a political or moral question. Why for you, why is the Holocaust important for you? Why is it an important part of history?

Philip: I think it is a sort of scheme is what can happen in the future. Or there have always been genocides so we can hope that we can learn from that.

...

Philip: That yes ... that we shouldn't discriminate people on the basis of their skin colour or their religion and so forth. That in a way is the beginning of a genocide and if we can avoid these ways of thinking—

Interviewer: Yes.

Philip: that is the best.

Ibrahim even mentions that 'Never Again' was the main message he remembers from the study trip, even though it wasn't brought up during the lectures: 'Mmmm, I would say "Never Again". That is the main message that I have remembered. That it can't happen again. Like I said during the first interview, that is really what I want to learn'. But Ibrahim (and other participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip) was exposed to 'Never Again' on other occasions. During the commemoration ceremony in Birkenau, for example, all participants were asked to lay a red rose on the Birkenau memorial which, in 23 languages, says: 'For ever let this place be a cry of despair and a warning to humanity, where the Nazis murdered about one and a half million men, women and children, mainly Jews from various countries of Europe. Auschwitz-Birkenau 1940–1945'. These brief encounters with memorial meanings, which were not provided to them by the historians, but by other actors (the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, in this case), were very salient for my participants, and they vividly remember them after the trip. I discuss these commemorative modes of engagement with the Holocaust in Chapter 2.

On some occasions, referencing 'Never Again' also serves as an opportunity for my participants to start reflecting on other genocides and forms of violence in the present or more recent past. John – a participant in the Aktion Reinhardt project – mentions repression of the Uyghurs in China, 'genocides' in 'Africa', and the rising popularity of the extreme right in Europe, and connects it to a 'Never Again' discourse before he leaves on the Aktion Reinhardt study trip:

Interviewer: Why do you find it important to know what has happened?

John: Because it is possible. Well, yes, who are we of course to really to prevent that that doesn't repeat itself again. And genocide is from all days and from all eras of all periods and of all continents. Look at China with the Uyghurs and so forth and in Africa, genocides. But yes, from that we can maybe see what is happening in our own Europe on the political front. The evolution to the extreme right and things like that. So, to find connections and to see warning signs.

Despite the mobilisation of 'Never Again', John also presents himself as lacking agency in preventing genocidal violence and the rise of the extreme right. Learning about the Holocaust allows him to see 'connections' and 'warning signs' but doesn't offer him a repertoire of actions.

Similarly, David links 'Never Again' to the war in Ukraine and the eruption of the conflict between Hamas and Israel in Gaza, but recognises his own powerlessness and lack of agency:

David: Auschwitz is more the symbol of, yes, the things that shouldn't happen again.

...

David: Yes of course that it can't happen again. That, that it can happen quite easily if you look at the news. And yes, because yes, that is a bit yes, what can you do about it? You are standing there powerless if you look at the current situation.

Interviewer: Which situation do you mean?

David: Yes, about what, in Ukraine war, with Israel-Palestine. Those things. Yes, I think that there is a lot that we don't know of what is happening.

In short, when I ask my participants to explicitly moralise the Holocaust, they reproduce a moral discourse ('Never Again the Holocaust') that they were socialised into before they participated in the respective projects. They connected this phrase to other, more specific, moral vocabularies about tolerance and equality that they had gotten to know before the trips, and which were activated during the commemorative interactions during the study trip. But during the parts of the projects of which the historians were in charge, they were not exposed to any new moral meanings that could be attributed to the Holocaust. Additionally, the discourses of the two historians that they were exposed to were heavily invested in facts, neutrality, and avoidance of explicit moralisation. This leaves them with only the macro culturally dominant meaning when they are required to moralise in interviews.

Some Critical Responses and Nuances

It is clear from the previous sections that the two historians managed, in general, quite well in performing their discourse of moral distance in interaction with laypeople. They brought across the idea of historical distance when approaching the Holocaust: The Holocaust is properly part of the past and should be treated factually and objectively without additional explicit moralising. The facts of the Holocaust, they believe, are already morally valuable in themselves and should inform the moral judgements of the participants without the help of the historians. At large, the laypeople that I observed and interviewed are appreciative of this approach to the Holocaust and reproduce it (with some nuances) in the interviews.

But I want to finish this chapter by highlighting that this 'reproduction' is never perfect. There are always small instances of contention among the participants. After both the Aktion Reinhardt and the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip project, there were three participants in total who didn't find 'the facts as such' sufficient. They expected and required some more explicit moral meaning, coming from the historians, for them to attribute to the past.

Patrick, for example, found that the foundation and the historians could have made a better case about why the Holocaust is still relevant today. He looks therefore to a discourse about human rights and argues for a more presentist approach:

They have to broaden it. And the people should, from the news, the most newsworthy human rights that are being violated. They have to come

down to the past from the present and the discriminations and the war and the injustice with which people are being treated. They should bring the message that there is 'nothing new under the sun' to say it like that.

Other participants explicitly complained about the absence of moral meaning while being interviewed. Nathalie for example, said: 'I think that this morality or that sense-making maybe lacked a bit, in my opinion. But again, what about the statutes of the foundation and, secondly, this is my perspective as a teacher'. Nathalie wanted small breakout groups at the end of each day during the study trip, to be able to make sense together about the experiences of the day. She also communicated to the historians via an evaluation form that she really needed these moments of shared reflection. Nathalie clearly relies on her pedagogical sensibility as a teacher when she makes these comments.

On the other hand, Mary, a retired mathematics teacher who joined her husband during the trip, is ambiguous about her need for moral meaning. First, she reiterates the value of distance and factuality. However, when I probed her about the absence of moral meaning, she first argued that more moralising would be welcome, but in the end modified her argument. She believed a more moralising position would not be welcomed by a broader audience and perceived as patronising:

Mary: What they were telling us wasn't fake news, eh, they know that that is correct information.

Interviewer: But they say for example, it was in their brochure that the aim was not to be moralising about the Holocaust. So, to give facts. And then everything can do things they want to do with the facts, that is yeah.

Mary: Yes, I think they could have been a bit more moralising. I think yes. Oh yes, it is maybe good that they don't do it because then the public will think like 'ooof, there they are again'.

In short, there were small moments of contention against the distancing discourse in my interviews. At least three participants mentioned that they would have welcomed more sense-making and moral meaning, apart from the (highly valued) factual detail. These instances, however, are rare occasions and happened only in my interviews. In face-to-face interactions during the trip, I had not observed historians being challenged by participants.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the first of four discursive and practice strategies employed by the two academic historians when they interacted with interested laypeople in Holocaust memory education. To perform historical distance, the historians position the Holocaust as 'fact' in the past alone. As a historical fact, they argue that the Holocaust can be rationally understood. To accomplish such distance, the Holocaust needs to be stripped of any explicit moral meaning and any connections to other past and present events. The morally disinterested approach to the past that focuses on facts is, they argue, inherently more valuable than other, more engaged approaches. They also believe that the facts can be judged morally, but that it is not their task as historians to do so. Additionally, focusing on the facts of the past alone prevents possible arguments and conflicts in the group about issues in the present. In general, my participants welcomed this approach, largely internalised it, and performed it during the study trip and in the interviews. They said they valued rationality, detail, objectivity, understanding, and facts and they spoke up against moralising approaches to the Holocaust.

There are some specific discourses that are core constituents of this performance of distance that I have discussed in this chapter. First, historians infused their discourses with excessive factual detail. Participants in both projects picked up this detail and its value and reproduced it in interviews. Second, historians presented themselves as counteracting 'collective memory'. 'Collective memory' is seen as distorting the factuality of the past, especially the past of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip project eagerly reproduced this 'against collective memory' trope. Third, the historians didn't make any connections or comparisons between the Holocaust and other genocides in the past, or violence in the present. That strategy is only partly reproduced by the participants. They re-actualise the meaning of the Holocaust by comparing it to other events, but always (with two exceptions) to events about which there exists a broader consensus about their meaning in their respective contexts of socialisation. The conflict between Israel and Hamas, in this case, was the elephant in the room that remained mostly unaddressed.

If I probed my participants to moralise, despite the absence of explicit moral meaning during the trip, most of them mobilised a discourse that they had been socialised into before the trip. They talked about the duty to remember and 'Never Again'. The trip itself didn't provide them with new moral meanings, and they had to practice what was culturally dominant if they were required to moralise. Finally, I have also noted three participants

who (sometimes ambiguously) lamented the absence of moral meaning during the trip. These small signs of resistance, however, are only exceptional. At large, the strategy to strip the Holocaust of explicit moral meaning on the part of the historians was largely accepted and reproduced by the white, middle class Western Europeans that I studied.

In the next chapter, I outline how the two historians also resisted affect and emotion as part of their distancing strategies. In many cases, I have shown that affect and morality are mentioned together as undesirable. However, a historicist and distanced discourse about the Holocaust without affect and emotion has different (often unintended) consequences on laypeople's discourse and practices than one without explicit morality.

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2. Holocaust Memory without Emotions

Abstract: In this chapter, I analyse the performances that facilitate a distant, non-emotional approach to the Holocaust. I show how othering emotional approaches performed by other groups supports this distancing strategy. These ‘others’ were Israeli Jews, and (indirectly) survivors. The foundation and its historians present their approach of distance as superior to the approach of these other groups, which is accepted by lay participants. In practice, however, the interactions with both the past and these other groups are very affective. My participants often get frustrated by more emotional approaches to the Holocaust, which can lead to xenophobic statements and actions. Finally, I discuss four cases of genre shifts between historical narration and commemorative performance. These shifts facilitate affective practice, but are often interactionally awkward.

Keywords: affect, commemoration, Israel, Gaza, survivors

On day five of the Aktion Reinhardt study trip, the group visited the Belzec memorial site and museum. The visit consisted of a short, five-minute introduction to the site by the museum director, and then we visited the small museum before having free time to visit the memorialised site in its entirety by ourselves. The small museum in Belzec also includes a ‘contemplative room’, a dark, empty, and silent room of about 20 by 10 metres, closed off from the rest of the museum with thick concrete walls. Inside the room, there is nothing to see or visit. It is an empty space with limited lighting. Before the visit to the museum, the two historians told the group not to enter that room yet. We would be going there together after having visited the exhibition.

Nevertheless, one participant, Marc, entered the room by himself before the rest of the group finished visiting the exhibition. I was standing in the connecting corridor between the exhibition and the silent room, discussing the contents of the exhibition with Dr Jones, when Marc suddenly came out

of the silent room crying. He approached Dr Jones and me and said that he didn't know what was happening to him and that he was out of control. He then took Dr Jones's hand to dry his tears. Dr Jones didn't know how to react and started laughing, causing an awkward situation that was normalised by me taking over from Dr Jones, trying to console Marc.

In my interview with Marc after the Aktion Reinhardt trip, he recounts how he experienced that episode:

Well, yes, yes, well, for some reason, probably out of curiosity I first entered there first by myself I open the door very cautiously because I didn't know what I would see there in the silent room. I thought about a sort of chapel with seats, but you directly see the concrete tube really. And yes, I was there completely alone. And you couldn't see the end of it because of the darkness. And I go. The door, I let it close very carefully. I kept it open for four or five or six centimetres from the doorpost. Then the door closed and I heard the echo. Well, that was acoustically something special. And then I went in the room because there is a panel. And the little grains of sand under my feet crunch quite a bit. And you hear the echo resonate. You are alone there, that by itself didn't really affect me. But then Dr Smith entered and I had returned a bit from the other side. And Dr Smith said: I will show for what this is actually made. And I see him hit a wall, that that first wall. And then, of course, you directly have the echo that returns as a cannon shot and then expands and becomes silent. And then you are there in the silence. And you are with two but you are actually alone. And then you think automatically about, or Dr Smith said something like: in fact, the Shoah is going somewhere with a lot of people, and suddenly, he says, there is nothing. And it is, like, over, or the silence. And then you suddenly think about the Jews and the non-Jews who were massacred. And in a way that affected me, I don't know any more. But I went outside. No, I started crying immediately and started shivering and shaking.

Interviewer: Yes, yes.

Marc: And then I felt tears dripping from my eyes in my beard and I went outside. And then it was already over. Well, it is like, I don't know. I don't which nervous system that then. It is exaggerated, but I was almost hyperventilating. Well, that was very emotionally catching, touching moment for me. But once outside, well, it was over again. And I remember still that you came to me and said: Marc, go a bit outside. But I said it is not necessary anymore it has, well, passed.

Marc's story is one where the emotion comes suddenly and unexpectedly. During the first five days of the study trip, Marc was exposed to a performance of historical distance, which treated the Holocaust almost exclusively without emotion. Then, being unprepared, Marc quickly moved between the realm of historical narration (the exhibition) to the realm of memory and emotion (the contemplative room). This quick change was unsettling for Marc. He wasn't prepared for a sudden shift in treatment of the Holocaust. When one of the historians enters the room with him and demonstrates the metaphorical meaning of the room, Marc is overwhelmed by emotion. He 'suddenly' had to think about the victims of the Holocaust, which he didn't do much in the four days before. Marc didn't manage to understand or explain his sudden burst of emotion; he seeks meaning in symptom descriptions that come from his psychological training: disruption of the nervous system and hyperventilation. Marc felt like he had to leave the contemplative room to regain control over his emotions. He could narrate this episode two weeks later during the interview with me in plenty of detail (e.g. the little grains of sand crunching under his feet, the door slowly closing) and in reported speech, which adds to the dramatising effect of his narrative performance and the engagement it creates (Tannen 1989). However, ten minutes after this episode, Marc was able to re-enter the contemplative room again with the rest of the group, an episode I discuss at the end of this chapter.

Distancing the Holocaust means getting rid of its affective load. The two historians in charge of most of the contents of both study trips make a lot of discursive and performative effort to reduce affective engagement with and emotional reaction to the Holocaust. However, leaps into affect and emotion are inevitable, as the episode in Bełżec demonstrates. Six million people were murdered during the Holocaust. To be confronted with both the physical remains of the Holocaust, and testimonies of survivors will inevitably lead to affective and emotional responses among study trip participants. As the case of Marc demonstrates, these sudden leaps in emotion can come unexpectedly and can cause discomfort and interactional awkwardness. That is the case for both the historians as well as the laypeople. My participants had been exposed to so much of a distanced treatment of the Holocaust during the study trips that they were unprepared for and surprised by any sudden emotional engagement.

In this chapter, I analyse the discourses and performances that facilitate a distanced, non-emotional approach to the Holocaust. I demonstrate, in the first part of this chapter, that discourses on the part of historians against emotion were largely effective. Lay participants in both study trips reproduced these discourses against emotion. Then, I demonstrate how

othering emotional approaches performed by other groups supports this distancing strategy.

In the case of the two study trips that I analysed, the groups that were othered were the ones that were co-present in the musealised realms with the group I observed. They were mostly Israeli groups and (indirectly) survivors, who treated the Holocaust more affectively. Although the foundation and its historians present their approach of distance as superior to the approach of these other groups, interactions with these groups were very affective, even on the part of my participants. My participants would often get frustrated by more emotional approaches to the Holocaust, which could lead to xenophobic statements. In the case of the othering of co-present Israeli Jews, these practices fed into pre-existing stereotypes held by the participants.

This chapter also serves a theoretical agenda. The humanities and qualitative social sciences have turned to affect and embodiment in the last two decades (e.g. Ahmed 2004, Giese & Keightley 2022, Wetherell 2012). The idea that we can fully understand who people are by only analysing their (spoken or written) texts has been challenged. We now look at people as embodying meanings, identities, and emotions. The way I treat both my observational and discursive data in this chapter is strongly influenced by these insights. I look at how people perform emotion (or lack thereof) in their discourses as well as their physical gestures and expressions, how they coordinate those in groups and in relation to structures of authority and norms. However, what I will try to avoid is treating bodily affective practices as somehow impulsive or premediated. Nothing about the things people feel, the emotions they express, or the way they make sense of their feelings is premediated or innate. Cultural meanings, interactional dynamics, the materiality of space and place all directly inform affective practice.

In that respect, I adopt an approach to affective practice that is indebted to work in sociolinguistics and discursive psychology (Wetherell 2012, 2013, 2015) and in the anthropology of mass violence (e.g. Navaro-Yashin 2009, 2012). For Wetherell, the discursive and the non-discursive are entangled in affective practice and that entanglement should also dictate how they are studied. For Navaro, both subjective experience and material (and social) context inform affective practice. Fine-grained description and analysis of both observational and speech data can provide us with an understanding of the social dynamics of affect and its practice.

Getting Rid of Emotions

For Historians

Morality and emotion are tightly connected in the creation of historical distance. Moral judgement of events and people in the past, or moral meaning derived from the past to judge the present, is often supported by feelings that are provoked by representations of the past and its actors. Past events you feel bad about also make you judge them morally as bad. At the same time, if someone is required to take moral distance from the past and avoid moral judgement, then this also requires resisting feeling something about that past, or at the very least minimising these feelings when you are engaging with the past. The entanglement of moral and emotional distance is discussed in the scholarly literature about professional historiography (see, e.g. Paul 2011, Philips 2013), but it is also essential in practices of historical distance in interactions between the two historians and laypeople I observed.

When the two historians who led the two study trips introduced the aim of the trips for future participants, they stressed that emotion and morality were not aspects of the trip they dealt with. As mentioned in the previous chapter, during the preparation session for the Aktion Reinhardt project, participants were told by an administrator to avoid political discussion and questions to preserve the 'group atmosphere' during an emotionally 'heavy trip'. They were also told not to expect psychological assistance during the trip but were promised 'vodka every night to forget everything again'. Dr Jones added that participants will not be told whom to vote for at the end of the trip. These interactions demonstrate that normative messages of moral and emotional distance are firmly entangled.

This entanglement of morality and emotion, and the attempts to get rid of both while discussing the Holocaust, is also present in the discourses of the historians during the interviews. Dr Jones, for example, stresses that both historians choose a factual and neutral approach above one that mobilises affective and sentimental dimensions, such as was done by survivors when they still joined the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip. He stresses that 'the facts are already bad enough' and that extra 'pathos' isn't necessary:

It is also not the goal to attach more pathos to it than necessary. Again, here we have. For those who. If we don't want to influence politically. The facts are already bad enough. Then if we there, yes, have to take our violin and make the people cry. That is one of the problems that we had, well yes, it is relative, but the survivors added affect to it to stress that

they really suffered. But even if they would have brought it in a neutral way, it would have worked.

For Dr Jones, the political and moral meaning of Auschwitz is strongly supported by affective practice, both of which can and should be avoided. He believes that describing and explaining the 'facts' (that are already 'bad enough') is sufficient. Dr Smith also supports this vision. He links the affective dimensions to the detail in which suffering is being described. In an interview with me after the study trips, he laments the dramatising and 'morbid' effects in which people's suffering in the gas chamber is sometimes described in popular culture. Instead, he prefers to describe what happens in the gas chambers 'scientifically' as a purely chemical process:

I don't think we have to, I think that we just, how should I put that. I think that we go enough into detail without going into the morbid or the uncomfortable ... the furthest we go concerning that is, for example, to explain what the effect is of Zyklon B, thus cyanide, and carbomonoxyde. Yes, that is already, that is then very scientifically considered. That is our limit.

During my interviews with the two historians, I also had long exchanges in which I asked them about their own emotional engagement with the Holocaust and their feelings during the educational projects and in their research. As I will outline in the rest of this chapter, Dr Smith becomes emotional during short commemorative ceremonies in the study trip, while Dr Jones keeps, somewhat cynically, distance from these ceremonies. In the interview, however, both elaborated extensively on the coping mechanisms they employ to be able to continue doing this job. One of these coping mechanisms is the use of sick humour, which I turn to in Chapter 4.

Dr Jones, who in recent years became a father of two, describes a struggle to cope with testimonies of child victims, something that changed since he has become a father:

Personally, I can shield myself from this very well ... Emotionally it became, let's say, emotionally stronger ... what changed now is that since I became a father. If there is testimony about children that are going to be murdered after a few seconds in the gas chambers or the pit where they will be shot. Now I can perfectly fill in the faces of these children because I see my own.

Having moved from the history of ancient Rome and Greece to the history of the Holocaust, he also describes how the Holocaust was a 'historical object'

just like the ancient world, which required the same 'emotional effort' as the Holocaust, which has now changed for him since he became a father. At the same time, however, Dr Jones stresses that it is important to find coping mechanisms and protect himself:

Well, I found it also somehow important to not be too immersed in it, well, otherwise I wouldn't be able to do this job. Because if every time I return after a study trip depressed then we would not be doing well. That would be destructive.

