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**“I never thought I could be seen as an oral historian”
– Fritz Schütze about the autobiographical narrative
interview and oral history in conversation with
Jakub Gałęziowski**

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Interview with Fritz Schütze – sociologist, professor emeritus of General Sociology / Microsociology and former director of the Institute of Sociology at the Otto von Guericke University of Magdeburg, widely known as a creator of the autobiographical narrative interview research method – a coherent theoretical and analytic approach including a method of data collection, and procedures for data analysis based among others on grounded theory, symbolic interactionism, sociolinguistics, social phenomenology and ethnomethodology. His approach was developed long before the “narrative turn” in the social sciences and is an inspiration for both biographical researchers and oral historians.

The interview was recorded remotely on Zoom, 11 October 2021, then carefully reworked and supplemented by Fritz Schütze, including many additional footnotes.

Jakub Gałęziowski: *Professor Schütze, thank you very much for agreeing to talk to me a little this morning. I am curious as to where this conversation will lead us, especially as we come from various perspectives and have different backgrounds. At the outset, I should note that a few years ago the “Qualitative Sociology Review” published a very extensive interview with you, conducted by Kaja Kaźmierska,¹ and much has already been said there about your biography, about your research career and the method you have developed.² Therefore, it should be noted that we are really lucky here in Poland, because a lot of your texts have been translated into Polish thanks to the research team from Łódź.³ So, the Polish reader is really able to appreciate your research output in qualitative sociology. But I am not sure if you are aware that in Poland you are famous not only among sociologists but also among oral historians, who very often refer to your*

- 1 Kaja Kaźmierska – Polish sociologist, biographical researcher, her interest include biographical experiences and social processes from a generational perspective.
- 2 K. Kaźmierska, *An Interview with Professor Fritz Schütze: Biography and Contribution to Interpretative Sociology*, “Qualitative Sociology Review,” no. 10 (1/2014), pp. 284–359.
- 3 Since the mid-1980s, there has been an ongoing collaboration between Fritz Schütze and his German colleagues and Polish social scientists from the University of Łódź. See: K. Kaźmierska, *op. cit.*, p. 329. Polish translations of Schütze’s texts have been published i.a. in: *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii*, J. Włodarek, M. Ziółkowski (eds.), Warszawa–Poznań 1993; *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii. Antologia tekstów*, K. Kaźmierska (ed.), Kraków 2012; *Biografia i wojna. Metoda biograficzna w badaniu procesów społecznych. Wybór Tekstów*, R. Dopierała, K. Waniek (eds.), Łódź 2016.

method of interviewing. This is the reason I would like to talk to you about this specific connection between the biographical method and oral history, the roots of which go back to the early 2000s and the large-scale international oral history project devoted to the memories of survivors of Mauthausen concentration camp, carried out in Poland by KARTA Center.⁴ From that time, your name has been spoken of among oral historians, but this has not always been followed by deeper theoretical and methodological reflection.⁵ This conflation led to the anecdotal situation, where during one annual meeting of the Polish Oral History Association (POHA), somebody proposed making you an honorary member of POHA.

Fritz Schütze: [smile]

J.G.: So, your method is living its own life in Poland, I would say, especially in the oral history field. Do you feel you are an oral historian?

F.S.: No, I don't. But I was a lover of history, the science of historiography, and I even started to study it with success, but when the professor of Modern History heard that my main subject would be Sociology, he just showed his disagreement and let me understand that it would not fit history studies. I left history, although I liked the lectures given by that professor – he was one of the first who would deal with Nazi society and German crimes in that period, and I went to general linguistics (including the obligatory study of one non-European language and culture; in my case classical Chinese).⁶ And then, because of my disappointment with the attitude of the professor of history towards sociology, for more than 15 years I never looked into history, because I was so disaffected with his reaction. 20 years later, I was invited to the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton, where there was a study group working on biography research. Daniel Bertaux⁷ was there, too, and

4 In 2002–2003, more than 800 interviews with survivors of Mauthausen and its satellite camps were conducted within the Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project in all European countries, in North and South America and in Israel. Most audio interviews were saved in digital form and ca. 10% interviews were recorded on video. In Poland, 164 interviews were conducted by KARTA Center. These are stored in the Oral History Archive at the History Meeting House in Warsaw. For more about the project and an analysis of the interviews, see: P. Filipkowski, *Historia mówiona i wojna. Doświadczenie obozu koncentracyjnego w perspektywie narracji biograficznych*, Wrocław 2010.