Dr Jones believes that showing these emotions in front of laypeople would be potentially damaging for them. He says that he doesn't want to hurt participants by showing 'pathos'. Dr Smith endorses this idea; it is important to resist emotion in front of laypeople to protect them:

Maybe we already have a callus layer. We deal with it every day, so that you actually don't think about it much anymore. But that also grew during the trips, that we know, like, we don't need to go further, you know, you don't have to hurt someone.

Dr Smith realises that he, as a Holocaust historian who studies the Holocaust every day, is used to exposure to the horror of the Holocaust, while laypeople need to be protected from it. At another moment during the interview, he also describes how the emotional reactions of the participants sometimes come as a surprise to him and that he needs to keep on reminding himself that the laypeople he takes on study trips are not used to learning about the Holocaust as he is, and that they might react emotionally. On the other hand, Dr Smith also tries to understand why the groups of Western Europeans he brings to the former sites of the Holocaust react less emotionally than other groups he sees. Here, he makes the comparison to the groups that I observed and a group of Germans with whom he joined on a study trip a few years before:

I think that is also easier for the [country nationals] because we had a victim role during the war. So we can go there for information, and not for a sort of pilgrimage. Like the Germans who go there like 'what did our grandparents, parents do?'

Two aspects of this reasoning are striking and will be developed further on this book. First, he considers the participants as descendants of victims,

not as 'implicated subjects' (Rothberg 2019), people whose ancestors were involved in the conflict and genocide during the Nazi occupation of their country, but not as clear perpetrators or victims. For Dr Smith, this collective victimhood absolves the Western European gentiles from feelings of guilt which thus allows them to treat the Holocaust from a rational distance ('for information') without having to deal with their own historical involvement. Second, he doesn't reflect on the present social position of his participants as affluent people who aren't discriminated against, which might also reduce the possibility of fellow-feeling with the victims of the Holocaust.

In short, Dr Jones and Dr Smith believe that the Holocaust needs to be stripped of 'pathos' for laypeople. The reasons for that are threefold. First, they believe that the facts themselves are already 'bad enough' and don't require additional dramatising, which would potentially distort these facts. Secondly, they want to protect lay participants from 'hurt' by treating the Holocaust more emotionally strictly. And finally, for themselves, they realised that it is emotionally difficult to deal with constant exposure to Holocaust memory, for which they found coping mechanisms. But what do lay participants make of this approach?

For Laypeople

Normative discourses 'against emotion' performed by the two historians in front of laypeople were generally quite effective among my participants, especially among the male participants (the vast majority during the study trips). They largely reproduced those, even though they struggled emotionally during the trip.

Take Marc, who, before leaving for the trip (but after the induction in the capital), reproduced a normative discourse against emotion that stands in sharp contrast to his experience in the contemplative room. He presents the more emotional discourse in reported speech, uttered by an imagined 'other':

Yes, yes, yes it doesn't have to be tearful. With saying: 'do you realise how many Jews have died? And have died a horrible death? And imagine yourself in their place'. So it doesn't need to be empathetic. They took a neutral and objective perspective. And I could appreciate that.

His brother Patrick took a very similar perspective. When I asked him after the Aktion Reinhardt study trip to assess the stress on either history or commemoration and on either rationality or emotion, he expressed his appreciation for a 'factual approach':

Interviewer: And if you need to say on what was the most stress: on facts or on feelings, or commemoration between these three poles?

Patrick: Yes, for me the facts were more important.

The same explicit discourses against emotion appeared among participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau trip, of which I would like to bring up two examples. David, the first-year law student, talked to me after the study trip about the conversations he had about his experience of the study trip with his family members:

Uhm, their reactions. Yes, also like, yes that they say: 'it is good that you did it with this organisation, that you really got the information'. And then I said also like: 'Yes, they are the real facts that they gave, and you don't go there to approach it like emotionally'. Yeah, maybe partly yes, but that is not the main issue.

David stresses that both he and his family valued the 'real facts' the historians were giving. That, for him, should be the main purpose of visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau, not emotions. However, at the end of his statement he modifies this radical position and recognises that emotions should be part of the experience but should not be the focus.

Philip also recognised that the stress was on 'facts' and not 'emotion' during the Auschwitz-Birkenau project:

Uhm, yes, euh, I don't know if there was time spent on emotion itself, but yes, everything was factual. Also during the lectures. It was especially the names of the groups, the numbers and so forth. It was not that they said that it was regrettable because we understand that it is regrettable.

For Philip, the fact that the Holocaust was 'regrettable' is obvious and shouldn't be especially stressed during the trip. Instead, historians should (and did) focus on facts that are potentially new for the participants. In saying that 'we understand that it is regrettable' without it needing to be mentioned, Philip endorses the historians' philosophy about facts and their morality, saying that participants don't require explicit moralising and/or emotion from the historians because they already understand that the facts of the Holocaust are bad and regrettable.

However, in practice, highly emotional interactions do appear during the study trips despite an omnipresent discourse that either ignores them

or counters them, even among the lay participants who want to treat the Holocaust rationally and from a distance. The contents participants are exposed to are often so cruel that they can't do otherwise than to show and share emotions. During the visit to the Auschwitz I site, on the second day of the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip, I observed a significant amount of my participants crying during the guided tour. Two elements of the exhibition were especially tough for them. First, were the piles of shoes, luggage, and hair from victims that were exhibited in some of the barracks. And second, the photographs of children who were subjected to the medical experiments of Josef Mengele. Among the participants that I paid special attention to was Nathalie, who struggled most with these parts of the exhibition.

At the end of that guided tour of Auschwitz I, I walked next to Dr Smith. We were on the way from the end point of the tour to the so-called Death Wall (the main place in Auschwitz I where executions took place), where we would hold a minute of silence (which I discuss later in this chapter). Reflecting on the ceremony that was about to take place, Dr Smith cynically commented: 'And now we need to let some tears.' In Dr Smith's discourses, this cynicism about emotion feeds into a self-representation in which he sincerely presents his distanced and objective approach to the Holocaust as superior to the emotional approach that he is supposed to slip into from time to time because the commemorative genre requires it from him. As I will show later in this chapter, cynicism might also function as a protective strategy for him. On some occasions, Dr Smith had moments when he couldn't keep his emotions under control. To his initial cynical statement, I replied that some participants already suffered during the trip, referring to those that I saw crying. To this Dr Smith replied, again cynically, 'Well, didn't they understand? The story ended well'. I didn't say anything in response, struggling to make sense of the meaning and implications of Dr Smith's statement. Then, after about a minute, he asked me seriously: 'Are you serious that they were struggling?' Dr Smith, at first, treated my sincere mentioning of emotion cynically. Only later, after he had time to reflect, did he express sincere puzzlement about the fact that participants reacted emotionally to the exhibition. It appeared that he could not comprehend the possibility of an absence of cynicism among the participants.

In short, one of the historian's strategies to construct distance between themselves, the participants, and the Holocaust was to strip the Holocaust of its emotional meaning. For these historians, the Holocaust should be treated rationally and understood as such. To some extent, these discourses are effective. As I have demonstrated here, participants reproduced them in interviews. But in practice, it proves to be impossible to tell people not to

show emotion when confronted with the Holocaust. The norm is impossible to practise. For many of my participants, the educational projects are unsettling at certain moments. The accompanying historians, who themselves have normalised interactions with Holocaust memory and history and who have found coping strategies, struggle to understand these emotions on the part of the participants.

But the stripping of the Holocaust of its emotional load is not just a theoretical and/or discursive operation on the part of the historians. It goes together with specific 'othering' practices in which co-present groups are 'othered' as practising emotional, and thus inferior, approaches to the Holocaust.

Othering Jews and Survivors

While visiting sites of Holocaust memory, we were seldom alone. Other groups occupied the same memorialised spaces. Of those other groups, Israeli groups were often the most visible. When encountering those other groups, the two historians showed frustration at their more emotional approaches to the Holocaust. In these instances, they argued in front of the participants for the superiority of their own distanced and rational approach to the site and its past. In many cases, these performances were very effective. After the study trips, participants were mostly convinced that they had treated the site and its past in the 'right' way, in contrast to other groups. For the participants, these performances and discourses of othering also inadvertently activated pre-existing ethnic stereotypes and prejudices, mostly about Jews and Israelis.

But othering practices towards other groups were not restricted to those groups that physically shared the same spaces during the trips. They also extended across time with groups that weren't physically co-present. The two historians also 'other' Holocaust survivors and their testimonies. For them, these people and their accounts are too emotionally involved; they often unnecessarily compete for prominence among each other and distort the factuality of the past. With none of the survivors present to counter-argue, this signifying and repositioning of the survivors and their testimonies became a dominant discourse during the trips.

In this part of this chapter, I disentangle specific practices of othering on the parts of the historians as well as the participants. I focus first on discourses and practices towards Israeli groups. Then, I discuss discourses and practices of othering towards Holocaust survivors.

Othering Israeli Groups

Interactions between the group of Western Europeans that I observed and Israeli groups happened mostly during the Aktion Reinhardt study trip project. On the sites of the former Warsaw Ghetto, in Chełmno, in Majdanek, and in Sobibór, Israeli groups were present while we were conducting our visit. During the Auschwitz-Birkenau project, on the other hand, we did not encounter Israeli groups. There would have been plenty of Israeli groups at Auschwitz-Birkenau, but our visit took place at the end of October 2023, just three weeks after the 7th of October attacks in Israel and the intensification of the violence in Gaza. Most of the flights between Israel and Poland were cancelled and Israeli groups could not visit Auschwitz-Birkenau. The data I analyse here thus only concerns the Aktion Reinhardt project and its participants.

The first time our group encountered an Israeli group was on the very first day of the Aktion Reinhardt study trip. After having had lunch in a hotel close to the airport, our bus driver left the group in Warsaw's city centre to visit the remains of the so-called Small Ghetto. This site consists of a small memorial next to one of the few remaining original walls of the ghetto. It is in a quiet pedestrian area in the middle of residential apartment buildings in today's central Warsaw. Shortly after we entered the site, a group of Israeli teenagers also entered. Our group occupied the same small space around the wall and were explained the history of the Small Ghetto by our respective guides. Dr Smith, then in charge of the tour, became immediately frustrated by the presence of the Israeli group because they acted too loudly for him. He addressed our group, saying that a part of the memorial site is now closed because he believes inhabitants of the quarter started to become frustrated by the noise from Israeli groups.

After our visit to the site of the Small Ghetto, the tour proceeded with a four-hour tour (both on foot and by bus) around the whole of the former Warsaw Ghetto. Throughout the tour, we continuously met Israeli groups. Both Dr Smith's and Dr Jones's frustrations with these groups kept increasing, and they were very vocal about them in front of the participants. The tour ended around what is now the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which is built on one of the main sites of violence during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (1943). While Dr Jones was doing his explanation about the site, an Israeli group of teenagers entered the same site with a partisan song in Yiddish on speakers. Dr Smith immediately became critical and exclaimed: 'If we should arrive here with music like that...'. He lamented the fact that Israeli groups are allowed more than others on Holocaust memorial sites. Dr Smith then addressed the group, saying that the commemorative tours of

the Israeli groups were not factually correct enough. He said: 'Then you get that stuff that day and night Jews were killed in the concentration camps'. No one in the group verbally reacted to his frustration. In my field notes, I wrote that it seems that the group was puzzled about his frustration, and they didn't seem to understand what his frustration was about. Now, after my period of ethnography, I know that Dr Smith is generally frustrated with representations of the Holocaust that highlight that the gassing of Jews was a constant, 24/7 process, while in reality it was concentrated around planned arrivals of transports at extermination sites. He considers this misrepresentation overtly dramatising.

As is clear from this ethnographic vignette, the historians' strong belief in rationality, factuality, and 'against emotion' leads to very strong affective practices on their own part when they are confronted with the more emotional approaches to the Holocaust. The historians I studied and some of my participating laypeople became angry, frustrated, annoyed, or xenophobic when they saw other groups treating the Holocaust with more emotions than they, supposedly changing factual accounts for emotional effects. In these cases, paradoxically, a discourse of radical emotional distance leads to very affective practices on the historians' part.

When the Aktion Reinhardt study trip proceeded, in the days following the episode outlined above, some of the participants also became vocal, critical, and frustrated about the Israeli groups we met. I believe that they sensed that because the historians were so openly critical, they felt validated in being critical as well. At the same time, the historians' argument against the emotional approach to the Holocaust was internalised and already performed by group members. Throughout the week, the participants' attitudes intensified and radicalised, often resulting in outspoken antisemitism. I believe that the distant attitudes of the two historians, which led them to voice criticism of the more emotional Israeli groups, created a context for the participants in which it was acceptable to voice critical (and sometimes even antisemitic) discourses and opinions. In other circumstances, with other tour guides, the same participants might still have held the same opinions but maybe wouldn't have found the normative reality to voice them out loud.

During our visit to Majdanek, for example, on day four of the study trip, we met at least four Israeli groups of teenagers. Upon arrival at the site, participants immediately commented on the Israeli groups, expressing frustration about the flags they carried: 'They are walking around with flags here'. In the continuation of the conversation among my participants, the Israeli flag became an example of how, they believe, Israeli groups claim a

certain space, wanting to make themselves seen and attract attention. Dr Smith joined this conversation about this sense of entitlement as well: '80 years ago they had less to say here'.

However, the contentious interaction in Majdanek did not stay limited to in-group and backstage conversation. It also became physical from time to time. Because of the size of the Israeli groups (about 20 people per group), they often occupied large parts of the barracks in which the exhibition was located. On one occasion, one of my participants became very frustrated with their presence and pushed away some of the Israeli youth to have more space to enter a barrack. Dr Smith was also troubled by how the Israeli groups occupied the exhibition space in the barracks. Often, they would sit in a circle in those barracks and sing songs together. Dr Smith was angry about this behaviour, especially because some of the songs were of a religious nature, which he, as an outspoken atheist, found inappropriate on former sites of the Holocaust. In the interviews, however, some participants also said that they were touched by this singing and that they found it beautiful. I discuss these statements later in this chapter. However, when this frustration about Israeli groups was voiced in Majdanek by Dr Smith, none of the participants stood up to challenge it.

In my interview with him after the study trips, Dr Smith couldn't contain his frustration with Israeli groups for taking too much space in Majdanek. He is frustrated that the participants condoned the Israeli group's behaviour, making 'almost a guard of honor', recognising and respecting the Israeli's approach to the site and its meaning:

Those Israeli group who then exaggerated, I say really exaggerated. Like 'What was done to us?' Come on, what the fuck. How many times I get angry that I see, for example in Majdanek, that these guys they trample you to death. Yes, and I see it as a reaction. It is their freedom to trample you away. But when our group then just leaves the path and they make almost a guard of honor, then I say: 'No, just stay here. Why are you less?' They are playing tag and ten minutes later they are whining there.

Dr Smith then goes on to explain that both groups, the Israelis and his own study trip participants, need to respect each other. Strikingly, Dr Smith also laments the Israeli's supposed lack of emotional sincerity. He says that these same 'guys' are 'whining' for the victims of the Holocaust but were playing games just before they entered the museum. He doesn't prescribe how Israeli groups then ought to act in a manner which he would consider respectful.

While it was mostly Dr Smith who became visibly frustrated with Israeli groups during the study trips, Dr Jones also reflected on the inherent difference with which Israeli and Western European groups treat the former sites of the Holocaust. For Israeli groups, he says, it is a 'generational teambuilding' and goes on to explain that:

Groups of Israelis ... they arrive then singing and with flags. But they come with a different point of view than us. So, their group is organised from Israel, they come with the idea that 80 years ago we lost. Because that is what it is. The Holocaust made an end to the Jewish judaity in a way. At least a strong caesura. They come with the idea that: 'But now they will not do it again to us'. You really feel it, they come to create endorphins.

After the trip, some participants also explicitly reflected on the different ways Israeli groups and their own group approached the Holocaust. Some also voiced their frustration about how Israeli groups treated the memorial sites while they were co-present. In making these arguments, the idea of historical distance explicitly serves their arguments. This is Marc, after the trip, reflecting on the fact that he treats the site as 'a semi, quarter historian', while 'Jews' reflect 'on their own fate':

Marc: I didn't find myself like the Jews that walk there with their Jewish flags and think about their own fate. Or the fate of their father or mother or grandparents, well, the own family tree. I just went, yes, as interested semi- or quarter historian to know more about—

Interviewer: Yes.

Marc: about the real history.

Here, Marc clearly positions himself as a personally disinterested 'semi- or quarter historian' who is interested in 'real history', while 'Jews' are more personally involved and thus treat the site and the past differently.

While Marc was reflective of the different ways in which a memorial site could be approached, Michael was simply frustrated with how Israeli groups treated the sites, picking up the same argument about respect as was made by Dr Smith:

Too much noise. It is little respectful I think. Why I choose for us, like, it was like more a procession, it was like something that was moving.

I choose for us, yes, our group was also smaller than all those student groups. No, I found that very hurtf—

Michael thought that the Israeli groups were too loud and disrespectful, constructing a hierarchy between 'our' way and Jewish rituals in sacred commemorative sites. He explicitly says that 'our' way of dealing with the site (Majdanek in this case) was superior ('I choose for us'). He also compares the visit to Majdanek to a (Catholic) procession in which you walk silently in group, in prayer. This comparison shows that, for Michael, the guided tour in Majdanek is recognizable as an interactional, sacred, but Catholic, ritual. At the end of this excerpt, it seems that Michael would make an emotional argument, saying that the way Israeli groups behave is 'hurtful', but he doesn't finish his thought and argument. Instead, he stops himself. After this excerpt, he immediately returns to reflecting on how the two historians managed the group during the visits to the memorial sites.

During informal moments, away from the memorial sites and when the Israeli groups weren't co-present, some of the talk about Israeli groups turned from criticism of practices of commemoration to criticism of Zionism, and then to open antisemitism. Take this lunch conversation in Włodawa, on day six of the trip. There were five participants present. Marc, Patrick, and one other participant (who pushed the Israeli youth in Majdanek) were leading the conversation; Mary and I were mostly silent. None of the historians took part in this conversation. The other participant brought up the topic by starting to complain about what they called 'Zionist aggression' during the visits of the Israeli groups. Marc and Patrick both picked up on this argument saying that 'Jews' were exploiting their historical suffering for present interests. They argued that Jews could get away with more today because of their suffering during the Holocaust. Patrick then started talking about his trips to Israel as a tour guide, saying 'Jews' were always dirtying the toilets on the flight to Tel Aviv. He wondered why this was the case. Marc, then responds that it is because they feel entitled to treat the flight assistants as slaves.

These antisemitic, conspiracy-loaded narratives also appear in interviews with Marc. He repeats the idea that 'Jews' are exploiting their victimhood, implying that the foundation which employs the two historians is somehow structurally part of that exploitation. Marc thereby employs an antisemitic view of Jews as being all-powerful in the present because of their historical victimhood. Here is Marc, before the study trip, reflecting on why he believes 'Jews' downplay the importance of other genocides:

These kind of things. The Jews ignore that. And because they have a lot of media in their power or because they have a lot of money to put researchers on that. Well, objectively, researchers. They can spread a lot of information and we receive that information via the website.

...

The foundation that is of course, yes, in a way they are scientists. But on the other side, whose word, or now, you speak the words of whom you receive your funding. Yes, so it will also always be coloured, or yes coloured. Because philosophically, what is the truth? And you have to see everything from two sides and that is very difficult. And it is with the foundation, in the back of our minds, that we go on a trip. So, we are going to hear that luckily they weren't all murdered. And the luckily, Hitler, the German enemy, lost the war. And that Europe is now so good with Germany again as friend. Yes, apolitically neutral, not ideological, while that is impossible.

Marc assumes that the foundation is funded with donations and grants from Jewish donors and organisations and can't therefore be neutral. That, in fact, is mostly wrong. While the foundation receives private donations, it is mostly funded by structural subsidies from national and regional governments. But the supposed financial involvement of Jewish organisations and private donors, he assumes, will impact the narrative the foundation promotes. Weirdly, the narrative Marc believes is promoted by the foundation is a baseline narrative that is widely accepted by almost all actors in the Western world: the Holocaust was a bad thing, luckily not all the Jews were murdered and Hitler lost the war, and it is good to have a peaceful relationship with Germany in an integrated European Union. Marc never makes explicit what a less-coloured narrative would be. I believe that he assumes such a narrative would both question and 'nuance' Jewish victimhood and German perpetrator-hood, but he never fully verbalises it.

Dr Smith, when asked to reflect on Marc's statements, recognised that 'it smelled a bit like antisemitism'. He hopes to challenge these views by offering people like Marc 'objective material', adding that 'it are also these profiles that we need to allow to participate because it are those that we need to debunk with just objective material. Just like this is what history teaches us'. He continued by arguing for historicising antisemitism in front of people who are prone to be antisemitic, to demonstrate both from a distance and through the *longue durée* how these views have grown historically. He

strongly believes that when you teach people to historicise, that they will start doubting their ideas. Dr Smith doesn't reflect here on – and probably doesn't even realise that – his own performances of frustration in interaction with Israeli groups had reinforced antisemitic attitudes among the participants. In the example he gives, he reflects on a lecture he gave to participants of both study trips in which he overviewed the development of antisemitism and its connection to Christianity through the centuries:

For example, the lecture about antijudaism antisemitism. You see, that just evolves through the centuries. Yes, by just showing that those ideas that are apparently still alive today, they are so old and they come from there and there and there.

On Marc, however, these historicising operations had very little effect. I demonstrate later (in Chapter 4) that he also reproduced antisemitic discourses and sick Holocaust humour after the eight-day Aktion Reinhardt study trip.

It is important to stress, however, that not all participants in the Aktion Reinhardt project 'othered' Israeli groups or engaged in antisemitic discourse and practices when they tried to embody an emotionally distant approach to the Holocaust. Not all the participants would explicitly and critically distance themselves from the Israeli groups visiting the sites. Some of them held more nuanced opinions or were positively affected by the singing of the Israeli groups. In fact, I left the group for 15 minutes during the visit in Majdanek to listen to a group of Israeli girls singing in one of the barracks. Mary was also touched by the singing. For her, this nuances her critique on Israeli groups' 'demonstrative behaviour':

Mary: There at the back, while we were standing there, there was a group of girls and they were singing such a soft song. And then yes, I looked and I listened especially to these girls yes yes yes. And then in the beginning, that was still in Łódź I think, busses with Israeli youth arrived. And yes, I thought that yes, that they were listening interestedly. I just found it strange that one of these busses, they were walking there with flags on their backs. And then I was thinking: is this really necessary? This so demonstratively walking around with flags, but yes, but yes.

Interviewer: And you said you listened to the music. How did it impact you? How did you feel, how did you feel, also with the singing, I mean the singing?

Mary: Yes, I would have liked to record it. I wanted to make a little video of it, so I could listen to the sound afterwards. But I was too late. The song was finished. I was listening to it so long that I realised too late, oh that I wanted to record it, I would have liked to record it yes. Yes, I find it beautiful.

John also had mixed feelings about how he perceived the actions and interactions of the Israeli groups we encountered. On the one hand, he argued that the reality of the Holocaust can only lead to emotion and silence, and on the other hand, he disapproved of the 'theatre' of the Israeli groups. This second opinion, he says, is informed by the position of Dr Smith:

John: Yes, it is maybe possible. It is maybe the case that emotion. And when you hear the numbers and one speaks about 900,000 murdered people and so forth. Yes, then you can actually only be moved and be silent for a moment.

Interviewer: Yes, yes, yes.

John: So, I don't know to which degree. I actually think that Dr Smith has explained it again at the moment of the other visits. And those Israeli and so forth who almost perform a piece of theatre and also cried for it, and whole of that group starts screaming and what a spectacle. That they [the foundation] then focus on the softer and quiet side. I think that his [Dr Smith], I find it personally, really good.

Patrick, finally, was also positively impressed by the Israeli youth groups. He especially admired their sincerity and the fact that they weren't distracted by their group leaders (adults, who were, it is assumed here by Patrick, more demonstrative):

In Majdanek, they didn't let themselves be distracted by their group leaders apart from the explanations they received from their leaders, guides. And from the notes they were taking. And from the modesty. These guys, who are always a bit more relaxed when school trips have to be done, but they were of course very impressed by what happened to their own people.

Further into the interview, Patrick also contrasts the sincere and focused engagement of the Israeli groups with the more 'touristy' engagement on the part of Polish families who are also visiting the sites:

But the Poles themselves, I see them more as tourists. Who, as passers-by, and who for once don't want to engage with it too much. But I am happy that they are there. That we saw a lot of them, of those Poles. That they don't say 'yes, this is another world that engages with our country'. And and yes, that they don't consider it as something what in the past was called the exploitation of the Holocaust. Especially, the make money out of the, and to build a whole tourist industry. It is not that.

On the one hand, Patrick argues, Polish families are different from Israeli groups because they treat the Holocaust as 'passers-by'. On the other hand, he is happy to see that they engage with the Holocaust as something that is part of the Polish history and don't focus on earning money from the visitors to the Holocaust sites. To this statement, I expressed surprise that he noticed the Polish families and reflected on their visiting practice because, I said, they are not very visible compared to the Israeli groups.

In short, the co-presence of Israeli groups on the memorial sites visited during the Aktion Reinhardt project provided the two historians with a context in which they could contrast their own distanced approach to the Holocaust with another more emotionally close relation to the Holocaust, personified by co-present Israeli groups. As the examples from the Warsaw Ghetto and Majdanek guided tour show, these discourses of othering on the part of the historians are often performed with a lot of frustration. Participants were generally quite receptive to this performance of othering and reproduced it, both in discourse and in more non-verbal behaviour during the visits. This othering discourse can feed into and can activate pre-existing antisemitic attitudes among some of the participants. But there were also some participants who appreciated, at least to some extent, the emotionally close, ritualised and commemorative approach to the sites performed by Israeli groups, as the cases of Mary, Patrick, and John show.

Auschwitz Survivors as Others

While during the Aktion Reinhardt project, it was Israeli groups who functioned as others with supposedly inferior and closer ways of treating the Holocaust, it was Holocaust survivors, mediately present through their video testimonies, who took over this role during the Auschwitz-Birkenau project. The survivors and their testimonies were mostly de-sacralised by the historians and positioned as others who distort the past and make a distanced approach to the Holocaust more difficult. This shift of roles

between Israelis and survivors in the two projects has to do with both contingent and structural reasons.

First, during the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip project, there were no Israeli groups physically co-present on the sites. The conflict between Hamas and Israel in Gaza had intensified three weeks before the trip, and most of the flights between Poland and Israel were cancelled. It was impossible for Israeli groups to travel to Poland and visit the sites. This lack of co-present Israeli groups forced the historians into constructing another 'other', the survivor, who was present during the trip, although not physically.

But there are also more fundamental and structural processes that inform the othering of Holocaust survivors and their testimonies. The Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip project has structurally changed with the passing of most of the survivors in the last decade. The project emerged in the 1970s as the central project of the foundation, then still a 'friends circle' of local Auschwitz survivors. Every year, survivors would bring students to Auschwitz-Birkenau to visit the site and talk about their experiences during a commemorative study trip. But with the gradual passing of the survivors, historians took over the main roles in the foundation, which turned itself increasingly into a documentation and research centre and as an advisory organisation to the government in matters of Holocaust education. The year 2019 was the last time survivors joined the study trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Now, only two historians and one administrator join as staff on the part of the foundation. During the trip that I observed, survivors 'talked' to the participants in three documentaries that were broadcast in the hostel in the evening. These films were a documentary made in the 1970s about one of the first study trips of the foundation to Auschwitz, one with Auschwitz survival testimonies from Jews of the respective Western European country, and one with testimonies about the transit camp. After the study trip that I observed, the historians told me that they were reconsidering showing these documentaries at all during the next trip. They don't see them as important and believe that the films are too old to be appealing to a modern audience.

The fact that the survivors were no longer physically present during the trip made it easier for the historians to de-sacralise and challenge their testimonies and keep control over the 'transmission of historical knowledge' (Grever 2009, p. 56). When challenged by the historians, there was no one who could speak back on the part of the survivors. In this way, survivor testimony became resignified from sacred, factually and morally true, and emotionally correct (Waxman 2010) to an inferior, distorted, and overtly emotional way of treating the past.

The two historians also reflected on the passing of the survivors and the changes that brought to visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau. Dr Jones, for example, realises that the nature of the narrative has drastically changed from a narrative of personal experience contextualised by the historians to a narrative of vicarious experience told by the more distant historians alone: 'Because of the fact that the witnesses fell away physically and that we historians have to tell it, a part of the pathos will be filtered out anyway. Even if you do your best, it still isn't your story'. Both historians explain that they are also relieved that they now have more control over the narrative and don't have to balance their explanations with the more emotional and moral discourses of the survivors. Dr Smith here talks about the difficulty of disagreeing with a survivor in public and the authority survivors felt over Holocaust historians:

It was sometimes difficult when you had to sometimes with some survivors. When then you tried to approach that mess. That you had to almost say: 'Yes they [the perpetrators] were monsters'. Yes, I remember well that while, that was with a survivor in a classroom and he, you know, that was a matter of showing like 'he, I am here'. It is almost like: 'You can speak thanks to me'.

...

Yes, he was the one who interrupted me and I remember well, I will not say the name. That were monsters. I interrupted like 'No, no, and no'. I said 'no'. They are no monsters. They did monster-like things. They are no monsters because if you make no people from them, then it is almost like people didn't do it, you see. That was annoying that you always needed to be attentive.

Furthermore, Dr Smith also argued that it doesn't make much sense to let laypeople ask factual questions to witnesses because their testimony was often factually inaccurate. When I asked him which kind of questions he would ask survivors now if he had the chance, he answered that he would like to have more philosophical conversations with them to understand how their experience influenced their view 'on life'. In that sense, he constructs survivors as non-authoritative about the nature and factuality of their own experience in the past but valuable for philosophical reflection about the present.

Dr Jones, similarly, remembers the struggle of interacting with survivors in public. He recounts that during the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip when multiple survivors joined the group, they would disagree in front of laypeople about their experiences, undermining their own position of authority:

Yes, that is why trip became a more classical trip. There were in the past you had the extra part with the witnesses. That could be a bit, how should I say, counterproductive. Because these witnesses were sometimes arguing with each other in front of the group. So, if you expected that they all experienced the same things and that it would come out '*unisono*'. *Quod non*, haha, sometimes they were insulting each other so much. That could be very destabilising for the audience.

Both historians are relieved to be more in control of the narrative now that the survivors are not physically present. This also allowed them to bring their vision of survivor testimony to laypeople. One interaction between historians and participants has been particularly salient in the resignification of survivors on the part of the lay student trip participants. At the end of the fourth day of the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip, we were travelling back from Krakow to Oświęcim by bus after having visited the former Krakow Ghetto. All my participants gathered in the back of the bus to talk. Dr Smith joined us as well. Many topics were discussed, from the guides in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum to the stories and motivations of the founders of the foundation. This last topic allowed for Dr Smith to 'other' survivors. He talked for about 15 minutes about his experiences with survivors, both on the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip as well as in classroom interactions between high school students and survivors. Dr Smith sketched a grim and vengeful reality in which survivors were battling among each other for prominence, thereby dramatising their own experiences to be seen as 'the one who suffered most'. Dr Smith said that he doesn't like survivors because they are not scientific, adding ironically that he doesn't like their 'mundane worlds' of personal experience. In this interaction, Dr Smith had the ultimate chance to perform a superior sense of distance, positioning himself as the epistemic authority with access to factual truth who is clearly above the survivors and their emotional in-fights about the severity of their suffering.

This interaction on the bus had a significant impact on the participants' views of survivor testimonies. This is David, who brings up this conversation with Dr Smith as the main event that makes him doubt and desacralise survivor testimonies:

David: Well, yes, I think personally, then that for example these these documentaries of testimonies are a bit more emotional. But then you have for example the conversation with Dr Smith when he was alone who also says like 'yes, these testimonies, you have to be sceptical about them'. So that is then being taken down. But that was a private conversation, but yes.

Interviewer: You mean the conversation that we had with him on the bus?

David: Yes.

Interviewer: Aha, okay.

David: Yes, but yes, yes, then I thought a bit like, yes. We have looked at testimonies for two nights. Of course, they were probably being filtered and checked. But I think then that, yes, you have someone who says that you have to pay attention with witnesses.

When I asked the two historians to reflect on David's comments during the interviews, they were satisfied with David's thoughts, feeling as if their mission was accomplished: their relation to the past was accepted, while other, closer ones weren't. Dr Jones, for example, believes that Holocaust history is endangered by both denial and sacralisation. Being able to other survivors and interrogate their testimonies contributes to the desacralisation and thus to a scientific approach to the Holocaust:

If it is being desacralised, then I would say like, yes, I don't find that bad. Because that are the two dangers that threaten Holocaust studies: sacralisation, being like you can't change anything to it anymore because it became a gospel, even if it is bullshit. And denial. Like this you don't do science. Science is *de facto* revisionistic.

Other participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip also picked up the trope of the survivors' inaccuracies compared to more historically distanced accounts, but they regretted the absence of survivors because they believed their presence would have compensated for the historians' lack of emotional treatment of the Holocaust and allow space for further reflection. Interestingly, the participants who regretted the presence of more emotions were both women, who accepted and endorsed the emotionally distanced approach to the Holocaust, but also left space for other, potentially more emotional approaches:

Interviewer: Do you think that the trip would have been fundamentally different with witnesses present?

Nathalie: Yes, absolutely, not only because they would have given testimony in the evening, and you could ask them questions in person. Yes, you could also go deeper. Now, now it is just a 1–1, well, it is just receiving [the survivors' message]. But you don't have the possibility to reflect, you don't have the possibility to react.

Interviewer: Oh no.

Nathalie: Yes, it is also a lot, the emotions will be much stronger than when you just see it on film. And on the other hand, yes, if you visit something like that with someone who has experienced of who returns to it, then you get always an extra dimension. Despite the fact that I realise that every person is, so often your memories get coloured, or you start experiencing your memories differently because you repress it a bit or because you received so many other images and information. So, it would be interesting ... because then you would get a balance between the emotion of who has experienced it versus the academic side.

Nathalie perfectly realises that survivors' testimony can be inaccurate, influenced by cultural contexts. She knows that the historians' discourse is factually more reliable. But even so, she would welcome interaction with someone who has experienced the events and can treat it with more emotion.

Anna also reproduces the argument that face-to-face interactions with survivors would have added emotional depth to the study trip and made the historical reality more 'real':

Interviewer: And do you think that if there would have been witnesses physically present, do you think that then the trip would have been different?

Anna: That yes.

Interviewer: To offer added value.

Anna: It would have been different if they were standing in front of us and told their story. That would have touched me in a different way.

Because now we look at it as if it is just a movie. Because, we know that, yes, movies didn't really happen.

For Anna, as for Nathalie, it is also the mediated interaction with survivor testimony (through video documentaries) that stands in the way from affective engagement with Holocaust testimony and experience. Both express the need for embodied, face-to-face interaction with survivors, which contrasts with what the historians wanted to convey.

In short, I have outlined how the two historians have engaged in 'othering' strategies to increase the authority of their own superior, distanced approach to the Holocaust. The main targets of these othering strategies were co-present Israeli groups (during the Aktion Reinhardt project) and medially present survivors (during the Auschwitz-Birkenau project). In both cases, these are groups who treat the Holocaust with more emotion. Participants at least partly reproduce these practices of othering. But they don't fully reproduce them. In both the Aktion Reinhardt project and the Auschwitz project, I have seen some (mostly female) participants sympathising with othered groups for their emotional treatment of the Holocaust which they see as lacking in the practices and discourses of the two historians.

But emotion is not only something that is performed outside of the official programme of these two projects. Also, within the structure of the programmes, there are small moments in which the historians allow for emotion to be performed. These moments often take place when the interactional genre shifts from historical lectures and guided tours to commemoration. Commemorative rituals, as an interactional genre, are more oriented towards affect rather than reason.

Affective Shifts: Between History Education and Ritual Commemoration

In each of the two study trips, there were two organised and planned moments of ritualised commemoration. In the Aktion Reinhardt project, those happened in Chelmno and in Treblinka; during the Auschwitz-Birkenau project, they took place near Auschwitz I's so-called Death Wall and in front of Birkenau's International Monument. These cases of commemoration were either institutional remainders and rituals dating back from when the foundation was a circle of survivor friends, or, in two cases, they are new commemorative initiatives initiated by the administrator of the foundation or Dr Smith. Three out of the four ceremonies are mentioned in the study

trip programme but are not engaged with in the lectures and preparatory sessions delivered by the historians. In this section, I describe in detail how interactional genres shift between performances of historical explanation and commemoration and how these (often awkward) shifts create space for affective practice in which Holocaust memory suddenly becomes a matter of personal narratives in which the lay participants can physically participate.

The historians mostly retreat from the frontstage when these commemorative moments take place. They let the administrator of the foundation take the lead, who appoints one or more lay participants to take key symbolic actions during the commemorative ritual. These lay participants chosen by the administrator are exclusively women. The two historians and the administrator consciously separate roles during the study trips. The historians take care of 'the facts', the administrator of the 'human aspects'. Here, the administrator discusses this role separation during the Aktion Reinhardt project before he had mobility issues. In the last few years, the administrator has had medical issues and is not mobile enough to walk all the guided tours on-site. In the years before my observation, he would read testimony for the group while the historians guided on-site, providing 'a bit of humanity', to complement the historian's 'numbers and names':

That has also naturally grown like this. That I take, if I can call it like that, the human aspects on me. That means during the tours they gave the numbers and the names and I read the testimonies ... the participants then heard the two voices of the historians and then if a piece of humanity was necessary, then suddenly it was a third person who spoke. And that has a big impact on the people, eh. That they see like 'Ow, ow, there is someone running around here who isn't juggling with numbers and names but just communicates a bit of humanity'. And this is really a role that suits me.

That the administrator is well-suited to take care the 'human aspects' is something the historians also appreciate. They say they are relieved when the administrator, whom they call 'Little Buddha' who 'radiates rest', participates in the study trips. Dr Jones even ironically and self-critically distinguishes between the historians on the one hand, and the more 'normal' administrator:

Yes, yes, that is probably also one of the reasons that it functions well. That there are two aspects. We say from the beginning, from the study day in [capital] [for the Aktion Reinhardt project], like: 'we are not, so at night we want to talk about it around a pint, but yes, we can not give

expert help on that front. But yes, the administrator, is then more so, yes the more normal comes with it.

After the commemorative ceremony – or the reading of testimonies in the years before I observed the study trips – the historians need to take the lead again in the interaction and shift back from affective practice to distanced historical discourse, which is not always easy for the historians. Dr Smith says, ‘Yes, people who then become emotional. And just waiting. Ok, we are back together. Yes, and then we have to take over again. Do what we are there for’. For Dr Smith, the shifts from affective practice to distanced historical explanation are difficult to manage. He realises that these shifts are difficult and sudden for the participants, but he sees it as his professional duty to move back to historical explanation (‘do what we are there for’).

In the next sections, I analyse the four different commemorative ceremonies in detail as interactional rituals that facilitate (sometimes inadvertently) affective practice in a project that otherwise employs distanced approaches to the Holocaust.

Chełmno/Rzuchów: Sunflowers for the Children of Lidice

The first ritualised and organised moment of commemoration during the Aktion Reinhardt project took place during our visit to the forest of Rzuchów, the place where the victims of the Chełmno extermination site were burned and buried in mass graves.

This specific ceremony took place at the small memorial for the 80 children of the Czech village of Lidice who were murdered by the Nazis in Chełmno. The historical entanglement of Lidice and Chełmno is quite complex. On 9 and 10 June 1942, the SS destroyed the Czech town of Lidice as a reprisal for the murder of Reinhard Heydrich. Heydrich died a week earlier from an infection after having been wounded in an attack organised by the Czech resistance and the British secret services. The SS claimed that two families from Lidice were related to the resistance. Before destroying the town, the SS separated its 500 inhabitants. The men were executed, the women and children were deported, the children mostly to the Łódź Ghetto in occupied Poland. Of those deported, about 80 children were murdered by the SS at the Chełmno extermination site. A little memorial is featured in the Rzuchów forest, where the children were probably buried. During our visit to the forest, we passed by that memorial.

The Chełmno/Rzuchów commemorative ceremony has two key features that often return in the other ceremonies. First, when the genre shifts from historical explanation to commemoration, the two historians retreat as

much as possible and give the floor to the administrator of the foundation who joined the trip. This administrator then both initiates and orchestrates the commemoration. Second, the shift to the commemorative genre always comes unexpectedly and unannounced for the participants. Commemorative ceremonies are included in the written programme of the trip but were not mentioned during the formation day before the study trip. At the end of four tours of former sites of extermination, one of the historians would announce that the administrator would now take care of a commemorative ceremony. For participants, these shifts between genres came suddenly. In the cases I analyse here, these sudden shifts either caused awkwardness because no one knew how to behave, or they overwhelmed some participants because they were not prepared.