5 For more about the interconnection of both approaches in Poland, see: J. Gałęziowski, *Oral history and biographical method. Common framework and distinctions resulting from different research perspectives*, "Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej," no. 25 (2/2019), pp. 76–103.

6 In the years 1964–1972, Fritz Schütze studied Sociology, Philosophy, and General Linguistics at the University of Münster, where in 1972 he received his PhD in the field of Sociology.

7 Daniel Bertaux (born 1939) – French sociologist, who popularized the use of life stories in Sociology.

Martin Kohli⁸ and quite a lot of very interesting scholars. And through this study group I started again to be in contact with historians. I love working together with them.

In Magdeburg, we have one of these centres for historical research on the Stasi police, who had a special prison there. And I was invited, together with historians, to give some advice regarding the further development of the museum there.⁹ I always felt that maybe they would use me for just showing how to do autobiographical narrative interviews with the former prisoners or something like that and nothing more, but when I started to demonstrate my capabilities to analyse interview texts, then they seemed to be some bit irritated. This is an additional reason that I never again attempted to get into closer collaboration with modern historians. It might be also a reason that I never attempted to get into any contact with oral historians in Germany. And, as far as I could see it, none of them were ever interested in what I was doing.

I never thought I could be seen as an oral historian. The cleavage between the disciplines of history and sociology and the mutual misunderstandings between them have, of course, nothing to do with socio-historical and socio-biographical subjects as such. On the one hand, when I, as a sociologist, was interested in the impact of historical events on the suffering of people, and I started to dwell on this, the historians always dropped out. Also, when I started to look at what the impact was of state socialism on biographical outlook, on biographical work, and biographical situations, then I felt historians would not be willing to dwell on this topic so much. I was not stubborn enough to ask them why they wouldn't be interested in my way of looking at it. So, maybe it's my fault. On the other hand, the impact of personal biographies on history could be very interesting as well. For example, at Princeton, the historian J.H. Elliott had written, a "double biography" on the political and biographical contest between Richelieu and Olivares, and I was extremely intrigued by this book.¹⁰ So, the reverse research questioning on the impact of biography on socio-historical processes could be very fruitful – even in terms of basic-theoretical theorizing.

Essentially, there should not have been any barrier to understanding and co-operation between "us", the historians and sociologists, but rather there should have been a lot of interest in "us", i.e. in joint groups of historians and sociologists, working together, but with various research approaches. Of course, there will be important differences in the substantive character of research questions

8 Martin Kohli (born 1942) – Swiss sociologist, his research interests are life courses, health and aging, and welfare states.

9 Memorial for the victims of political violence *Gedenkstätte Moritzplatz Magdeburg*, see: <https://gedenkstaette-magdeburg.sachsen-anhalt.de/> (accessed: 10.12.2021).

10 J.H. Elliott, *Richelieu and Olivares*, Cambridge 1984.

posed by historians, sociologists, sociolinguists, educational scientists or even ethnologists, however, we should always keep in our minds the fact that the basic theoretical concepts are similar. You can use different terminology, but we will come to a common ground. So, the basic theoretical points of view, however, not the substantive and practical research questions, regarding social and biographical processes are mutually understandable.

J.G.: *They were also similar for one of the “fathers” of oral history, Paul Thompson,¹¹ who in his famous *The Voice of the Past*¹² listed you and Gabriele Rosenthal¹³ in one line together with Lutz Niethammer¹⁴ and Alexander von Plato¹⁵ as creators of the German “model of the narrative interview” as a response to the Nazi past. In this way, the author refers to you as a “life story sociologist.” Are these appropriate associations?*

F.S.: I see life stories and biographical identity unfolding as a normal, ordinary type of social process, so that both are a normal research subjects of a process-oriented sociology (in contrast to a sociology mainly focussed on stable conditions of society), interested in the courses and mechanisms of social processes, their mode of conditioning and their mode of experiencing. Of course, you must accept the close relationship between personal biography and collective phenomena, so you have to consider these together. It turned out that the analysis of life courses and their combined processes and mechanisms, i.e. the analysis of socio-biographical processes, have formed the main part of my work. However, taking into regard the range of my disciplinary denomination and the range of my real interest, I feel that I am a microsociologist and general sociologist. I analyse ongoing interactions, how people interact with each other, and how actors work together in their social worlds and, especially in their professions. I have just published a book on the profession of social work.¹⁶ Again, because social work is closely connected with individual biographies and collective processes

11 Paul Thompson (born 1935) – British sociologist and oral historian, one of the pioneers of oral history as a research methodology.