But despite the suddenness, these short moments of commemoration allowed for an affective practice of collective mourning that participants were happy to join and found valuable. The release of excessive and repressed emotional energy is what the historians have in mind when they think about the function of these commemorative ceremonies in the study trips. This function is what justifies the existence of these ceremonies in the distancing strategy as a necessary purge. As Dr Smith says, 'On that moment it is a sort of release that allows people to maybe a repressed, yes, emotional difficulty'. In the case of the Lidice memorial in Ržuchów, Dr Jones prompted the administrator when passing the memorial, about halfway through our visit to the forest. The administrator then explained that we would be holding a small commemorative ceremony for the children of Lidice. Why exactly for the children of Lidice? The administrator of the foundation had invited the children's choir of the city of Łódź in 2017 to his capital to perform during a commemorative event for the Kristallnacht pogrom in 1938. The administrator met the manager and director of the choir for lunch in Łódź during the Aktion Reinhardt study trip in 2018, to which these two brought sunflowers. It was decided then that the sunflowers would be left at the memorial for the children of Lidice every year when the foundation visited the site.

After telling this story, the administrator then asked for silence and proposed that every member of the group, one by one, would leave a sunflower at the memorial. The administrator had spent the morning buying these in Łódź while the group was being given a tour of the former Łódź Ghetto. Then, everyone left their sunflower at the memorial. The administrator himself was emotionally moved by the ritual and started crying. Two other group members also cried, one of whom (John) consoled the administrator after the ceremony.

This commemorative ritual, I believe, doesn't only facilitate affective practice because it comes suddenly within a more distanced historicist discourse. It is also inherently narrative and personal: it tells the story of a specific group of victims who were killed on-site. Second, it concerns children who were murdered, which is sensitive in a group of people of which all those I interviewed were parents. Finally, giving every single participant the chance to individually lay a sunflower at the monument allows for physical and individual participation, which is inherently different from when historians lecture about the past and laypeople are passive listeners.

The administrator of the foundation picks up on all these elements in his interview after the study trip and describes the commemorative ceremony in Chełmno as a 'turning point' in the study trip in which a simple story and simple actions without surrounding it by dramatising discourse provoke realisations of the horror of the Holocaust. Emotional reactions then come automatically:

You have so different turning points during the whole trip. That is also such a turning point that people become aware of where I am standing here actually. What happened here. Without saying saying: 'Ok, now we have to make them cry'. No, just, the children of Łódź. Every year they give us money for buying sunflowers and we put them there. And that is just, right, that is a sign from the children of Łódź for the children of Lidice. It is so simple. But every time, everyone stands there, I, I, with tears in the eyes. Because it is a sensitive topic. You are talking about so many children that are murdered there.

In their interviews after the trip, participants often mentioned that they valued these moments of commemoration but also that they came as surprises. I asked Mary, for example, if she thought there was enough of a balance between history and commemoration during the trip. Mary then outlined her surprise about the commemorations, but also her appreciation for the short moments 'to pay tribute':

Mary: Yes, I didn't even count on such, uhm, such a commemoration. Despite the fact that actually... Because I wasn't well prepared for it. I saw the trip more, for me, as a tribute to the people who experienced all the suffering there and passed away and were murdered. But I didn't expect that it would happen. That for example, that was in Bełżec [she means Chełmno] that we first put down the flowers. Uhm, so I have, uhm, I was happy with that.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mary: And the balance. Because I didn't expect more, yes, I found it enough these two times yes.

During the Chełmno/Rzuchów commemoration, the historians themselves were absent from the front stage. The administrator organised and orchestrated the whole ceremony, just needing to be introduced by Dr Jones. In Treblinka, however, at the end of Aktion Reinhardt study trip, the administrator involved Dr Smith in the ritual, which led to an unexpected lapse into public mourning and showing of emotion on his part.

Treblinka

The visit to Treblinka came at the end, day seven of the Aktion Reinhardt study trip. The study trip followed the historically chronological order of the functioning of the various extermination sites in the past: first Chelmno (which was technically not part of Aktion Reinhardt), then Majdanek, Bełżec, Sobibór, and finally Treblinka. Apart from following the temporal order of the extermination sites and their operation, the historians also presented the progress of the trip as an insight into the 'perfecting' of the industrial murder from Chełmno to Treblinka, during which the Nazis 'learned' from their 'mistakes' of previous phases and updated their structures and systems accordingly. Treblinka, then, is seen as the most 'perfect' factory of death within the Aktion Reinhardt. I return to this discourse of 'perfecting' of extermination structures and systems in the next chapter.

During the visit to Treblinka, we were first given a three-hour tour of the site by both Dr Jones and Dr Smith. Then, at the end of the tour, we gathered at a memorial stone in the memorial part of Treblinka. The stone was dedicated to victims of the participants' home country and was located close to the former railway platform where the Jewish deportees arrived at the site. The group gathered around the memorial. Dr Smith then read a part of Itzhak Katzenelson's 'The Song of the Murdered Jewish People' in Yiddish, a poem written in a concentration camp in France by Katzenelson just before being transported to Auschwitz. Then, the administrator read the same piece, but in translation. After the readings, the administrator asked 'the two ladies' (Mary and another female participant) to leave flowers and a little national flag at the memorial. John, at that moment, started crying, and one of the two women also started crying. After the two women had left the flowers, Dr Smith asked for a minute of silence, 'for the 1.6 million people whose grave we passed by this week'. During the minute of silence,

Dr Smith took his phone and mumbled something incomprehensible. After a minute of silence, he left suddenly and marched into one of the bushes that surrounded the memorial site. Then, the other participants also spread out over the site, each of them individually. I went to sit down in a far corner of the site to take some time by myself and make notes.

This short commemorative ceremony in Treblinka was initially an initiative of Dr Smith as a ceremonial ending of the Aktion Reinhardt study trip:

Dr Smith: Like for me it is important to really close it. The study trip. Then I am talking about the Shoahtrip. Boom, voila. It is finished, now also for me.

Interviewer: Because also for you it is emotional?

Dr Smith: Yes, I am also human.

The need for a closure of the trip is also supported by both Dr Jones and the administrator, who agree that you can't just send people home after visiting extermination sites together for a week:

Dr Jones: We don't just want to say: 'Bon, it is over, ciao'. There at that moment, we found it good that something more solemn was added. Put the flowers there. There is a stone, luckily, also with [home country]. So it sticks well with our, with the audience we have with us. So, as they say in French: '*Ça fait sens*'.

Dr Smith's behaviour during this commemorative moment was puzzling for me. 'I am also human' is the only explanation Dr Smith gave for his emotional outburst. During the interview, I didn't feel comfortable enough to ask him how he sees such bursts of emotion in relation to his ideal of the distanced and neutral historian. It was the only time during the two study trips that he showed signs of emotional trouble apart from his frustration with Israeli groups and survivors. I knew he had some Jewish roots from his mother's side, but I didn't think he had a personal connection to Treblinka. At least he never brought that up during the trip. Even more, he positioned himself clearly as an atheist during the trip, critical of organised religion, also the Jewish one. Furthermore, on all the other sites we visited before Treblinka, he didn't leap into mourning and sadness but either acted as a distanced historian or as frustrated with the behaviour of Jewish groups.

It was only three months later, during the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip, that I was able to make a little more sense of the potential emotional burden Dr Smith carries. Earlier in this chapter, I described an interaction between my participants, Dr Smith, and me on the bus between Krakow and Oświęcim after having visited the former Krakow Ghetto. First, we discussed survivors and their testimonies during the conversation. As mentioned before, Dr Smith was critical of survivors during that conversation. Then, however, Dr Smith started opening up to us. He hinted at his own family links to Holocaust survivors and said that 'a grandmother' asked him to say Kadish (the Jewish prayer for the death) when he visited Treblinka. It was only during that interaction that I realised that Dr Smith might have been reading Kadish from his phone in Treblinka and was moved during the commemoration ceremony because he might have a family connection to the site.

Because Dr Smith started opening up on the bus, I asked him about his family story. However, he was annoyed with my question. He said that he 'doesn't need to know' his family story, and that he is 'not dealing with that'. I didn't know how to react to this very sudden rejection and retreat from the personal conversation on the part of Dr Smith. A few seconds of awkward silence followed during which I felt uncomfortable and guilty for having probed for deeply personal and probably disturbing stories. I realised, however, that there is something deeply sensitive about the Holocaust, and Treblinka in particular, for Dr Smith. He is not just interested in the Holocaust as a historical fact but is also dealing with something personal. His professional identity as an historian (coming with a lot of prescribed distance) is dominant but also intersects with other personal and social processes in which Dr Smith is implicated.

After a few moments of awkward silence, the conversation moved naturally towards lighter topics. Dr Smith didn't seem to hold a grudge towards me afterwards for being intrusive and taking him outside of his comfort zone. One of the participants, Frederik, noticed that I didn't feel at ease and reached out to me after the bus ride to say that what I was doing wasn't inappropriate because Dr Smith himself opened up first.

During my interviews with participants after the Aktion Reinhardt trip, many brought up the ceremony in Treblinka as a very impactful moment, also because of Dr Smith's visible emotion. John, for example, tells me how he was moved:

John: The ceremonial farewell that was an unimaginable top moment. Yes, it is not so obvious.

Interviewer: Yes, yes, yes.

John: Emotional ... with the text in Yiddish and then the administrator in [mother tongue]. And then Dr Smith who at the end completely disappears from the horizon, turns his back to us and seeks peace in the forest. Yes, that was unforgettable.

Mary explained to me how she tried to hold back tears (and managed) during the commemorative ceremony in Treblinka while she was leaving the flowers at the monument. She learned from the first ceremony in Chelġmno on how to do so:

Interviewer: Uhm, how was it to leave the flowers there?

Mary: Well, it was then that I had difficulty to keep it dry. And I left some little tears then yes. That was emotional for me yes.

Interviewer: In Treblinka too.

Mary: There, but there I already knew like, if the tears come then I think about something else. Because I was prepared, like, if they come, think about something else. I weaponed myself, because yes, it is not nice if you are sitting there crying, right.

Interviewer: But you weren't alone eh.

Mary: No, no. It is true, it would have been possible.

Interviewer: Because there were also other people who were having difficulties.

Mary: Yes, yes.

Mary was very aware that there was a masculine norm in favour of showing restraint and 'against showing emotion' during the trip (see Introduction). During the Chelġmno/Rzuchów ceremony, she wasn't prepared for a commemorative ceremony and wasn't able to stop herself from crying. In Treblinka, however, she managed because she used protective strategies (thinking about something else) when she was asked to take the lead in a commemorative ritual in which she played a key role. During the interview,

however, I mildly challenged the norm she reproduced and hinted at the fact that it would have been acceptable to cry in Treblinka, that she wouldn't have been alone. This, then, she agreed with.

Dr Jones recognised during the interview after the trip that some participants were repressing their feelings because of the 'neutral' way the Holocaust is discussed by the historians during the week, while during a commemorative ceremony they can let go of these emotions:

That is then something that comes to the top on these moments. Because people restrain themselves because it is the whole week bad news. And that is brought reasonably neutrally, in the sense that we are not trying to do more. But at such moments it can be a bit of an outlet of for letting go of these emotions ... that is such an inside joke between Dr Smith and myself and the administrator. That is like: we did a Kishka moment.

The 'Kishka moment' is a cynical reference to Henri Kishka, an Auschwitz survivor who was a frequent public speaker. He was known to be an emotional speaker with whom both the historians had a contentious relationship.

Auschwitz I

During the Auschwitz-Birkenau project, the programme was also populated by two commemorative ceremonies. The first one took place in Auschwitz I (on day two of the trip), and the second in Birkenau (on day three of the trip). The affective practices were different in these two ceremonies. The first one, in Auschwitz, seemed to fulfil an institutional purpose, lacked narrative (and speech in general), and seemed to have left the participants untouched. The second one, in Birkenau, had a strong personal and narrative angle and affected the participants to a much larger extent.

The division of responsibilities and roles among employees of the foundation was also different compared to the ceremonies during the Aktion Reinhardt project in the summer. As aforementioned, the administrator could not walk with the group during the tours of Auschwitz I and Birkenau. He thus could not join the ceremonies, so Dr Jones, as managing director of the foundation, took over the administrator's role in initiating and orchestrating these. Dr Smith attended the ceremonies but didn't play a front-stage role.

In Auschwitz I, the ceremony was held at the so-called Death Wall after the guided tour of the site. The Death Wall is a (reconstructed) wall between blocks 10 and 11 in the former camp, where most of the executions of political prisoners by firing squad took place. Now, the space between the two blocks is a silent space meant for reflection. Before we entered the space, Dr Jones

instructed the group to remain silent. We then entered and walked to the Death Wall, where Dr Jones put flowers next to the memorial sign and urged one of the female student participants to join him. She was urged to help him hold the flag of the foundation, a symbol dating back from when it was a group of survivor friends. The meaning of the flag was not explained to the participants, and the historians often ironically referred to their flag. Both Dr Jones and the student faced us, standing in front of the Death Wall. Everyone stood still in silence for about a minute, and then, with the sign from Dr Jones, we left the silent space. There were no speeches held, no statements read, and there was no discursive meaning attributed to the ritual we were carrying out and participating in.

The Auschwitz ceremony is a good example of a ritual that was once a highly meaningful ritual and has now become mostly empty. The Auschwitz survivors who established the foundation were Jews, but some of them were also part of resistance organisations and were arrested as political prisoners. When these survivors took students to Auschwitz-Birkenau from the early 1970s onwards, paying tribute close to the Death Wall where many members of the resistance were executed must have been a very meaningful moment, so the historians believe. Now, however, when all these survivors have passed away, the specific meaning of this place for the Western European visitors is unclear and the historians recognise that it has become an empty ritual, resulting from an institutional memory that only they know. The fact that they are not allowed to speak close to the Death Wall also prevents the historians from contextualising and explaining the meaning of the ritual on-site. Dr Smith said, 'Yes, now you need to shut up there. We are just standing there and that are just, there are flowers that are being put down there'. These factors make this ritual a puzzling and meaningless moment for lay participants in which they feel like they can't participate.

Birkenau

But in Birkenau, the commemorative ceremony had a strong narrative and personal focus. The ceremony took place at the end of the tour, at the International Monument, between the former Gas Chambers II and III, which were destroyed by the Nazis before they evacuated the site in 1945. The monument has a strategic position in the museum at the end of the railway tracks entering the former camp and directly at the opposite end of the iconic entrance gate. The monument also holds 23 smaller plaques on which the same text is written in all the languages of the victims and in English: 'For ever let this place be a cry of despair and a warning to humanity, where the Nazis murdered about one and a half million men, women and

children, mainly Jews from various countries of Europe. Auschwitz-Birkenau 1940–1945'. After the tour, the participants gathered at the monument. Dr Jones took the word to initiate the ceremony. He told the group a story about a Jewish resistance fighter from the participants' home country who survived Auschwitz and who was one of the founding members of the foundation. After the war, so Dr Jones said, the Auschwitz survivor met a woman whose daughter was murdered in Birkenau. She asked the survivor to dispose of her own ashes next to Crematorium IV in Birkenau, where her daughter's ashes had probably been disposed, when she died. When the woman passed away, the survivor took her ashes to Birkenau and (illegally) placed them there. Since then, Dr Jones explains, the foundation asked the Auschwitz-Birkenau project participants every year to leave red roses next to Crematorium IV. This year, however, the site around Crematorium IV was closed, and the ceremony was moved to the International Monument. Dr Jones first asked two students (Anna and a male participant whom I didn't interview) to leave a wreath at the memorial, and then everyone was given red roses that they could leave at the memorial. After that, participants spread out around the monument and stayed by themselves.

Compared to the ceremony at Auschwitz I, this ceremony facilitated affective practice to a larger extent. First, there was a narrative about a set of individuals offered by the historian that helped people attribute meaning to their participation in the ritual. The narrative itself involves a tragic mother-daughter relationship, which is something that easily affects people. Dr Smith says that in that ceremony, 'people put a face on it. Yes we talk about this person and that is why we do it'. Second, apart from this discursive dynamic of involvement, participants were also offered the opportunity to actively and physically participate in the ritual by leaving a flower at the monument. This is different from the ceremony at Auschwitz I, where there was silence instead of a narrative and where participants couldn't individually act.

This difference in affective practice was also noticed by participants. This is David speaking about the commemorative ceremonies. His initial answer is responding to a question about what he thought about the ceremony in Auschwitz I:

Uhm, beautiful but maybe quick or something like that. I found the one in Birkenau better because you got more time, also for yourself. You can stand apart a bit, you could leave the flower yourself. You can stand there a little reflecting about those things. While for Auschwitz I it was just as a group, going there and leave a wreath. A flag that, yes, where I have

nothing with. Well, this flag, that doesn't represent anything for me, was being shown there. But yes, that is where it also stopped. And then 'come on, the gang, leave'. Yes, that didn't mean much to me that first one. The second one was more for yourself and that seems more interesting.

Despite the Birkenau ceremony's use of narrative and physical involvement, it still had some of the general characteristics of the other ceremonies. It came suddenly and unannounced for participants, and historians managed to establish some distance between themselves and the commemorative genre. Anna, for example, who left the wreath at the International Monument before the other participants could leave their roses, was not aware that she would need to do that until the very moment, when Dr Smith physically forced her to take the lead in the ritual:

Interviewer: Yes, yes, yes and in Birkenau you were one of the two people who had to leave the flowers eh?

Anna: Yes.

Interviewer: Was that agreed beforehand or was that decided in the moment?

Anna: No, no, I was being pushed in my back by Dr Smith so I had to go.

Interviewer: And how was it?

Anna: I found it stressful because I had to go for a whole group. But finally, while I was doing it I realised, like yes, first of all you don't need to have stress because it is just a group of people. And it is something beautiful that you could leave these flowers. It is a beautiful sign.

After the ceremony, when everyone was hanging around the International Monument in Birkenau, Dr Jones, who had just led the whole ceremony, distanced himself to some extent from the commemorative genre when he left the frontstage in the interaction. He told some participants and me that he is generally against monuments on former sites of extermination because the paving over of those sites with concrete for the memorial destroys all the potential archaeological evidence that is still in the ground, which he values as a historian because it can generate new knowledge about the site. In Bełżec, three months earlier, he made a very similar statement. The main

site in Belzec was covered with metallurgic clinker to symbolize the terror. Dr Jones remarked that ‘with this monument, the Nazis accomplished what they wanted to. Everything is erased. With this monument in place, nothing can be dug up anymore’. Dr Jones didn’t say, however, that archaeological work around the gas chambers in Birkenau and in the Belzec site would be difficult anyway, even without memorials. They are considered Jewish graves, and Jewish religious law prohibits exhumation.

The Birkenau commemoration, much like the one in Chełmno and Treblinka, offers participants the opportunity to move from rationality and historical explanation into affective practices of mourning. This practice is facilitated by both discourse (a personal narrative or a poem) and individual action (leaving flowers). Participants are generally grateful for these moments. The administrator told me in the interview that every year, on people’s evaluation forms, the foundation is asked to keep the commemorative ceremonies in the programme. This is significant because it shows that laypeople appreciate ‘close’ and affective practice while they discursively endorse the emotionally and morally distanced discourse of the historians. They do not see these two positions as contradictions.

In the total picture of the study trip projects, however, these commemorative moments make up only a very little part of the trip. The shifts between interactional genres of guided tour and commemorative ceremony often come suddenly and unexpectedly for the participants, which creates interactional awkwardness. Participants aren’t anticipating the shift in genre, are surprised, and can be overwhelmed with emotions that they didn’t anticipate.

Compartmentalising Joy

It is not only sadness and mourning that participants deal with. There were also moments of joy during both study trips. The two study trips were experienced as journeys in which you got to know new people and do other things in a group after the planned activities. These moments provided the space and time for more moments of joy. In the evenings, when the educational activities and visits were finished, participants spent their evenings together and often got to know each other quite well. During the Aktion Reinhardt project, the long bus rides – the trip covers about 1,500 kilometres – allowed for free time for more personal conversations about home and family and for watching and discussing sports together (the Tour de France took place at the same time as the study trip). In the evenings,

after dinner, some members of the group would discover the towns where the group stayed together, having a drink outside on terraces and squares and telling each other jokes. The historians also participated in (and sometimes initiated) these evening strolls. I discuss some of these interactions in Chapter 4, where I look at sick humour as a distancing strategy.

Some of these 'light' moments in the Aktion Reinhardt study trip were also seen as turning points of the trip by both the historians and the participants. On day four of the trip, we visited Majdanek in the morning and had a self-guided tour of Lublin 'as centre of Aktion Reinhardt' in the afternoon. In the evening, the whole group went together to Mandragora, a Polish-Jewish restaurant in the centre of Lublin. Dr Smith describes this moment as key for bonding in the group because it comes the evening before three days 'in the heart of hell':

A big turning point is the Thursday in Lublin in the Mandragora, because then it is like: yes, we introduce from tomorrow, yes, so tomorrow, Friday, Saturday and Sunday we will visit Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka. Then it is really, then we are sitting in the heart of hell, and then you feel that there are very strong ties between the participants.

During the Auschwitz-Birkenau trip (where there were almost no bus rides, unlike in the Aktion Reinhardt study trip), the free time was concentrated in the evenings after dinner. In the bar of the youth hostel where the group stayed, some of the participants gathered to play board games. Werewolves and Jungle Speed were the most popular ones. Werewolves (a role game with a lot of discussion) allowed participants to get to know each other better in informal ways. Jungle Speed (a more active game) allowed for the release of some accumulated energy during the day. Sometimes, these games continued until well after midnight. The historians never joined those board games, even though I invited them twice. While we were playing, they were drinking and smoking on the terrace outside of the youth hostel. I always joined the board games because I truly enjoyed getting to know my participants better and developing these more informal, playful connections. It also helped me to establish a relationship of trust with them. They got to know me and were more willing to talk to me afterwards. While I only managed to interview three participants before the trip, I interviewed six after the trip. I got to know all six of these people better playing board games at night.

Both the historians and the administrator recognise that these pockets of joy in the evenings are necessary for the study trip. These are moments when participants can unwind.

Dr Jones: Yes, we assume that these are necessary he. It can't be only tension and so forth. They are tough days, both Auschwitz as well as the Shoah [Aktion Reinhardt] trip. So, I think that it is important to leave people at ease ... especially during the Shoah trip it is important that people can be at ease a little in the evening.

Further on in the interview, he also made sure to argue that there is no need to feel guilty for having had these moments of ease and joy. The administrator of the foundation and Dr Smith also stress that they need these moments themselves, to be able to cope with guiding the group on the former sites of the Holocaust the whole day. Dr Smith describes here a scene in which he communicates to the group after having visited Chełmno during the Aktion Reinhardt project that they will go to eat a pizza in Łódź, and that anyone is welcome to join:

As a guide, I mean, just towards other people. That is, right. The second day when we come back. That is: 'Well, people, we are soon going to the Manufaktura [a shopping mall in Łódź]. Do you want to join?' 'Well, what are we going to do?' 'Eating a pizza, what do you think?' You see. Yes, and there are always people who join then. And then we talk about nothing, nothing about the Shoah. And we also tell that during the introduction sessions: 'We are also people. Leave us in peace at the end of the day. We have needed to talk the whole day'. I then just want to tell jokes, or just big bullshit, and to drink a pint.

The administrator echoes this need for peace and joy in the evenings during a study trip: 'The only thing you want to do is at night, like, eat a good sausage and drink a shot of vodka'. The participants themselves also enjoyed the moments of play and bonding, especially during the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip. Frederik, for example, stresses that they were what made the study trip experience feel like a journey they took together rather than an educational activity only:

In the end it is also a journey. It doesn't mean that because you are on those sites or, yeah, on certain moments it can be emotionally heavy. And on other moments can you step out of this mood. Or, I will speak for myself, at the table or afterwards at night, there were also conversations about other things with other people. You could get to know each other and so, on that front, it is like, the character of a journey.

When Philip talked with his flatmates and parents about the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip after he returned, he mentioned that the evening activities made him relax and reduced the emotional burden of the trip. Philip realises that what happened in Auschwitz-Birkenau was 'bad', but he argues that having this knowledge is reconcilable with moments of relaxation and joy:

Philip: I talked a bit with with flatmates, or uhm, parents on the telephone and so forth. And yes, I have also showed them pictures. And they were also a bit curious but they were especially with a lot of empathy. They talked with a lot of empathy. And I was, yes. They asked: 'Oh, aren't you impressed? Isn't it too heavy for you?' And so forth. Actually, I found it ok. I mean, it was really impressive and I. But it was especially, yes, I didn't get depressed or something like that ...

Interviewer: Yes, did you find, do you find, did they find it difficult to understand that you actually also enjoyed yourself on a certain moment?

Philip: Yes, yes, it is not all black and white, yes. We really have the idea that everything was bad about that period, and it was really bad. But we didn't talk during the whole journey, we also played Jungle Speed and so forth. Thus there were also moments of relax.

The same feeling is shared by David, for whom the moments of joy came unexpectedly. He also speaks about compartmentalising emotions during the trip. The museum visits are for sadness, the evenings for joy:

So yes, in the beginning I went there with the idea like it will be a sad happening. But yes, it is sad on the moments that it is necessary and outside of that it can be joyful. Also, that makes the journey lighter.

These moments of joy, when compartmentalised outside of the official programme of guided tours and lectures, help participants to cope emotionally with the horrific realities that they have learned about during the day. Moments of joy came naturally and unplanned during the trip in both groups, but they were key for bonding for the participants as well as the historians. In Chapter 4, I will also analyse occasions of sick Holocaust humour along similar lines, as compartmentalising and coping strategies for both the historians and the participants.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined a second strategy that historians employ to practice distance towards the Holocaust in their interactions with laypeople. They strip the past of its potential affective and emotional load, at least on the level of explicit discourse. Instead, they say to act as scholars, rationally understanding the Holocaust as fact in the past. The Holocaust, stripped of both explicit moral and emotional meaning, is then fully distanced and ready for analysis and teaching.

I argue that this emotional distancing is not just a theoretical and discursive operation. It is also achieved through practices of othering, whereby other groups (who treat the Holocaust more emotionally) are positioned as less worthy. This othering happens both to groups who are co-present on the sites (Israeli groups) and groups that are not present anymore (survivors). In both cases, they are presented as standing in the way of a 'better', factual, and emotionally disinterested approach to the Holocaust. These practices of othering have, in both cases, consequences that can be seen as contrary to what liberal Holocaust memory education stands for or is aiming to achieve. In the case of the othering of Israeli groups, it re-actualises pre-existing antisemitic stereotypes. In the case of the othering of survivors, it desacralises their testimonies.

I have demonstrated that, as a discourse, participants pick up and reproduce this 'getting rid of emotion', but the reality of practice is more complicated. Both the historians and the participants continuously slip into affective practice. That happens on two occasions. First, the othering of other groups (Israelis, most notably) leads to strong feelings of frustration and anger. Secondly, the short commemorative events organised within the scope of both projects provide spaces for sadness and mourning. However, the switches of interactional genres between historical explanatory tours and commemorative rituals come quite suddenly and unannounced for the participants. They aren't prepared for sometimes overwhelming feelings and shifts to highly intensive affective practices. In the case of the ceremony in Treblinka, I have shown that that was also the case for one of the historians.

In the first two empirical chapters of this book, I focused on the meaning attributed to events and how historians try to get rid of what they deem to be excessive moral and emotional meaning. In the next chapter, however, I focus more precisely on the contents and forms of Holocaust memory narratives as told by the historians. I move from the field of what stories should mean to studying what these stories should contain. Both the forms and contents of these Holocaust memory narratives can also contribute to distancing strategies.

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3. Narrating the Holocaust as System: Getting Rid of Actors and Experiences

Abstract: In this chapter, I analyse how historians narrate the Holocaust a developing system, rather than as a personal or collective experience. I show that when laypeople take on this systemic approach to the Holocaust, they lose their interest in victims and their narratives. When human agents appear at all in both the historians' as well as in the lay people's narratives they are either extremely cruel perpetrators, or heroic victims, two types of agents with whom it is difficult to empathise as layperson.

Keywords: narrative, testimony, perpetrators, victims, historical explanation

In Chapters 1 and 2, I engaged with the moral meaning attributed to the Holocaust and the extent to which the Holocaust and its memory emotionally affect historians or lay participants. I have discussed performative and discursive strategies employed by the historians to reduce both explicit moral meaning and emotional response during the study trips for laypeople. However, there is more to the interactions between historians and laypeople than the performance of factuality and emotional restraint. The content of the memory narratives themselves also matters for distancing and deeply impacts the experiences of both historians and laypeople. Whose stories are tellable and told, and who are presented as individual and collective actors in the Holocaust is key to both the historians' and participants' understanding of the events and the way they are represented (Norrick 2021).

So, how exactly is the Holocaust narrated in the two projects that I observed? Which facts do 'the Holocaust' consist of? In the narratives told by the historians, the Holocaust is presented as a developing system rather than an individual or collective experience. With their structuralist approach to Holocaust historiography, the two historians are products of

the dominant trend in Western European Holocaust historiography from (roughly) the early 1980s until the late 2000s (Stone 2009, p. 59), which focused on systems and organisation, sidelining experiences. Recently, however, Holocaust scholarship has rediscovered experience as a lens for investigation (see e.g. Cushman et al. 2025), which is something the two historians don't engage with. If experience is discussed by the historians, stories about perpetrators are preferred over victim-centred narratives. However, just as in the previous two chapters, when I discussed morality and emotion, the extent to which historians have control over the organisation of the project matters for the content of the Holocaust memory narratives that are being narrated during the study trips.

In the Aktion Reinhardt project, where the historians have full control, the Holocaust is fully narrated as a system. The murder of European Jews is presented as the outcome of a system of concentration and extermination that has been 'upgraded' and 'improved' during the process. The historians narrated the development of the 'system of extermination' from Aktion T-4, to the gas vans in Chełmno (1941–1942), to the gas chambers in Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka (1942–43). The study trip also follows this chronological trajectory in which the process of extermination had been 'improved', showing how, in the words of the historians, 'the Nazis learned about their mistakes': from Chełmno, to Majdanek, Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka. Within specific days of the study trip, we were also shown the development from concentration to extermination. Whenever we saw a former extermination site in the afternoon, we would visit a former ghetto in the morning where Jews were concentrated. We also visited a so-called Umschlagplatz, a train station or railway platform from where the Jews of the Ghetto were deported to an extermination site. During the trip, we visited the former Warsaw, Łódź, Radom, Włodawa, and Siedlce ghettos and their respective Umschlagplätzen.

At the same time, the systems of extermination that were operational during Aktion Reinhardt were also historicised in bigger diachronic processes during the introductory sessions before the study trip. The Holocaust as system was explained as the conclusion of a longer process of both international relations and internal changes within the Nazi party, ideology, and plans. Here, Dr Smith talks about what participants should know to understand the Holocaust:

The history of Poland, the history of Germany, Nazism ... I think it can all be constructed like because then it was for us: where do we end up? First, it concerns the Shoah, so Aktion T4 had to be added to make the

link and explain from where the idea came. Then the Einsatzgruppen and then so we conclude.

Dr Smith argues for the need for historicism in two respects: first, on the more macro level of national and international history, and then within the 'Shoah as process' itself. This double historicising, for Dr Smith, is necessary to show laypeople that there was a logic to the Holocaust, that it was not random: 'Yes, that is what I try to do. Like to trigger that it wasn't just darts that they played'. Playing darts, here, is for Dr Smith, a metaphor of randomness, in which the Nazis would have based their actions on chance.

In general, in the Aktion Reinhardt study trip, where the historians have full control, these narratives of the murder of European Jews are presented as perpetrated by a system, not necessarily by individual or collective actors. By reducing individual agency and experience in the Holocaust memory narrative, and by narrating 'systems' not 'events', historians aim to distance the Holocaust and reduce potential personal identification with the people involved in those 'systems'. If individual people are brought up in these narratives, it is done in such a way that it is very hard to identify with them. Either they are presented as very cruel individual Nazi perpetrators, or they are selfless heroic victims. In these cases, the perpetrators are much more prominent than the victims. This approach is in contrast with how Holocaust memory education is more generally perceived, teaching empathy with victims and collective guilt for descendants of perpetrators and bystanders across Europe (Ozyurek 2023, p. 23). Participants in the study trips that I observed believe that perpetrators and their cruelty are more tellable and have more narrative 'representability' than the victims and their fate (Rigney 2001). I will discuss such specific individual cases later in this chapter.

In the Auschwitz-Birkenau project, as outlined in the previous two chapters, the historians share control over the narrative with the local guides of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and with survivors in the documentary film screenings. During their own lectures, the historians focused very much on the Holocaust as a system of concentration and extermination. In the case of Auschwitz-Birkenau, that narrative is particularly complicated because the sites functioned both as sites of concentration (barracks for forced labourers) and extermination (gas chambers and crematoria). This contrasts with the former extermination sites in the Aktion Reinhardt project, which didn't have a concentration component and were only designed for murder in the gas chambers (Majdanek being an exception). During their lectures, the historians explained these differences in minute detail to the participants. During the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip, this narrative of

'systems' coexisted with narratives of survival performed by the survivors in documentaries and the more affective practices of guiding on the part of the local museum guides. When participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau project reflect on these three different approaches to narrating the Holocaust, they say they prefer the more distanced and systemic way of the historians.

What I do in the rest of this chapter is first look in detail at the way historians narrate the Holocaust during the two respective projects. I thereby mostly look at their narrative on-site when they are visiting the former sites of concentration and extermination with the groups they are guiding and at the way they structure the daily study trip experience. Then, I analyse how the lay participants engaged with these discourses and practices, both on-site and in interviews.

Aktion Reinhardt Study Trip: Understanding the Holocaust as a System

During the Aktion Reinhardt project, the historians treated the Holocaust in the former General Government as a process in which Jews were first concentrated in ghettos, then deported, and finally murdered in an extermination site. The study trip was organised in such a way that the group would first visit a former ghetto, then visit the place from where the Jews were deported and then visit the former extermination site. In this way, study trip participants were meant to experience the chronology of the Holocaust as a system during their study trip days. On some days, we visited a former ghetto from where Jews were transported to the site we would visit in the afternoon; on other days, that was not the case for logistical reasons. In these cases, we mostly visited another former ghetto. Following this structure, this is the plan of the study trip with the places the group visited in italics, and in brackets I include the site where the Jews that were concentrated in the respective ghettos were murdered:

Day 1: *Warsaw Ghetto and Umschlagplatz* (Treblinka)

Day 2: *Łódź Ghetto and Umschlagplatz* (Chełmno and Auschwitz), *Chełmno extermination site*

Day 3: *Radom Ghetto and Umschlagplatz* (Treblinka)

Day 4: *Majdanek*

Day 5: *Zamość Ghetto and Umschlagplatz* (Bełżec, Sobibór, and Majdanek), *Bełżec extermination site*

Day 6: *Włodawa Synagogue and Umschlagplatz* (Sobibór), *Sobibór*

Day 7: *Siedlce Ghetto and Umschlagplatz* (Treblinka), *Treblinka*

Dr Smith stressed in the interview that the repetition of a daily structure of visiting ghetto-Umschlagplatz-extermination centre was needed to make the participants understand the 'logic' of the Holocaust.

During the visits to the former extermination sites themselves (Chełmno, Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka), the historians always structured their tours in a very similar way. First, participants were given an overview of the structure of the site (often with a map), which always included the place of arrival of the transports, the 'corridor' between that place and the gas chambers, the gas chambers, and the place of cremation. Additionally, the historians showed us where the SS barracks were, where the Jewish Sonderkommando that was forced to assist in the murder stayed, and where the so-called hospital was located, a place in disguise where Jews who couldn't walk the 'corridor' were executed by bullet. This general framework of guiding was adapted to the specific site. A chronological idea of 'perfecting' across sites was also introduced, in which, according to the historians, the system was 'improved' in every stage of the process, from amateurism in Chełmno to 'perfection' in Treblinka.

During their narration of the Holocaust as a system and structure on the respective sites, individual actors are rarely featured. If they are, the historians introduced two types. Those were either SS men (often commanders of the site) who were key to the organisation of the 'system' of the Holocaust and characterised by their cruelty, or heroic survivors (often escapees) who were characterised by their courage.

The focus on high-level SS perpetrators and their stories was already present during the training in the capital before the study trip started. During his overview of the various police departments in Nazi Germany, Dr Smith spent time talking about Himmler, Heydrich, and Nebe. The key 'organisers' of Aktion Reinhardt were mentioned as well: Odilo Globocnik and Christian Wirth received attention. During the visit of Bełżec, the SS men whose stories were narrated included commander Christian Wirth, SS head of guard Josef Oberhauser, and Rudolf Gockel, who led the arrival of the transports. Anecdotes about the cruelty of these SS men were told in detail by the historians. Kurt Gerstein was also mentioned. Gerstein was an engineer and member of the Waffen-SS who witnessed the murder of a transport of Jews from Lwów to Bełżec during an inspection and later reported it to foreign diplomats and asked them to pass his information on to the Allied Powers. I could note only one specific mention of someone who was in Bełżec as a victim. Rudolf Reder was a Sonderkommando member who escaped from Bełżec and who delivered testimony after the War. He is one of the two survivors who gave testimony of Bełżec after the war.

The structure of the visit to Sobibór was very similar to the one to Bełżec. First, participants were given an overview of the structure of the site. Contrary to the other sites, this was not accompanied by a walk on the site. Archaeological excavations were taking place, and only the railway platform and the small museum were accessible to visitors. I didn't make note of individual SS perpetrators that were engaged with, but I wrote in my fieldnotes that the historians stressed the cruelty of SS men in general. One story of cruelty especially impacted the participants: the historians told a story of SS men tearing children apart with their hands. The victims and survivors that received special mention were those who participated in the uprising in October 1943, when Sobibór prisoners killed SS guards and about 300 escaped. The leaders of the uprising were represented as ingenious and courageous.

In Treblinka, we were introduced to the structure of the former extermination site during a walk around its perimeter. During the tour in Treblinka, I made note of five stories about the cruelty of individual perpetrators and only one story about a victim. Among the cruel perpetrators were Irmfried Eberl (the first commander of Treblinka), Willi Mentz (who executed prisoners in the so-called hospital), Hans Hingst (an SS guard), Christan Wirth, and Franz Stangl (second commander of Treblinka). All these SS men were represented as very cruel. Dr Smith especially mentioned that Irmfried Eberl was, in fact, more cruel and 'ambitious' than he is usually remembered. Eberl was dismissed as Treblinka commander in August 1942 because his work was not 'efficient' enough. Janusz Korczak was the only victim who was mentioned by name. Korczak, a Jew, managed an orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto during the war. He was offered sanctuary by the Polish underground but refused it. He joined his children when they were transported and killed in Treblinka. His story, as a heroic and selfless victim, is the ideal-typical example of a tellable victim narrative for the historians. Mentioning Korczak also made sense for the historians because the group also heard his story on day one of the study trip, during the visit to the former Warsaw Ghetto.

For participants, I noticed during my interviews after the study trip that it is very difficult to identify with these two types of actors. The perpetrators are presented as inhumanly cruel; the survivors and victims are presented as heroes. The fate of the Jews who were led to the gas chambers and who didn't survive remains unnarrated and unrepresented during the visits to the former extermination sites. However, other parts of the study trip partly compensate for that. During the visits to the former Ghettos, survivor testimony was repeatedly used to narrate the suffering of Jews. However, I observed that these narratives were less impactful for participants. I believe that the context of narration is key to understanding these different

affective responses. The former ghettos aren't musealised to a similar extent as the former extermination sites. Often, during tours of ghettos, we found ourselves in a residential urban neighbourhood with high-rise apartment buildings built after the Second World War. Materially, there was almost nothing present on-site that could help participants relate to the stories they were hearing. Secondly, while ghettos were (mostly) sites of suffering, the extermination sites were sites of murder. This distinction makes a difference for my participants. 'Being there' and hearing stories of murder on-site creates a high emotional involvement among my participants. I will engage with this further in this chapter when I analyse the practices on the part of the participants.

Some (short) moments during the trip were also used to talk about pre-Holocaust Jewish life in Poland. These short moments were led by Dr Smith, who positioned himself as a 'religion scholar' (he obtained an MA in comparative religion). During these moments in the trip, 'Jews' were not treated from an individual perspective, but their life was treated from the perspective of shared religious practices and folklore. In Łódź, we visited the Jewish cemetery, where Dr Smith gave a short introduction to Jewish burial practices. In Włodawa, we visited the synagogue where Dr Smith lectured about Jewish religious holidays. In Lublin, we ate dinner in a restaurant that exclusively served dishes that were said to be made by Polish Jews before the Holocaust.

In general, distancing the Holocaust by presenting it as a structure or system is a very effective strategy to which participants are highly receptive. The same is true for narratives of individual cruelty on the part of individual perpetrators, which are fascinating and puzzling for participants. In the next section, I look at how participants reproduce these two strategies in discourses during the interviews I conducted with them.