12 P. Thompson, J. Bornat, *The Voice of the Past. Oral History*, 4th edition, New York 2017.

13 Gabriele Rosenthal (born 1954) – German sociologist, renowned as a contributor to biographical research and intergenerational transmission within families analysed through Gestalt.

14 Lutz Niethammer (born 1939) – German historian and oral historian, who, together with Alexander von Plato, developed a specific approach to interviewing marked by the Nazi legacy of research on the German population.

15 Alexander von Plato (born 1942) – German historian and oral historian, coordinator of many oral history projects on slave workers and prisoners in concentration camps in Nazi-occupied Europe.

16 F. Schütze, *Professionalität und Professionalisierung in pädagogischen Handlungsfeldern: Soziale Arbeit*, Opladen-Toronto 2021.

too, my method for analysing life histories and autobiographical narration is very closely connected to social work. I have to admit that many German social scientists would see me as some sort of creator of “narrative sociology,” but I never would use this term for my work [smile], because the label would be too narrow – it would exclude my research interests on interaction, communication, social worlds and macro-social mental space¹⁷ and it would probably associate an attitude not prone to basic-theoretical thinking.

The mentioning of me in *The Voice of the Past* is misleading in a certain aspect.¹⁸ I did not develop the narrative interview as my research reaction to the Nazi period of German history. I was very much intrigued by the question of how to analyse ideological statements of politicians and clerics. In my very long PhD dissertation published in two volumes in 1975, I developed the idea to do social research through the socio-linguistic study of oral formulations used by members of society, especially those in power.¹⁹ The general idea of the narrative interview is to be found in this dissertation: that it would be possible to get behind the ideological formulations of powerful people by letting them narrate their personal experiences with the socio-political collective processes in which they were involved. For this reason, I did basic-theoretical empirical research on the elementary language schema of presenting self-experienced events via *ex-tempore* narration.

17 F. Schütze, A. Schröder-Wildhagen, *European Mental Space and its Biographical Relevance*, in: R. Miller, G. Fray (eds.), *The Evolution of European Identities. Biographical Approaches*, Houndmills-Basingstoke- Hampshire 2012, pp. 255–278; F. Schütze [et al.], *Discoverers in European Mental Space: The Biographical Experiences of Participants in European Civil Society Organizations*, in: R. Miller, G. Fray (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 150–169.

18 Fritz Schütze: “I do not want to discuss here what the authors, whom I appreciate for much of their work, wrote in their book. I have to confess that I have not read this book, which Jakub Gałęziowski referred to. A few days after having talked to Jakub in the framework of the Zoom interview, I asked my friend Gerhard Riemann about the thesis of Thompson and Bornat that (a) the narrative interview would be a direct reaction of the first generation of young Germans social scientists after Second World War to the Nazi mindset of their parents’ generation and (b) of the close connection of the oral history interview and the narrative interview in Germany. He wrote to me a few days later and confirmed my intuition on the subject, adding the fair remark that ‘in the preface to the 4th edition, the authors themselves hint to the situation (p. ix) that they are not so familiar with the German narrative interview due to the language barrier and that, therefore, they had to rely on what had been published in English. The only piece that they seem to have read of is *Pressure and Guilt*’”. Cited from Gerhard Riemann’s email, 18.10.2021; see also: F. Schütze, *Pressure and Guilt: War Experiences of a Young German Soldier and their Biographical Implications. Part 1 and 2*, “International Sociology,” vol. 7 (2/1992), pp. 187–208 and issue 3, pp. 347–367 (Polish edition: F. Schütze, *Presja i wina: wojenne doświadczenia młodego żołnierza niemieckiego i ich biograficzne implikacje*, in: *Biografia i wojna...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 450–502).

19 F. Schütze, *Sprache soziologisch gesehen, Vol. I: Strategien sprachbezogenen Denkens innerhalb und im Umkreis der Soziologie; Vol. II: Sprache als Indikator für egalitäre und nicht-egalitäre Sozialbeziehungen*, München 1975.

I did this together with Werner Kallmeyer, a linguist and sociolinguist, who later became the head of the working group on “Language and Society” in the Institute for German Language in Mannheim. In 1976 and 1977, I published the first two – quite long – papers on the narrative interview based on my first interview experiences with local politicians who had organized or tried to hinder fusions of local communities.²⁰

My “invention” or “creation” of the narrative interview was totally guided by basic theory and methodology and originally had nothing to do with the desire to analyse life courses of adolescents and young adults during Nazi times (however, roughly ten years later the narrative interview became my research instrument to study questions like this). During those early days I did not see the basic theoretical import of the “biography implications” of the narrative interview. Probably I got sensitized to the “historical-biographical transport” of the narrative interview – especially relating to Nazi times – through my cooperation with my Polish colleagues, especially Marek Czyżewski²¹, Andrzej Piotrowski²² and soon also Kaja Kaźmierska at the University of Łódź and by Anselm Strauss²³ from the University of California Medical Campus in San Francisco and his wife Frances Strauss, with whom I spent a year (1978/79). Then, immediately, I realised the necessity to see life course and biography as “natural” social phenomena, and I detected how to analyse them in a sociolinguistic process of analysis. This was part of my habilitation papers.

In Łódź and San Francisco and a few years later in Princeton (1984/85) too, I had to learn how to confront my “Germanhood”. My parents had never obscured the German crimes during Nazi times from their autobiographical renderings to me, and I hated this part of my “Germanhood”. However, before I went to Łódź, San Francisco and Princeton, I was used to assume that I would be just an “earthling” having nothing specifically to do with the German crimes during the Nazi period of German history. “How can you endure to live as German?,” a lady asked me during a social meeting in Princeton. She was right, my former assumption

20 F. Schütze, *Zur Hervorlockung und Analyse von Erzählungen thematisch relevanter Geschichten im Rahmen soziologischer Feldforschung*, in: *Arbeitsgruppe Bielefelder Soziologen. Kommunikative Sozialforschung*, München 1976, pp. 159–260; *idem*, *Die Technik des narrativen Interviews in Interaktionsfeldstudien – dargestellt an einem Projekt zur Erforschung von kommunalen Machtstrukturen*, Universität Bielefeld, Fakultät für Soziologie, Arbeitsberichte und Forschungsmaterialien, no. 1 (1977).

21 Marek Czyżewski – Polish sociologist, his research interests are public discourse analysis, contemporary social theories and social communication.

22 Andrzej Piotrowski (born in 1947) – Polish interpretative sociologist, his research interests are sociology of languages and European culture.

23 Anselm Strauss (1916–1996) – American sociologist, specialist in medical sociology, developer (with Barney Glaser) of grounded theory.

that I was just an earthling was not possible anymore under the impact of my concrete social encounters in countries that had fought the Nazis. I had to accept that I could not circumvent that question, and I could not ask my parents anymore about it, since both had died from the remote impact of Second World War. However, I realized that I had developed a research instrument for analysing the impact of the Nazi times on biographical developments: the autobiographical-narrative interview. The analysis of the *Rasmus* interview in Studs Terkel's oral-history volume *The Good War*²⁴ was my first piece of analysis in the field of experiences of Second World War, published 25 years later with a new framing.²⁵ Of course, in retrospect, one could ask if my basic-theoretical sociology-of-knowledge interest to circumvent the highly abstract and diffuse ideological statements of the German elite, especially politicians and bishops, by eliciting concrete personal narratives of ordinary people was guided by my contempt and scorn for the typical abstract and diffuse legitimating formulations of these elite people still very much informed by Nazi or even older reactionary ideological thinking. At least, in those days I was not fully self-aware of such a mechanism of guiding my research interests. In those days, it was much too difficult for me to analyse the broad discourse statements from those years – although today I might be able to do such an analysis.