Aktion Reinhardt Project Participants: Preference for Perpetrator Narratives

Both before and after participating in the Aktion Reinhardt project, participants were generally in awe of the Holocaust as a system and structure. This is John talking, before participating in the study trip (but after he attended the introduction day), about the organisational 'talent' he believed was needed to 'put together' the Holocaust:

John: And to finally understand the full story as well as possible. Because what made me think a lot is how big the scale is of that action. How it was

dealt with. How something like that was actually possible. How you could get everyone with, so everyone, and how they were following orders so passively. And then you see the whole organisation behind it, the whole construction of putting together railways, building camps. And yes, the evolution, that even in that Aktion Reinhardt to then that be able to do the Endlösung. Actually, it fascinates me to know more about that in detail yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer: Ok and—

John: To see if something like that is repeatable. Because we speak quite often about the period of the Holocaust, but yes that requires, I would almost say, a huge organisational talent to put that together, and intrinsic trust in all your collaborators.

Interviewer: Yes.

John: If I can call it like that.

What ‘fascinates’ John the most is the ‘scale’ and the ‘organisation’ of the Holocaust and its process (‘how it was dealt with’, ‘how ... it was possible’). He also refers to some specific knowledge he gathered during the introductory session (the evolution in Aktion Reinhardt). In the second part of this excerpt, John reflects on how we compare situations in the present with the Holocaust. However, he believes that the scale of the Holocaust and its organisation make these comparisons and actualisations problematic.

When I asked Dr Jones after the study trip what he made of John’s ideas, he asserted that John somehow ‘got it’. He recognises that John sees the Holocaust as ‘a structuralistic whole’. It is only at the end of the statement that Dr Jones mentions perpetrators (‘who came here’) and only then victims (‘who was murdered here’), after a significant pause in his discourse:

Wait, yes, this person really saw it as a structuralistic whole without really. Apart from Hitler then maybe. That is why we put the emphasis on the people who worked in the murder centres. Here he [John] hasn’t experienced it yet, in fact, but that is then giving the impression that this this study day in [capital] we really do the macroscopic part of the big lines. And then during the trip we focus really on a site and who came here [pause] and especially who has been murdered here.

Dr Jones distinguishes here between the ‘macroscopic’ part – an insight into the whole structure of so-called Aktion Reinhardt – before the study trip and a more site-based, concrete explanation of these macro dynamics on-site. For Dr Jones, stress on the perpetrators and their roles illustrates these bigger systemic dynamics.

But individuals (perpetrators, victims, or bystanders) are, in fact, absent from John’s discourse before the study trip. The same is true for his discourse after the study trip. It is only when I probe him about those explicitly that he reflects on them. I asked him if, in his opinion, there was enough of a balance between perpetrator and victim narratives in the way the two historians approached the past. When asked to reflect on this, he notices (rightly) that perpetrator narratives were common, with Janusz Korczak as an exception:

Perpetrators were probably more in the picture and the pictures of perpetrators. That is what I assume. That is the case I think, instead of the victims that mostly [indiscernible audio] I had noted down here the man with the orphans Janusz Korczak also came into the picture ... so he was also talked about as victim. But indeed, I think that actually victims weren’t explicitly named.

However, John doesn’t explicitly reflect on why he thinks it is the case that the historians employed by the foundation tell more perpetrator narratives than victim narratives. Other participants, however, do reflect on this fact. Michael, for example, believes that perpetrators as characters are inherently more interesting to talk about and that stories about them are more tellable, which he expresses in crude terms:

Michael: Yes, a victim that you beat to death or put in a gas chamber, you can’t really say more about that, he. The perpetrator has much more potential. What he has done there, I think yes, if they push hundreds of people in these vans, yes ... the perpetrator, the potential of the perpetrator is much bigger than yes, what do you need to tell about victims?

Interviewer: Yes.

Michael: I think.

Interviewer: Yes, we have, also for example, we talked a long time about Korczak if it concerns victims.

Michael: Yes.

Interviewer: At a certain moment, there were a few victims about whom we talked.

Michael: In that sense it is interesting, in that sense it is interesting, yes.

Interviewer: Ringelblum as well.

Michael: Yes.

In the second part of this excerpt, I try to give some pushback against Michael's radical dismissal of victimhood experience as without narrative potential. I mention two victims whose story was told, one in Warsaw and Treblinka (Janusz Korczak) and one in Warsaw alone (Emanuel Ringelblum), but Michael only hesitantly confirms that, indeed, these stories might be interesting. He doesn't develop the argument further.

Dr Smith, when commenting on Michael's thoughts, recognises and endorses the lack of narrative potential of the victims. He argues that they know the perpetrators during the Aktion Reinhardt study trip, while from the victims, there is 'nothing that is left':

But we wanted, we wanted to also personally do that, we wanted, we do, because again there we know the perpetrators. During the Shoahtrip: Christian Wirth, Globocnik and the whole bunch. There is nothing, nothing that remains of the victim.

Dr Smith adds to this that he is also designing a study trip for laypeople along the sites of the Aktion T4 (about which he wrote his PhD thesis), which will be even more focused on the perpetrators, both the SS men and the medics.

In short, John and Michael are two participants who noticed the prevalence of perpetrator narratives when I asked them about it. There are other participants who didn't notice the dominance of the individual, cruel perpetrator during the study trip and who argued that the Aktion Reinhardt study trip was even too victim oriented. Mary, for example, would have liked to receive more sociological and psychological insight into the perpetrators' background and experiences:

Mary: The study trip was done to remember the victims. So that they did for sure. And then if I want to know something about the perpetrators, yes, then

I would have liked, for example, to see a movie in which they clarify how it grows, how it grows in someone. And in those boys, especially yes, there were also women of course, but in these boys, how it grows. How they end up there in that cruelty. How it starts that I would like to know. Yes, that is true, yes, I think that the most of them are born sadists and psychopaths.

Interviewer: So you would like to know how those people, those perpetrators, actually ended up in that system and those

Mary: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer: Ok, and uhm, was there enough attention for the lives and the suffering of the victims?

Mary: Yes, absolutely, yes, yes.

Interviewer: Are there stories of victims or of survivors that you have remembered?

Mary: Uhm, yes, was it the historian that that. Was it a testimony? Or the story he told about one of those Germans, no it was not an SS man. It was a young man, I think, who then, he told, that they threw babies from the window of a hospital and that young man wanted. No, no, they tore them apart, it was something like that. They tore these small bodies apart.

Notice here that Mary, at the end of the excerpt, reproduces narratives that I interpreted as stories told by the historians to highlight cruelty of individual perpetrators by the historians, as victim-centred narratives. In this case, Mary struggles to remember the story, corrects the story, and is reconstructing it on the spot.

Marc, on the other hand, believed that the Holocaust and Second World War were too much narrated from the national and 'Allied' position. He believed there should have been a more balanced version of the story that also stressed the victimhood of Germans. He brings this point across somehow incoherently and hesitantly, not finishing some of his thoughts. Here, he answers a question asked by me about his assessment of the extent to which the study trip was structured around victims, perpetrators or both:

Marc: No, no, no, no. It was told through the perspectives of the victims, the Jews and it was told from the [country and region name] and Allied position.

Of the victors in a certain sense ... and how that, how that the Germans then as well. Dresden that burned and the German. And the occupation of Germany and the division between West and East. And communism that, and the Russians that acted very badly and how you. Yes, almost from loser to victor ... that was maybe not stressed enough, after the war, or or.

In short, what I demonstrate here is that the participants in the Aktion Reinhardt project, with some exceptions (Marc and Mary), easily reproduce the distance in the Holocaust memory narratives of the historians by focusing on narrating it as a system that evolved over time. They are in awe of the Holocaust as a structure and system and mostly find perpetrator narratives more (intellectually) interesting than victim narratives. In the Auschwitz-Birkenau project, where the historians are less in control of the study trip, the picture looks different.

Auschwitz-Birkenau Project: Centrality of the (Heroic) Victim

As discussed in the previous two chapters, in the Auschwitz-Birkenau project the historians were less in control of the forms and contents of Holocaust memory narration than in the Aktion Reinhardt project. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, they directly address the study trip participants in three lectures only: one on historical developments of antisemitism (by Dr Smith), one on concentration vs extermination (by Dr Smith), and one on Auschwitz after 1945 (by Dr Jones). They also led the guided tour of the former Krakow Ghetto on the last day of the study trip. During the three lectures, they took care to stress their approach to the Holocaust as a system, just like in the Aktion Reinhardt project. Individual victims were rarely mentioned in the historians' discourses, and individual perpetrators were less present in the narratives compared to the Aktion Reinhardt project.

There was one exceptional moment during the tour of the former Krakow Ghetto where Dr Smith shifted from explanations of systems to affective mourning. Near the end of the visit, he took the group apart to read (in Yiddish) the lyrics of '*Undzer shtetl brent!*' (Our Shtetl burns), a song about the 1936 pogrom in Przytyk by Mordecai Gebirtig, a song which was circulating during the functioning of the Krakow Ghetto. Gebirtig was shot and killed in 1942 by the Nazis in the Krakow Ghetto. Dr Smith, after having read the lyrics of the song, said that it 'is important to give a face to the victims'. That was the only time across the two projects during which I heard Dr

Smith make an explicit argument for less distance, personalisation, and the understanding of individual victim experience.

The other two actors (local guides and survivors) led the narrative drastically away from the system orientation of the historians. The local guides in their tours of Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau focused a lot on victims, especially Polish Catholics and children. In Auschwitz I, the guide focused a lot on Maximilian Kolbe, for example. Kolbe was a Catholic Priest and notorious antisemite before the Second World War. During his political imprisonment in Auschwitz I, he voluntarily took the place of another political prisoner to be executed. After the Second World War, Kolbe was canonised and became a symbol for Polish nationalists as 'messianic martyr' (Zubrzycki 2013, pp. 111–113; Zubrzycki 2016, p. 253). The guide focused a lot on the story of Kolbe during the visit to block 11 at Auschwitz I, the prison part of the camp. Only two individual perpetrators were mentioned during the visit to Auschwitz I: Jozef Mengele, who conducted medical experiments on prisoners, and the camp commander Rudolf Hoess.

During the guided tour of Auschwitz II-Birkenau, the guide focused very little on the Holocaust. Most of the visit was spent in the so-called women's camp, around the barracks where female forced labourers stayed during the functioning of the camp. There, the guide extensively focused on the fate of non-Jewish children in Birkenau. It was only at the very end of the visit that the guide addressed the fate of most of the Jewish victims who were immediately brought to the gas chambers and killed. She explained the functioning of the 'factories of death' when we arrived at the remainders of the former crematoria II and III. The survivor testimonies we saw in documentaries obviously focused on their own experiences of survival in the transit camp, Auschwitz I, and Auschwitz II-Birkenau.

The historians recognise that this combination of actors with narrative agency (historians, local guides, and survivors) makes for a more victim-oriented narrative of Auschwitz. But, also, that Auschwitz as symbol in various commemorative cultures invites a victim-oriented perspective:

Dr Jones: Yes, yes, in the Auschwitz there is less talk about perpetrators. It is victim-oriented. For sure, we are in a martyrologium, that is also interesting. Because now the Jewish story is very much present in Auschwitz and Birkenau. But it is also an important place for the Polish martyrologium. And that are, by the way, two stories that clash with each other. Yes, indeed, victim-focused.

The combination of these three actors and perspectives made for the fact that the participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau project mostly perceived that the focus of the project was exclusively on victims, which they mostly regretted when they were being asked about it explicitly by me during the interviews after the study trip.

Auschwitz-Birkenau Project Participants' Perceptions: Too Victim Centred

The participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau project were not consciously aware of the predominance of either victim-, perpetrator-, or system-oriented approaches to the Holocaust and the cultural, moral, and political potentials of these different narrative choices when they were visiting the sites. They only reflected on them during the interviews with me afterwards, when I explicitly asked them to assess if the project was either victim or perpetrator oriented. In most of these cases, they found the trip biased towards victim-oriented perspectives. Ibrahim, in fact, is the only participant who found the trip generally balanced between victim and perpetrator perspectives:

No, I found it enough. I found it enough because they not only always talked about the victims. We also talked a bit about everything. That I found very good, that we always had a general image, and not concentrating only on the victims or only only on the facts.

Other participants, however, lamented the lack of perpetrator perspectives. They would have liked to have either treated the perpetrators as victims as well and heard their testimonies (David) or would have liked to have additional intellectual insight into what moved the perpetrators (Frederik, Nathalie, and Anna).

David realised only during the interview that we talked very little about perpetrators during the study trip:

David: Uhm, there was exactly relatively little talk about perpetrators. Yes, it is victim oriented, I think, the study trip. Yes, actually it is an interesting remark. Yes, once you think about it, there was very little talk about perpetrators. That would maybe be a good addition.

Interviewer: And did you realise that in the moment?

David: No.

Interviewer: So you didn't have that, yes you.

David: I didn't think about that.

Interviewer: Interesting, and how do you think that it is so victim oriented.

David: Yes, I think that it is the case that with most things. If you want to talk about the seriousness of something, you go first looking at the victims. And not to the perpetrators who can, in a way, also be considered victims. Euh to be considered. Because yes, finally, they do cruel things, but they didn't originally want it. That is also a question that you don't know, to which you don't know the answer.

David makes the argument here that he would have been interested in understanding perpetrators ('that would have been a good addition'). However, he recognises that it is the norm that to treat the Holocaust seriously; you are required to approach it from a victim-centred perspective first. Victim-centred approaches to the Holocaust are the norm and omnipresent. However, he argues, the perpetrators can also be considered victims because they didn't 'originally' want to do the cruel things they did. It is assumed here that there are contextual factors that made the perpetrators do these cruel things. Because, for David, perpetrators can also be considered victims, it is justified to be interested in their perspectives.

For Frederik, the realisation that the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip might have been mostly victim oriented also came only during the interview when I asked him about it explicitly:

Uhm, I think that when it comes to the material, if I go through it just quickly in my head, the perspective was more on the side of the victims ... so mostly the victim side. For sure if you take the first tours [the guided tours in the museum], yes, then it is quite striking. And a theme that was completely absent was, was the theme about which the laureates had to write their essays. For example, he. That is a very philosophical and psychological question is in itself. 'Are we all potential perpetrators?'. I think trying to understand the psychology of this, or maybe via psychological motivations, or in concrete cases then Nazi-Germany. Rather than with historical, historical explanations. That was partly absent. It was mostly from the victim perspective.

Frederik must first go through all the activities of the study trip in his head, to then decide that, indeed, the trip was mostly victim oriented. Much like David, he doesn't seem to recognise the prominence of the victim perspective as something exceptional and only realises it when I ask him about it during the interviews. This is, I believe, in contrast to the more distanced approaches the historians are performing, which participants might recognise as exceptional, engage with more, and then evaluate positively. The victim-centred perspective, instead, is automatically accepted and barely noticed.

But unlike David, Frederik doesn't argue that perpetrators are also victims and should be treated as such. Instead, he regrets the absence of a perspective, or a set of questions, that would allow us to understand the perpetrators' motivations. These questions, for Frederik, are not historical but psychological and philosophical. In fact, he remarks, the topic on which the laureates (such as David and Anna) had to write their essays was 'Are we all potential perpetrators?' The laureates won the essay prize and a free study trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau with the foundation, but then the topic of their essays wasn't engaged with any more during the study trip.

Nathalie makes a very similar argument as Frederik. She believes that the study trip was a missed chance for the participants to understand what moved perpetrators and bystanders during the Holocaust:

Interviewer: And, and was there enough of a balance for you between stories or perspectives of victims, bystanders and perpetrators?

Nathalie: According to me, no. About that I would have more. Yes, the better, the clearer you get that. And how clearer you get that we are all bystanders. And, and could even be perpetrators even in small things. Not on the big, great scale of course he. The better you understand the whole mechanism, and I think that there, there is an interesting, yes, opportunity. Yes, I think indeed, that when it concerns the perpetrators and when it concerns the bystanders [said in mother tongue] and bystanders [said in English], that they can change some things.

Also, Anna (another laureate of the essay prize) believed more insight into perpetrators' experiences would have been interesting in the form of perpetrator testimonies:

Interviewer: Yes, yes, ok, and, and when it concerns perpetrators, do you think that you have enough, you have.

Anna: About what?

Interviewer: The perpetrators, the SS men, the Nazis, who committed the murders in fact.

Anna: Yes, I don't really understand. We all know what they have done and approximately why. But I would have preferred. Imagine, you have different soldiers. I don't know if some are still alive. But they could tell their story. Like, they were forced to do that, they were not forced to do that. Did they have a choice, did they all choose this themselves? I think it would have been interesting to hear that as well.

Anna, much like the other three participants whose discourses I analysed before her, would have liked to know what made perpetrators do the things they did. She was interested in the extent to which circumstances forced them to do their deeds and if they had any choice or free will. A perceived strong victim-centred narrative stood in the way of such a deeper understanding of perpetrators in the Auschwitz study trip.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I investigated how the content of specific Holocaust memory narratives can contribute to distancing strategies. While in Chapters 1 and 2, I engaged with the moral meaning attributed to the Holocaust and the affective practices of my participants while engaging with Holocaust memory, here I have looked more specifically at the content, form, and structure of the Holocaust memory narratives as they were performed and practised by both the historians as well as the laypeople. I specifically looked at how actors are presented in those narratives, whose stories are being told, and how these narrations are accomplished.

As a distancing strategy, the historians that I observed tend to narrate the Holocaust as the development of a system and structure that was constantly being 'improved'. In these narratives, there are barely any individual actors present. But if they are engaged with, then these actors are so extraordinary that it is difficult for laypeople to identify or empathise with them. When visiting former extermination sites, individual perpetrators are presented quite often as inhumanely cruel by the historians. The few victims that are mentioned are shown to be selfless and heroic. Any individual actor who sits in between these two radical poles of agency, and

with whom lay participants could potentially identify, isn't mentioned by the historians.

Participants reproduced the 'Holocaust as structure and system' frame of the historians. These reproductions came with a few (potentially unintended) consequences. Lay participants in the study trips that I observed were fascinated by the system of the Holocaust and its 'improvement'. They were mostly 'in awe' of those who set up these systems. Second, victim narratives became uninteresting and untellable for them. Victims were thought about as numbers without individual stories (and histories).

These dynamics are certainly present during the Aktion Reinhardt project, where historians are fully in control of the narrative. During the Auschwitz-Birkenau project, where historians share control with local guides and survivor testimonies, the picture is more complicated. Historians stress the narrative of the Holocaust as a system (mostly distinguishing between systems of concentration and extermination), the local guides focus on the Polish Catholic and child victims, and the survivors' narratives focus on their own personal experiences. When confronted with this mix of actors with different narratives, lay participants seem to favour the historians' approach. They argue that the trips are too victim oriented and that they also need to hear and understand perpetrator perspectives.

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4. Distancing the Holocaust with Sick Humour

Abstract: In this chapter, I outline how and why the historians use sick Holocaust humour to distance the past, which is greatly appreciated by lay participants. With ethnographic detail, I outline the structural conditions in which sick Holocaust humour appears during the study trips. Reasons for use of sick Holocaust humour include self-presentation as norm transgressor, emotional coping and relief when constantly being exposed to the horrors of the Holocaust, exercising superiority over co-present individuals, and group coherence.

Keywords: racism, transgression, coping, interaction, education

The study trips for adult groups I observed are complex social projects. Before the trips, almost none of the participants knew each other personally and would thus not have known if they would get along with each other during the (intense) experience of travelling in Poland between the various memorial sites. Furthermore, the historians and administrators don't know the people who will be joining their trips. They don't select participants. Those who sign up first on the website and pay the fee can join the trip. Often, the one-day training sessions for participants, before they embark on the study trip, are ways for the historians and administrators to see which kind of people will be joining their study trips and what to expect from them, and to establish interactional norms in the newly formed group. A common joke that circulates among historians and administrators on these occasions, but which they also perform in front of the participants, is that laypeople whom they find annoying will be given a 'one-way ticket' to the former concentration camps and extermination sites.

This type of sick humour, I argue, is not just an 'aesthetic experience' (Morreall 2005, pp. 68–69). When told in interactions such as these,

sick jokes also have profound social and psychological functions for self-presentation, coping, power dynamics, and group formation. Sick humour transgressively makes fun of the suffering of others and is therefore different from gallows humour (which laughs at own suffering) and dark humour (which isn't necessarily transgressive). The jokes and their tellings I will be analysing might be distasteful, but they circulated widely among my participants and must thus be socially relevant as 'barometers' of a group (Dundes and Hauschild 1983, p. 250). Despite their prominent social function, sick Holocaust jokes are relatively understudied in (social scientific) Holocaust studies (Cory 2004), despite a big interest in humour and the Holocaust in the arts (e.g. Boswell 2012, Langer 2021, Malchow 1999, Solomon 2011).