Going back to my contacts with German oral historians... As far as I can remember, I have never met Lutz Niethammer, and I only saw Alexander von Plato once. In this situation roughly ten years ago, there was quite a distance between Mr von Plato and me, and this was certainly my fault. During a conference organised by the prison-museum in Magdeburg many of the former prisoners came together, and I was asked to give a paper, but I did not really speak to them. My lecture was too academic. Von Plato was at that conference, too, and later in some situations of that conference, when I saw him from some distance, I was too ashamed of my wrong type of lecture that I avoided approaching him; and I just left without taking my chance. So, I missed the opportunity to “really” meet von Plato. On the other hand, I had published one long article in 1989 in von Plato's wonderful journal “BIOS.” It fell within the remit of the programme of “BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung and Oral History”²⁶ to publish oral history

24 Louis “Studs” Terkel (1912–2008) – American historian and oral historian, author, actor and broadcaster. For the book in question, he received the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction in 1985, see: S. Terkel, *‘The Good War’*. *An Oral History of World War II*, New York 1984.

25 F. Schütze, *Autobiographical Accounts of War Experiences. An Outline for the Analysis of Topically Focused Autobiographical Texts – Using the Example of the ‘Robert Rasmus’ Account in Studs Terkel’s Book, ‘The Good War’*, “Qualitative Sociology Review,” vol. 10 (1/2014), pp. 224–283.

26 Today its subtitle is: “Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History and Lebensverlaufsanalysen”.

articles and sociological articles dealing with life situations and life courses. My contribution there was very important for my own scholarly development; it dealt with American and German experiences of Second World War. One part describing the societal creative change of the collective metamorphosis of us society and its mode of experiencing on the empirical base of the interview *Red Prendergast* from Terkel's volume *The Good War*, the other part was delineating the societal distortion and the collective trajectory of German society through the Nazi regime and through the total devastation of the war and its mode of experiencing.²⁷ Perhaps Mr von Plato as journal lector first, later its co-editor, helped to get this extremely long article published – but I really don't know. However, I am sure that Werner Fuchs,²⁸ who was one of the founding fathers of "BIOS" – as was Lutz Niethammer – really helped, although he got angry due to the length and the late delivery of my contribution.

Finally, and this is important too: during those days, the end of 1970s and in the early 1980s, two other forms of narrative type of interviewing were developed. The first one, totally non-influenced by my articles, is the approach of Daniel Bertaux. He published it with his former wife Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame, who is also a historian²⁹. Their research dealt with the handicraft of French baking.³⁰ The method is beautifully presented and explained in *Le récit de vie*.³¹ There, Daniel Bertaux stresses that he would not be really interested in the biographies of the bakers as such, but in what their biographical experiences tell about the processual logic of the occupational life courses and career patterns of the baker apprentices, journeyman craftsmen and masters in all their hardships. But, of course, he had to listen to the bakers' expression of biographical experiences in a very sensitive way. Secondly, Gabriele Rosenthal, who was to some extent influenced by my way of conducting narrative interviews, developed her own way of analysing them. She was the first who applied the data collection method of the autobiographical narrative interview to larger research projects on the bio-

27 F. Schütze, *Kollektive Verlaufsurve oder kollektiver Wandlungsprozess. Dimensionen des Vergleichs von Kriegserfahrungen amerikanischer und deutscher Soldaten im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, "BIOS," no. 1 (1989), pp. 31–109.

28 Werner Fuchs-Heinritz (1941–2018) – German sociologist, life story researcher.

29 Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame – French sociologist and historian, promotor of life story approach in social sciences.

30 See: D. Bertaux, I. Bertaux-Wiame, *Artisanal Bakery in France. How It Lives and Why It Survives*, in: *The Petite Bourgeoisie. Comparative Studies of the Uneasy Stratum*, F. Bechhofer, B. Elliott (eds.), London 1981, pp. 155–181; *idem*, *Life Stories in the Baker's trade*, in: *Biography and Society*, D. Bertaux (ed.), London–Beverly Hills 1981, pp. 169–189.

31 D. Bertaux, *Les récits de vie. Perspective ethnosociologique* (Life stories, an ethnosociological perspective), Paris 1997.

graphical impacts of the devastating German mass crimes in Nazi times.³² Both approaches – that of Bertaux and that of Rosenthal – were and are very productive.

J.G.: *Misleading could also be the fact that the method of interviewing presented in your articles and in texts by Niethammer or von Plato has a lot in common. How can you explain this? Maybe this is one of the reasons for classifying you as an oral historian?*

F.S.: Maybe the problems of data collection are similar and if the problems are similar, you might develop the same type of method. That might be the reason. I started to use the autobiographical-narrative interview in the middle of 1970s together with my student assistant and friend Gerhard Riemann³³ in the already mentioned study on the fusion of German communities.³⁴ You could, to a certain extent, call this an oral history study. It had a lot to do with the problem of collective identities on the level of local communities. Our basic research interest was a quite abstract one of sociology of knowledge and of sociology of language: what would be the epistemic mechanisms to orient to collective phenomena in one's everyday life. It was very much inspired by the publications of Alfred Schütz and Karl Mannheim.³⁵ However, when we started to do this research project, I was not interested in biographies at all. The phenomenon of biography seemed to be very difficult for me in terms of being an important part of social reality and in terms of analysis. When we began to analyse the narratives on the fusion of local communities, biographies of mayors of communities and of community politicians came in as some sort of riddle or distraction for the research. However, it was clear to me that these biographical processes of which the informants would tell, e.g. losing the election to become the mayor of the merged community and losing all the former power for political decision making and/or being struck down by a heart attack, would be important parts of the socio-historical process of the merger of local communities.

32 See for example: *Der Holocaust im Leben von drei Generationen, Familien von Überlebenden der Shoah und von Nazi-Tätern*, G. Rosenthal (ed.), Gießen 1997.

33 Gerhard Riemann (born 1951) – German sociologist, whose research interests include biographical research, ethnography and the analysis of professional work (especially social work). Former research assistant of F. Schütze.

34 In 1972–1973, the state of North Rhine–Westphalia in the Federal Republic of Germany decided to organise fusions of local communities situated next to each other to enable provision of better local administration and communal services; K. Kaźmierska, *op. cit.*, pp. 309–315.

35 A. Schütz, *Collected Papers*, vol. I, *The Problem of Social Reality*, Hague 1962; *idem*, *Collected Papers*, vol. II, *Studies in Social Theory*, Hague 1964; K. Mannheim, *Wissenssoziologie. Auswahl aus dem Werk*, K.H. Wolff (ed.), Berlin–Neuwied 1964.

However, I realised that we were not able to analyse those “historical” parts of storytelling, where the “personal” autobiographical renderings of the local-political actors would come in. Therefore, we started to focus on the phenomenon of life histories as such and how to analyse orally produced autobiographical texts. For this reason, we conducted a first series of autobiographical-narrative interviews. I got my informants through friends, whom I asked if they had friends or acquaintances with especially interesting life stories and if they would help me to get in contact with them. In the beginning, we did not even know if the topic of one’s own life history as a whole would have a “narrative *Gestalt*,” which would encourage possible informants to talk. It was very encouraging that all those first interviews demonstrated the extreme “rendering power” of the topic of one’s life history as a narrative.

In the beginning, I just used the method of conversation analysis for my analysis of the interview texts. Then after a while, I discovered that there was some sort of “grammar” of autobiographical storytelling in these interview texts. I started to work on this; especially important were the phenomena (a) of narrative units, (b) of supra-segmental markers expressing general modes of biographical experiencing as trajectories of suffering or creative metamorphoses of change of life circumstances and biographical identity and (c) of background constructions dealing with experiences which were difficult to relate. Even today I am used to look at these types of phenomena as a starting point of my basic method of analysing autobiographical narrative interviews. However, while in the past I had been especially interested in “orderly” structures of autobiographical narratives, today I am even more interested in the unordered or disorderly parts of life histories or autobiographical renderings. This “disorderliness” has, of course, a lot to do with changes in life stories, like for example, with trajectories of suffering, where there is a lot of disorder in life circumstances and personal capabilities.³⁶ Today I am very much focussed on how to deal with this “disorderliness” in terms of basic-theoretical categorizing and of modes of analysing it within an acceptable framework of methodological “orderliness.”