Theories of (Sick) Humour

Joking about the death and suffering of others during the Holocaust is probably the ultimate form of emotional distancing from the experience of suffering, and of moral distancing from the acts that led to the suffering. From something that is to be mourned and judged, the Holocaust becomes something laughable. But instances of sick humour are not only performances of historical distance. Distance is often the outcome, or the result, of a variety of other processes that inform the telling of sick humour. Performances of sick humour are occasions for social rituals in which individual psychological and group dynamics are enacted and/or constructed. In this chapter, I draw on four lines of humour theory to understand and explain instances of sick humour during the study trips.

First, instances of sick humour provide an interactional strategy for self-presentation in which the 'jokers' can present themselves as people who are courageous enough to breach some social norms of decency (Billig 2005), in this case norms around the Holocaust and how the Holocaust should be talked about in public. Using sick Holocaust humour as conscious self-presentation presupposes knowledge of these very norms of appropriateness before they can be breached. After breaking the norms, the group can perceive the jokers as 'cool' and courageous. In the literature, this behaviour is often linked with male adolescence, in which breaking the rules of perceived decency is key to identity formation. Sexist jokes can fulfil the same function as sick jokes in this respect, and they did so in my fieldwork but are beyond the scope of this book. Norm breaking through

humour is, however, not only linked to male adolescent self-presentation. It can also be part of more thought-through political strategies to subvert perceived power relations. Freud (1905/2013, p. 105), in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, argued that 'tendentious jokes are especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure'. As I will demonstrate, for some of my participants, norm breaking through joking about the Holocaust allowed them to revolt against what they believed was political correctness.

A second theory of sick humour explains instances of sick humour as strategies to establish superiority over someone else (Morreal 2005). In these cases, one would joke about the supposedly inferior, abnormal, and incongruous nature of who the other person is or of what the other person is doing. This sense of humour in dynamics of power and subjugation has been present in literature and philosophy since the ancient Greeks until today.

A third theoretical explanation is more psychological. Instances of sick humour can be a way of 'relief', to release excess energy from the body (see also Moreall 2005, 2009). My participants (both historians and laypeople) are confronted with the horrific events of the Holocaust throughout a whole day, and often for days in a row. Laughing about these events might help them to relax and manage to cope with the exposure to so much horror. Alan Dundes, the folklorist who studied the circulation of Auschwitz jokes in Western Germany in the 1980s, said that these jokes 'constitute a kind of collective mental hygienic defence mechanism that allows people to cope' (Dundes 1987, p. 73). Philosopher Alan Pratt makes a similar argument about dark humour, saying that 'laughing at what is otherwise horrifying' can be valuable 'because this defends the personality from disturbing truths' (Pratt 1993, XXIV, in Solomon 2011).

Finally, 'laughing together', also about the Holocaust, can contribute to groupness and social coherence. It creates a common perspective for the group (Fine & de Soucey 2005) and provides for a ritual in which the social norms of the group are re-actualised. In that sense, (sick) humour is socially functional.

In the empirical parts of this chapter, I look at some specific empirical examples from my fieldwork in both the Aktion Reinhardt and Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip projects and demonstrate how some of them lend themselves to either of these four explanations or combinations of these explanations.

Positioning: Breaking Norms of Decency

The adolescent norm transgression, 'outraging decency' (Billig 2005, p. 36) by telling a sick joke about the Holocaust is only done by some of my participants: the two historians and the brothers Marc and Patrick. As I have shown in the previous chapters, these participants (all male) made a lot of interactional effort to distance themselves from morally and emotionally close approaches to the Holocaust, instead approaching it as something to be rationally understood as a system that operated in the past. Joking about what makes the Holocaust affect laden or moral for these people allowed them to show to the group their distanced and superior way of treating the Holocaust compared to these more 'close' approaches. At the same time, by humorously and very explicitly distancing themselves in often crude ways, they could position themselves as cool and courageous norm breakers.

There are two salient features that these joke-telling events by all these four participants have in common. First, all four made sure to tell sick jokes about the Holocaust in the very first interactions they had with others in the project, setting the tone for a coherent self-presentation as a distanced and funny norm breaker throughout the trip. Second, in the literature (e.g. Billig 2005, Howitt & Owusu-Bempah 2005), authors have noted that the modifier 'only joking' often accompanies sick jokes. These usages of 'only joking' are often used to pre-emptively challenge criticism of the joke, passing 'the responsibility for the conversational difficulty to the challenger – for not having a sense of humour' (Howitt & Owusu-Bempah 2005, p. 46) and signalling that they potentially don't really believe in the prejudice and racist content they have just delivered (Billig 2005, p. 33). Interestingly, these four participants didn't use the 'only joking' modifier, even in the very first times they performed sick jokes. They seemed to feel confident enough not to be challenged by their audiences and seemed to expect to enter an interactional context in which their sick humour would not be challenged. And in fact, this judgement of theirs was correct. I didn't observe a single situation in which sick Holocaust jokes were directly challenged for violating norms of decency. Even in the interviews with me after the respective projects, most of the participants declared appreciation of the jokes.

My very first encounter with Dr Jones during my fieldwork consisted of a joking interaction about Nazis and Covid-19. In June 2023, the group participating in the Aktion Reinhardt study trip gathered for a full Saturday in a conference room in the capital of the country to receive introductory lectures to prepare them for the study trip in August. That morning, when I arrived at the venue, Dr Jones was standing outside the building on the

pavement, waiting for participants to arrive. I recognised Dr Jones from earlier interactions I had with him when I worked as a journalist. I went to greet him but didn't know exactly how to do it. I told him that since the Covid-19 pandemic, I didn't know if to shake hands, fist bump, or do nothing whenever I met someone again after a long time. To this, Dr Jones replied that the Nazis had a good way of always keeping a 1.5-metre distance. I didn't note down in my field notes, and I don't remember, if he actually performed the Hitler salute, but it was quite clear to me that that was what he was referring to and that he did so jokingly. After the joke, I made sure to continue a small talk interaction.

Similarly, in the first group interaction I observed during the Aktion Reinhardt study trip, Marc told a series of sick jokes to the whole group. On the first day of the study trip, the group flew to Warsaw. I joined them directly in Warsaw, flying from Italy where I was living at the time. I met the group in a hotel close to the airport in Warsaw, where we would be having a quick lunch before taking the bus to the city centre to visit the former Warsaw Ghetto. We had lunch around one big, rectangular table in a restaurant where we were the only clients. Once seated, the interaction turned a bit awkward. No one in the group knew each other well, and they didn't really know what to talk about. The historians first solved these awkwardness issues by asking everyone to introduce themselves again. However, after the introductions, the awkward silence returned. Marc then took the floor and started filling the silence with performances of sick Holocaust jokes, alongside some other jokes (about Alzheimer's disease). One of those Holocaust jokes was a widely circulating one in the home country, which also included a language pun which played on the different meanings of the word 'extermination'. Marc wasn't sanctioned for his jokes. Instead, his brother, Patrick, picked it up and started telling sick jokes as well. Interestingly, the awkward silence returned when Patrick shifted from joking to serious discourse and expressed his negative opinion of the far right parties. No one picked up his statements of political opinion in the conversation.

Whereas the 'extermination' joke, as told by Marc, only served Marc's positioning as norm breaker, some of his other jokes had more political and ethical potential. Much like Freud described in the passage I cited before, some of his jokes allowed for situations to laugh at and ridicule perceived power. In some jokes, Marc would reproduce an antisemitic stereotype in a joking and absurd manner just to make fun of the stereotype itself. At the end of the interview I conducted with Marc after the study trip, for example, we discussed the souvenirs he bought in the duty-free shop at the

airport. Before the group left for the airport, I had advised Marc to buy dried prunes covered in chocolate, a Polish delicacy. At the end of the interview, we discuss the prunes in chocolate:

Marc: Yeah, but you also didn't find the prunes in that thing shop there, the tax free? Yes, yes, no?

Interviewer: I was at another airport, but there that had only Solidarnosc [a brand of sweets].

Marc: Ah, yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer: I flew from Modlin [an airport in Warsaw].

Marc: Probably a Jewish lobby is behind it hahaha.

Interviewer: [with smiling voice] I don't think so.

Marc ridicules the antisemitic conspiracy that Jews are secretly ruling the world by following its logic to its absurd conclusion in a joking matter: if there are no prunes in chocolate in the duty-free shop, it must be the result of Jewish lobbying. In this way, Marc positions himself as someone who is critical of these conspiracy theories. That is significant, because, on other moments during the interviews, Marc himself is prone to conspiracy thinking, reproducing some stereotypes of Jews exploiting the Holocaust to increase their supposed power and control. With this joke, however, he indicates that he clearly distances himself from absurd conspiratorial discourse.

In his interview with me, Marc also consciously reflects on sick humour and distance. He argues that 'we' (white Western Europeans who were neither victims nor perpetrators) treat the Holocaust less empathically and more 'neutrally' and that, therefore, we can laugh at sick jokes about the Holocaust. The Jewish youth visiting the memorial sites in Poland, he says, whose family might have been murdered and are therefore more personally affected, wouldn't be able to laugh at the events and treat the Holocaust as such:

And in that sense we treated it differently, or or more neutrally, or less empathically, more sober than than the Jewish youth that walk there. And a bit of Jewish humour and gallows humour ... But I can laugh with that. Because I don't laugh at my own people of my own grandfather or grandmother.

Marc confuses sick humour with gallows and Jewish humour in his explanation. Sick humour (what he is mostly engaged in) makes fun of other people's suffering and death. Gallows humour, on the other hand, makes fun of the joker's own suffering and misery (e.g. Feinstein 2008, Obrdlik 1942). Jewish humour is a genre of humour about Jews by Jews, which does not necessarily concern the Holocaust or involve antisemitism (e.g. Cohen 1987, Ziv & Zajdman 1993).

In the case of Dr Jones and Marc, I discussed two occasions in which their jokes allowed them to position themselves as norm breakers in the group in the early phases of the project. This norm breaking for (male and adolescent) positioning is inherent to almost all the jokes I discuss further in this chapter. However, the examples of sick jokes I discuss in the next sections are not only, or not primarily, concerned with positioning alone. They are also functional in the process of subjugation and superiority of co-present individuals in the local interaction context, or they can be functional in the process of stress relief.

Establishing Superiority

One way of theorising humour since Plato onwards has been to understand 'laughter as expressing our feelings of superiority over someone else, or over a former state of ourselves' (Moreall 2005, p. 65; see also Moreall 1987). In the cases I observed, the historians use sick humour about the Holocaust (or Nazi persecutions more broadly) in situations in which they want to establish their superiority over someone who is physically co-present in an interaction. The joke consists of using a category that is historically connected to the Nazi ideology, and the historians then use it to describe that co-present 'inferior' individual. Often, these instances of superiority through humour also go hand in hand with frustration on the part of the historians. They are frustrated by the respective co-present individual, and the joke is a way to express (and thus release) that frustration. In that sense, the superiority and relief theories of humour are, in practice, often entangled.

One example illustrates this entanglement of the establishment of superiority and relief very well. On day six of the Aktion Reinhardt study trip, we visited the former extermination site Sobibór. The location of the actual site was closed for archaeological excavations; only the railway platform and the small memorial museum were open to the public. Dr Smith guided the group through the exhibition in the museum. At the very beginning of the tour, we gathered around a model of the former extermination site

at the centre of one of the rooms of the exhibition. Dr Smith explained to us how Sobibór (as a system) functioned. During his talk, various other people who weren't part of our group were present in the same room. One of those was a family with a child with disabilities. The child would often make loud noises. Dr Smith got annoyed by these noises and the way they interrupted his explanations. At a certain moment, his frustration at the disabled child got so big that he tried to release his energy by joking about the child, calling it in front of our group a 'T4 case' while the child and its carers were still in the same room. With this, he was referring to the Nazi programme Aktion T4, which was the murder of about 300,000 incurable ill and disabled in German and Austrian (mostly psychiatric) hospitals by the Nazis. Dr Smith wasn't sanctioned for his joke at that moment, but I noted Dr Jones looking at me with a grin, indicating that Dr Smith might have gone too far with his joke. The joke was made in his mother tongue, which, probably, neither the child nor the carers understood. They probably didn't realise they were laughed at.

Other occasions of sick humour to establish superiority were more hidden from the person who was the object of the joke. During the Auschwitz-Birkenau study trip, for example, both the historians and the administrator started jokingly referring to one of the participants as 'Goebbels' when she was co-present with them in the same room. They did so among each other without the participant being able to hear it. The respective participant was a somehow solitary woman. She walked with a limp. The limp, for the historians and the administrator, was the reason for the comparison with Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda, who also walked with a limp.

These sick jokes that establish superiority over co-present individuals are probably the most unethical of the sick jokes I observed. But despite their unethical nature, they weren't sanctioned in the moments that the jokes were performed. Even more, in my interviews with participants, sick jokes were even welcomed to relax tension during the visits to the former concentration camps and extermination sites.

Sick Holocaust Humour as Relief Mechanism

Quite early on during the fieldwork, I realised that there was a potential contradiction in the way the historians positioned themselves. On the one hand, the sick jokes they told supported a positioning as distanced and cynical towards the suffering experienced during the Holocaust. Laughing at the Holocaust meant desacralising it, taking its moral meaning and affective

load less seriously. On the other hand, however, I realised that the historians weren't cynical at all about certain aspects of their job. First, they cared a lot about factual correctness when talking about the Holocaust. Statistics, organisations, and systems were to be taken seriously. Second, as I have demonstrated in Chapter 2, they were also emotionally affected by their visits to the former extermination sites. Especially Dr Smith struggled at certain moments, leaving the group for a bit in Treblinka because he was too emotional.

At first sight, these different positionings and behaviours might seem contradictory – being cynical, serious, and emotionally affected by the same matter all at once. However, the two historians I observed didn't see these two positionings as being at odds with each other; neither did the laypeople who interacted with them. It is at this point that the relief theory can start helping to explain these complicated practices. I have started seeing some of the instances of sick humour on the part of the historian as releases of excess energy and affect, to reduce tension and to cope with the confrontation of the cruel material they deal with on an everyday basis in their jobs. Joking about the Holocaust, however unethical it may be, helps them to continue functioning in their professional life.

The two historians themselves also recognised the importance of joking to 'release' tension when they believe it is appropriate. Dr Smith says that 'it is important to also like to release tension, yes, like but I think that is has to be well-chosen. Like with writing music: a note needs to fit well.' Dr Jones recognises as well that laughing at the Holocaust comes easier when you must work on it every day:

It [humour] is very important because of the fact that we are busy with this every day. So, then you easily joke about it sometimes. You then have dark humour. You don't do it with just anyone, for sure, out of respect of course. You don't joke about it with a grandson of a survivor.

In both these two quotes from the historians, they show awareness of the sensitivities of their humour and the need to segregate their audiences. They are aware that not every audience will appreciate sick Holocaust humour to a similar extent. I discuss these segregations of audiences in the next section of this chapter.

Rather than rebuffing the sick jokes, the participants also seemed to welcome them. For them, they seemed to be an occasion to release tension and to continue the exposure to Holocaust memories during the study trips. In the interviews I conducted with the participants after the study trips,

they talked at length and very appreciatively about the historians' humour and the way it helped them during the trip.

When I asked Nathalie how she thought the historians approached the matter, she said she valued the fact that the historians could be both professional and 'academic' but also cynical and critical. However, she described her initial reaction as one in which she wondered if the historians' funny remarks were appropriate:

Uhm, sometimes very professional slash, yeah how would you call that? Academic. So yes, that is good. And also human sometimes, uhm human, because we because also the guides have their own vision and they dared to give it. And because of that, how do you say that, they are really open and say things about which you think 'oops, yes'. But at the same time, you think also, like, that is possible. Why can't you, joke is maybe the wrong word, but why can't you give a cynical or a critical note. Well, I find that that should be possible. I think there should be a place for this. I just don't know if everyone deals with this in the same way. That is always the danger. But I think that it should be possible.

Nathalie clearly recognises that the humour could be problematic for some people, although it isn't for her. In what follows in this part of the interview, I ask her to elaborate on her thoughts. She connects Dr Smith's humour with his 'humanity':

Interviewer: So, about which kind of humour are you talking? About what is this?

Nathalie: Yes, about the one from Dr Smith, he—

Interviewer: Yes.

Nathalie: Yes, well, let's be honest. It is I think mostly Dr Smith who deals with it, well how would you say it ... yes who, in a human way, adds something to that. Or or, on a, yes, a critical perspective or with a witticism says something about that. That should be possible because it is partly filtering. And also, that is partly putting things in perspective. It is normal. Well, it doesn't always only need to be academic. Yeah, commemoration is also what people experience. So, I think there should be a place for that, that is why, that that experiencing for me, and this remembering like I said in the beginning is also very important ... because everyone

experiences this a bit differently. And everyone sometimes feels to be the need to just, yes, just be human. And a joke, that is a big term, but maybe saying something a bit cynical. Or yes, and I find that that should be possible, although I don't know if everyone is open for that.

In this fragment, Nathalie links Dr Smith's humour with commemoration and experience. Dr Smith shows his humanity, she argues, by joking. He shows, Nathalie says, that he is not 'only' an academic but is also a human being and is 'filtering' and 'putting things in perspective'. This line of reasoning corresponds with the relief theory. Nathalie repeats at least six times that cynicism and witticism 'should be possible' or that there 'should be a place for it', even though she believes and recognises that other people might have problems with what she calls cynicism and wittiness. I believe that these repetitive attempts to normalise Dr Smith's jokes are salient, especially because she brings up these attempts at normalisation herself without me explicitly urging her to. This, I believe, demonstrates that Nathalie is aware and understands that Dr Smith is breaking norms and that his actions might require justification.

Other participants in the Auschwitz-Birkenau project also recognised that the (sick) humour of the historians helped them to relax and release the tension of the visits to the memorial sites. This is Anna talking about the historians' humour: 'I found them, yes, they were relaxed about it. It was especially Dr Smith. He wasn't like: something bad happened and now you need to feel bad because of it. He could also make jokes and so forth'. Similarly, Ibrahim appreciated the humour of the two historians because it enabled him to relax during the study trip. He stressed that it was important to relax in the evenings:

Yes, I found it very important. Actually sometimes, because with these things you could be afraid that is, was only serious. Because we, you will not become joyful a lot and so forth. But it really wasn't like that. It really was one moment that I could be serious, and one moment during which you really, really could, as if we were suffering. Well, we didn't let the context influence us, you see. It is not because we were in Oświęcim that we couldn't be joyful or couldn't laugh. Even with the speakers, even Dr Smith and Dr Jones. I found it good that they sometimes introduced humour, you see. In their presentations and speeches, so I found that very good.

Ibrahim shares a common feeling among many participants: the ability to relax at night, either by playing board games or by drinking a few beers, did

well in balancing the tougher moments during the visits to the memorial sites. He sees the historians' humour fulfilling a similar role – allowing tension release for everyone.

Segregating Audiences and Situations

In a follow-up to the previous question for Nathalie, I asked her if she had encountered other participants who had told her that they couldn't appreciate Dr Smith's humour:

Interviewer: Did you, did you, has anyone told you that they couldn't appreciate it? No?

Nathalie: No, no, I didn't hear anyone personally who had issues with this or something like that. Well, but who am I to judge if others could or could not have issues with that? I don't know if Dr Smith did it with everyone in the same way. I also can't say that. Well, it could be that depending on with whom he is interacting in a certain moment, that he is doing all these things. Uhm, but for example, during the guided tour in the thing, in the ghetto, I think that then he said jokingly something once or twice. But I didn't really see if that affected someone personally or something like that. I don't dare saying that.

Nathalie says that she didn't encounter anyone who was affected by Dr Smith's humour or who problematises it. She also recognises that he might be segregating his audiences, joking only for one audience, which he knows will not be affected by his jokes.

During my observations, I never saw the two historians sanctioned for using sick humour about the Holocaust. The historians knew very well that they didn't need to segregate the audiences they were talking to, avoiding telling sick jokes to audiences that might include descendants of survivors or victims who might become offended by the jokes. Dr Jones: 'Yes, of course, you pay attention with whom you do it and about what it is'. The white, middle class Western European lay participants who were exposed to the jokes during the study trips seemed to appreciate the sick humour and weren't personally affected by it. People who could potentially be hurt by the jokes (e.g. descendants of survivors or victims) were not among the participants of the projects.

Whereas audiences didn't need segregation to avoid sanctioning, situations did. The historians segregated situations in which they judged sick humour to be appropriate. Crucially, the four short commemorative ceremonies organised during the study trips were judged to be situations that were solemn and sacred moments in which joking would be inappropriate. Dr Smith said, 'Yes, yes, but for example not during ceremony moments. Then it wouldn't be appropriate, you see, because that is then a moment that we, you see. And that is then also respect that you need to give'. During my interviews with the historians and the administrator, I asked them repeatedly if they were ever sanctioned while telling sick Holocaust jokes. All three told me the same anecdote. In preparation for the Aktion Reinhardt study trip in 2024 (the year after my observations), Dr Smith was told after the introduction day by one of the participants that this participant couldn't appreciate his humour. However, all three interviewees reported that during the study trip the same participant came to apologise to Dr Smith for his earlier comment about Dr Smith's humour. Dr Smith:

No, I have had it once ... during the preparation session, the induction session. One guy. It was about antijudaism. I had to explain about Jesus and I let myself go a little bit. Uhm, he came to me: 'Listen, your humour. I can't appreciate it well'.

Dr Smith then reported to have told this participant that the participant had no other choice but to accept it. Dr Smith indicates here that the explicit face-to-face rebuffing of his humour did not lead to different behaviour on his part. When a participant told him that a norm was being violated by his humour, he continued violating this perceived norm. In the end, the respective participant was reported to have changed his idea of Dr Smith's humour:

It was that guy, during the trip. He came to me and he said: well, sorry about what I said. Because he saw that the humour was well-dosed and that we don't start hurting. Well, you see, hurting humour that not.

What helps participants in accepting the sick humour and not challenge it is that they see during the trip that both historians are (also) experts who take Holocaust historiography seriously. Nathalie, for example, is very careful in making general judgements about how other participants perceived the historians, but she provided a very nuanced view of Dr Smith as someone who sometimes jokes about the Holocaust but nevertheless recognises that it

is an important, serious, and horrific event, and who doesn't have 'extreme' views. For her, knowing that he takes the Holocaust seriously helps her to accept the sick jokes and overcome the initial shock of hearing sick jokes:

I appreciate it, but yes, I have to say that the first time you hear it you think 'oops, ok, ah, yes, yes'. But it is a question of judging which kind of person it is. Is it someone who completely puts everything aside? Or is it something who just, yes, can deal with it in a certain way and dares just also a bit. I am still searching the word. Melancholic, is it that? A bit yes, can be ... about this. I mean, yes, and I think I also accept it or appreciate it because, because you feel that isn't only that and that there is something behind. That is the big difference. If you have someone about which you feel after a while: 'ah yes, he is thinking very extremely and he is just always expressing that'. No, I had it on certain moments that he is doing that, but not continuously.

With her mentioning of the fact that Dr Smith 'deals with it in a certain way', Nathalie here again hints at a relief explanation: Dr Smith is using sick humour to continuously deal with the confrontation with the Holocaust.

Conclusion

When folklorists Alan Dundes and Thomas Hauschild (1983, p. 250) defend collecting and studying sick jokes about the Holocaust in post-war Western Germany of the 1980s, they argued for their importance as sources for scholarly research: 'Whether these "Auschwitz jokes" are considered funny or not is not an issue. This material exists and should be recorded. Jokes are always an important barometer of the attitudes of a group'. I follow Dundes and Hauschild in their defence of the study of sick humour as an important social phenomenon. I find the jokes that I have been analysing in this chapter unethical and not funny. But that doesn't make them irrelevant for social theorising (see also Fine & de Soucey 2005). As I have demonstrated in this chapter, various types of sick humour about the Holocaust and Nazi Germany circulated among historians and group members during the study trip. The repetitive telling of sick jokes must be meaningful to them, and the jokes themselves must be helpful in fulfilling certain psychological, interactional, and social goals.

In the events of their telling, these sick jokes on the part of the historians support distancing processes that are very similar to those that I have analysed in the previous chapters. Being able to laugh at the Holocaust or Nazi Germany demonstrates that you are emotionally and morally detached from their cruel realities and consequences and from other people who might be engaged with the Holocaust in a less distanced manner. But these sick jokes are socially more complex than that. They do more than only support an ideal of historical distance. As I have demonstrated in the situations I analysed in this chapter, singular telling events can never be totally explained with any one of these theories. The telling of sick jokes supports a combination of these functions, in which one or the other becomes more prominent and urgent in specific contexts.

In this chapter, I looked at three other functions of sick jokes that are at work in the interactions that I studied. In my examples, combinations of these functions inform specific telling events, which makes studying the telling of sick jokes a complex and multilayered endeavour. First, the telling of sick jokes can support a self-positioning on the part of the teller as someone who breaks norms of decency. These positioning strategies are in the literature mostly associated with male adolescents who want to be recognised and valued for transgression. I have outlined in a few examples how both the historians and two of the participants continuously performed sick Holocaust jokes in the context of such positioning in the group. Second, sick jokes can be used to establish and reinforce superiority over other (co-present) individuals and groups. Laughing at someone using terms used during the Holocaust and in Nazi Germany or comparing this person to historically discriminated groups or notorious perpetrators can reinforce subjugating dynamics. Of all the sick jokes I studied, these are the most unethical because they explicitly discriminate against another co-present individual. Finally, sick jokes can also help to release tension and assist in coping with difficult encounters with often cruel representations of the past. Making sick jokes about these events can help a person to ease continuous exposure to representations and narratives of these events. In my fieldwork, I observed that this sense of 'relief' works both for the historians and the participants, especially if the participants are already 'distant enough' from the respective past which is laughed at. That applies to white, middle class Western Europeans, audiences that didn't sanction the two historians for their sick humour.

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Conclusion

Abstract: In the conclusion, I overview the empirical and theoretical take-aways of this book. I outline the premise of this book: studying historical distance as a practice that involves interactions between professional historians and laypeople. I go through the four 'distancing strategies' (on morality, affect, narrative and humour) I discussed in the book and reiterate the unintended consequences when these strategies are taken up by laypeople. Finally, I argue for a new research agenda in Holocaust memory education which focuses on how Holocaust memory contributes to socio-cultural continuity, rather than change.

Keywords: Holocaust, historicism, distance, education, social continuity.

I started the research for this book with two aims and questions. First, I wanted to understand what could potentially happen when professional academic historians who work from 'a distance' on the Holocaust in their scholarly work enter the field of Holocaust memory and memory education, which is more affect- and morality-driven. Secondly, I wanted to see how interactions with professional historians inform laypeople's understanding of the Holocaust and its meaning(s). In conclusion to this book, I overview both the main findings that I laid out in the five chapters of this book and provide some takeaways for further research, but also for practising Holocaust historians and Holocaust memory educators.

Historical Distance: The Study of a Practice

My two research questions led me to an ethnographic approach to researching historical practice and its virtue ethics of 'distance', which I have considered modernist and historicist. Instead of philosophising about the ontological nature of distance (like philosophers of history) or theorising

the methodological benefits of all kinds of distance constructed by historians, I investigated the construction of historical distance in practice. To understand what 'distance' means, I closely investigated how two historians practice it and studied the meaning they attribute to the 'distanced' past. I have done so by studying these historians 'in the wild' in their interactions with laypeople outside the academic ivory tower.

In this book, historical distance is neither conceived of as an idea nor (solely) as a material reality; I took it as an ideal that informs actions. It is a morally desirable goal that historians have learned to practice inside and outside academia. In that sense, I tried to understand historical distance as a category of practice in an ethnographic and sociological study. In two Holocaust memory education projects for Western European adults, I looked at a variety of situations and interactions in which historians construct and perform distance. I provided detailed descriptions of their actions and those of their audiences in these interactions. This micro study allowed me to properly disentangle all the cultural meanings, institutional factors, and interactional contexts that could inform a practice of historical distance in front of laypeople.

Such a micro approach can properly show the richness and complexity of a dominant idea(l) in practice. However, it also has its pitfalls. The two historians I studied in this book are obviously not representative of the whole discipline of history. The discipline of history is massive, diverse, and composed of a great amount of intellectually isolated silos. I am sure that many historians who have read this book will not recognise themselves in the two historians that are its main subject. The two historians that I studied practice a specific idea of historicism (that is nevertheless widespread within the discipline), and they practice it in specific institutional and interactional contexts. Even more, these two people also bring their own life experiences and personalities into the interactions that I studied. All of this means that nothing that I presented in this book is 'generalisable' for the whole discipline of history. What I have outlined in the previous chapters, however, is a thick description of what could potentially happen when an ideal of distance is practised in memory education. Patterns that I described here are likely to happen to a similar extent in other structurally similar contexts as well. Given the many unintended and undesirable consequences of distance in practice that I described, it is of utmost importance to be aware of the possibilities of them happening.

A second pitfall of this micro study of historical distance in practice is that it isolates distance as an ideal and practice from larger historicist

approaches to the past that are also practised by these same historians. The distance practised here is part of a bigger philosophy which underlays it. The historians I studied believe that the past is past and can be understood rationally and objectively when studied from a moral, emotional, and temporal distance. However, they also believe that no single event in the present or past can be explained with presentist theories. Events are always the result of longer historical processes. The historians that I studied in this book, for example, believe that the Holocaust is just the final chapter of a long process. When approaching the Holocaust from the perspective of the cultural history, Dr Smith argues, we need to start explaining it by starting with early Christianity and its relation to Judaism. Dr Jones, on the other hand, who approaches the Holocaust as political history, believes that we need to turn back to international relations between the Germanic realm and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late Middle Ages to explain it. Ideally, I would need to write another book to show the connections between practices of distance and related historicist practices. Nevertheless, I believe that there is strength in outlining distancing strategies in practice in minute detail, which I have done in the four empirical chapters of this book.

Third, I outlined in this book how practices of historical distance are performed in interaction with laypeople and how these laypeople reproduce and re-actualise these performances in other contexts. The lay participants I studied are Western European, mostly white and male, and exclusively middle class, and were born in a country which was occupied by Nazi Germany during the Second World War. Moral and emotional distance from the past fits with the ‘lay moralities’ (Sayer 2010) in which these people have been socialised before they interacted with the historians. They value rationality and emotional restraint, which is complementary with the historians’ idea of distance. This group of participants is thus peculiar in some respects. Other groups of participants might have reacted differently to the performances of distance by the historians. Comparative research, focusing on participants with different class and gender characteristics, or on groups who have personal connections with either victims or perpetrators, could shed further light on the social dynamics for transmitting a distant relation to the Holocaust.

Despite these pitfalls, I believe this book provides a strong descriptive and analytical basis for studying historical distance ‘in the wild’, theorising practice strategies in their cultural and interactional context that are also repeated across contexts.

Four Strategies to Distance the Holocaust

In my observational data and interviews, I found four strategies for constructing distance from the Holocaust employed by the two historians that I studied.

First, they strip the Holocaust of its moral meaning. They present the Holocaust as something that is fully in the past, which can be understood better if no moral meaning is attributed to it. Second, they act against approaches to the Holocaust that are affective and emotional. They believe that the Holocaust is something to be understood rationally. Third, they narrate the Holocaust as a process and system of extermination without centralising individual actors. If they do so, these actors are either cruel perpetrators or heroic victims with whom it is difficult to empathise for the lay study trip participants. Finally, they employ sick humour to establish distance between themselves and the Holocaust.

Throughout the four empirical chapters in this book, I have analytically disentangled these four strategies and looked at interactions in which one of the four is at work. When zooming out, however, these four strategies are impossible to separate, and they constitute a single practice of historical distance. In their operationalisation, they often enforce each other. It is only together that these strategies reach the effect on participants that they did.

Additionally, my observations demonstrate that these performances of distance are never 'perfect'. The historians that I observed sometimes unavoidably slip into 'closeness' to the Holocaust. For example, they made a lot of explicit effort to remove any moral meanings from the Holocaust. But such a distanced approach to the Holocaust is, paradoxically, endowed with virtue and considered morally superior to other approaches. A similar dynamic happens when considering emotions. Despite their disregard for emotional approaches to the Holocaust, the historians themselves sometimes had difficulty controlling their own emotions, either because they got annoyed with other groups or because they became sad during the commemorative ceremonies.

Unintended Consequences

The participants that I have observed in the two projects were very receptive to the four distancing strategies employed by the historians. They explicitly valued them and even reproduced them in their own practices, with only minimal signs of resistance. This, however, comes with some consequences that, I believe, are mostly unintended by the historians.

In the case of presenting the Holocaust without explicit moral meaning (Chapter 1), stripping the Holocaust of its moral meaning and seeing it as an object in the past alone that should be understood from a distance means that (at least in theory) you should not draw parallels between violence in the past and moral statements about violence in the present. The past stops becoming a resource of lessons and insights for the present. The historians I researched stick to this 'past alone' approach, although the participants made bridges to other conflicts that are uncontested in their own present contexts. Second, consciously stripping the Holocaust of its explicit moral meanings also means that participants, when they interact with historians, don't learn or develop new moral meanings that they can attribute to the Holocaust. When they return from the study trips, they stick to 'Never Again', a macro cultural norm that they were already fully aware of before their interactions with the historians. Treating the Holocaust factually and morally 'from a distance' is, in this case, a missed chance for more in-depth ethical reflection with laypeople. They might learn many new 'facts', but they don't know what to do with these facts, despite the historians' idea that knowing the facts by themselves should already be sufficient to judge the past. The stress on factuality also comes with other consequences. Participants start valuing (often very detailed) facts in themselves after interacting with the historians, focusing on minute details when they were asked after the study trip about what they had learned. Focusing on factuality also informs an oppositional attitude to the 'collective memory' of the Holocaust, which, after the study trip, participants saw as their duty to debunk.

In the context of the second strategy, in which historians repress affective relations to the past, unintended consequences fuel performances and narratives of violence. They do so in two ways. First, actors who are seen as treating the Holocaust more emotionally closely are 'othered' and presented as morally and epistemically inferior. That was the case for groups and individuals that were physically co-present with my participants on-site (Israeli groups), but also for survivors and their testimonies that were shown on video to participants. In the case of Israeli groups, the othering of an emotionally close approach to the past re-activates and fuels pre-existing antisemitic attitudes and discourses among the lay participants. Second, repressing affective engagement with the Holocaust lead to outbursts or 'releases' of excessive emotion during the few short commemorative ceremonies that were part of the programme of these study trips. Especially when these ceremonies involved a narrative aspect and allowed participants to individually participate in them, they became collective rituals for emotional relief.

The third distancing strategy, in which the Holocaust is the narrative of an evolving system, diminishes the role of human actors. If the Holocaust is understood as a system, it is impossible to also narrate it as an event that is both individually and collectively experienced. In doing so, the past is stripped off of the people that experienced it. That is especially true in this case for the victims. These victims (especially of the Aktion Reinhardt) are seen as a homogenous mass without much narrative potential. If individual victims appear, then they are so heroic and selfless that it is difficult for laypeople to identify with them. Janusz Korczak is a good example of such a victim. Perpetrators, when they are mentioned, are presented as extremely cruel and troubled individuals, which fascinates the lay participants.

Finally, sick Holocaust humour is a genre that functions well in an environment in which the Holocaust is approached from a distance, stripped of its moral meanings and emotional load, and in which people are filtered out from the historical narrative. In these cases, sick Holocaust humour assists historians and laypeople in positioning themselves against politically correct moralisers, coping with their own emotions, and establishing themselves as morally and epistemically superior. It is a discursive genre that, in this situation and with these people, fulfils a multitude of social functions in terms of group formation and collective coping. Loosening the institutionalised moral virtue of distance would, I believe, lessen the necessity to laugh at the Holocaust and its victims.

I have observed these unintended consequences of the distancing strategies in specific interactions between specific individuals. Their generalizability might be limited to this case study. Nevertheless, I believe that my participants (both the historians and the laypeople) are social types that are especially receptive to distanced approaches to the Holocaust and its potential, unintended consequences. They are mostly white, middle class, male and Western European. This makes them less historically implicated (they are neither descendants of perpetrators nor of victims) and doesn't make them part of a discriminated group in the present that would benefit from 'presenting' the Holocaust and identifying with its victims and/or perpetrators. Additionally, their masculinity makes them prone to be attracted to and endorse the virtue of emotional distance from the Holocaust. All these classical sociological factors make them receptive to historicist distance and value the historians that practice it.

On a more theoretical plane, the discipline of history often presents itself in an existential crisis since the post-structural turn. Historians, so it is argued, suffer from the (convincing) critique of a positivist approach to history that believes that it is possible to know the past as it really happened

if the necessary distance is kept. Fields such as memory studies, heritage studies, and oral history have filled the gap created by post-structural critiques on the discipline of history, focusing more on the experiential, political, affective, and moral nature of relating to the past. However, it should be clear from this book that for white, middle class, Western European laypeople, positivist history is not in existential crisis. What my participants expected from historians were neutral, objective, factual and thus distanced approaches to the past. The two historians delivered on those expectations. Even more so, their epistemic and moral authority only grew during the study trips. The virtue ethics of distance they perform match well with the lay moralities that their participants practice: rationality, emotional restraint, and wariness of political debate and political correctness. In interactions with these middle class, white people, positivist history is far from in crisis.

At the same time, I have also shown that the two historians are not only personifications of historical distance. They also bring their own personal biographies and emotions into their historical practice, even if these are at odds with the virtue ethics of historical distance. Both historians, for example, became angry and frustrated with groups that treated the Holocaust emotionally. Dr Smith also stepped out of his role of distanced historian during the commemorative ceremony in Treblinka. For them, these changes of roles and moves between distanced and more affective practice didn't create a sense of personal existential crisis. Some of the interactions I analysed in this book might seem contradictory from the point of view of the observer, but they aren't for the historians themselves. The historians can reconcile the strongly institutionalised morality of historical distance with their other roles, emotions, and convictions. Like all of us, they are complex and often troubled people who manage to navigate and reconcile these different moral imperatives and affective responses.

Teaching the Holocaust: If neither Distant, nor Close, then How?

To what extent, then, are the unintended consequences specific to historically distanced approaches to Holocaust memory education? Would the dynamics I sketched above also happen in memory education projects about other historical events? For the participants I studied, the Holocaust is culturally salient and central to the political positionings and subjectivities they are navigating. This salience of the Holocaust is what makes them (voluntarily) join the respective study trips in the first place. For them, participating in a Holocaust study trip is a significant practice informed by

and that shapes their political subjectivity, their class, gender, and ethnic identities. However, I am convinced that similar dynamics might be at work in other cases of distanced approaches to violent pasts, pasts that are not so politically and culturally salient as the Holocaust, with these participants. I believe that, for my participants, the role of the distanced historian in the face of past violence is attractive, regardless of the specificity of the Holocaust.

Of course, most of the unintended consequences of a distanced approach to the Holocaust in memory education with Western Europeans are problematic. While participants gain factual knowledge, it is mostly of details. The distanced approach to the Holocaust doesn't offer space for extensive ethical reflection and moral learning and re-activates xenophobic ideas that pre-exist from before the educational projects. These consequences are at odds with what liberal Holocaust memory education (funded by the state) prescribes. At the same time, however, the participants themselves appreciate the distanced approach to the Holocaust; they are receptive to its virtue ethics and repeat its underlying moral discourses across situations. They see their experience during the study trips as positive and productive.

But if not like this, then how should we teach about the Holocaust? I am not sure that I have the right answer to this question. Other (closer) approaches to Holocaust education have recently come under severe scholarly scrutiny, often for good reasons. Holocaust memory education and its politics are criticised for fuelling difference and conflict (David 2020), for ignoring bigger structural social problems (Gensburger & Lefranc 2020), for being a tool of the political right (Pető 2021, Pisanty 2021), and for continuing coloniality (Antweiler 2022). Others argue that there is little empirical evidence that Holocaust memory education 'works' (Robinson et al. 2024). Given this new literature and my own findings in this book, I find it hard to prescribe the right way to talk about the Holocaust in educational and political contexts. I simply don't know how to do it well.

What I can propose, however, is a different research agenda for the study of Holocaust memory education. All too often, scholars expect (Holocaust) memory to cause social change: the past should inform and change attitudes and actions in the present. Scholars, then, are desperately searching for such change in their empirical research. But (Holocaust) memory is not necessarily an actor of change in society. The study presented in this book is a good example of such a dynamic, in which memory education enforces pre-existing social norms, ideas, and behaviours. Holocaust memory's – as any other collective and cultural memory – main social function is to ensure cultural, political, and psychological continuity. This continuity is only

seldomly 'for the good'. Instead of searching for change, scholars might want to spend more time and effort disentangling the ways Holocaust memory education ensures continuity in a rapidly changing world.

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