So, one can say that this could be seen as an oral history project, and this could have been done by historians, too. However, it might be that they would have been distracted or disoriented by the issue of personal suffering which ap-

36 Analytical categories as, for example, trajectory of suffering, are explicated in the following systematic publication: F. Schütze, *Biography Analysis on the Empirical Base of Autobiographical Narratives: How to Analyse Autobiographical Narrative Interviews – Part one and two*, “European Studies on Inequalities and Social Cohesion”, vol. 1-2 (2008), pp. 153–242 and 3/4 (2008), pp. 5–77. (Polish edition: F. Schütze, *Analiza biograficzna ugruntowana empirycznie w autobiograficznym wywiadzie narracyjnym. Jak analizować autobiograficzne wywiady narracyjne*, in: *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii. Antologia tekstów*, K. Kaźmierska (ed.), Kraków 2012, pp. 141–276).

peared in these life histories [smile]. Some of the interviewees, i.e. mayors, went to prison, since in the turmoil of merger events they had lost their guidelines of orderly administrative behaviour, and others got very sick as a result of the turbulence, and so on... Perhaps these personal biographical data would not have been all that interesting for historians but they were very interesting for me because I was always intrigued by the relationship between individual biography and collective developments. However, I could imagine that something similar must have been happened with oral historians in terms of concentrating on difficult socio-biographical processes like in the case of the Mauthausen interviews. Nowadays, I would say, there is lot of interest of oral historians on suffering... Generally speaking, when the research interest is similar, the method of collecting data by some sort of autobiographical interviewing might become similar.

J.G.: *Indeed, this method of conducting interviews, and the format of the autobiographical narrative interview, seems to be optimal for oral historians. Having the entire biography of the narrator gives you so many possibilities to use it afterwards. This is why in Poland your method is so widely recommended as the best method of doing oral history interviews. Maybe, in time, Polish oral historians will also become interested in the method of analysis and will start using the categories and concepts you created, which I personally also find very useful for historical analysis. The new publication by Kaja Kaźmierska and Katarzyna Waniek can be of great help here, as the authors have presented the assumptions and outline of the method in all its complexity, but in a very accessible way, which can be valuable especially for non-sociologists.³⁷ In a review of this publication published in the previous volume of "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej", historian Marcin Jarząbek noted his scepticism towards the mechanism of homology, as this may be difficult for oral historians to accept.³⁸ Before I ask you about this interesting phenomenon, please explain what "ex-tempore" storytelling is, because without that, it is difficult to understand the phenomenon of homology, which, paradoxically, could help historians to treat the narrative more seriously and really use it as a historical source too.*

F.S.: First you have to take into account that I interview people who would not be prepared to relate some sort of canonical study of their life. You can have people with their prepared stories, especially famous people, who do this several times. In my studies, I am normally dealing with people that have never told their

37 See: K. Kaźmierska, K. Waniek, *Autobiograficzny wywiad narracyjny. Metoda – technika – analiza*, Łódź 2020.

38 See: M. Jarząbek, rev.: Kaja Kaźmierska, Katarzyna Waniek, *Autobiograficzny wywiad narracyjny. Metoda – technika – analiza*, Łódź 2020, pp. 175, "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej," vol. 10 (2020), p. 270.

life history, and for them it is something really new to do it. Normally, people might think: "I am not that important to tell my life history. Nobody would be interested in it." So, after encouragement they start to tell their life story, but they don't have any practice in doing this. And if you are unprepared, you just start to remember what happened, for example in your childhood – at least in those cases in which the thematic focus of the autobiographical interview goes back this far. You start recalling your experiences in a so-called *ex-tempore* way. And then there will be some sort of sedimentation of the life-historical experiences you have in your biographical memory. Of course, in the introduction of any autobiographical narrative interview I try to let the informant know that I am interested in her or his life history and her or his personal memory of it. By life-historical memory, I mean personal experiences that are important in one's life. In one's everyday life's state of memory, not being involved in the rare situations of autobiographical storytelling, one has these life-historical experiences and the memories related to them just in some sort of abstract categories in one's mind; these abstract categories only contain their pivotal and general features. However, if you start to tell your life history beginning with some events in your childhood, even with your first ever memories, then these abstract concepts become much more concrete, and the "fluid" sequence of your personal experiences comes in. And this is important: you basically do this oriented to the basically sequential course of the important events in the ongoing history of your life. This mechanism I call homology. Of course, you can jump to events much earlier or much later if you see some similar problems or some similar creative capabilities in the past or in the future. However, you certainly show this jumping to later events – or doing flashbacks to earlier events – when you talk (and it's seen in the transcription!), and after having done this, you normally go back in the text to that passage from to where you have started from. So, this is the basics of the homology and you cannot do anything than – driven by the three constraints of *ex-tempore* narration of personal experiences – follow up the personal history of your experiences. In German, we have this word *Erlebnisse* [which refers to these life experiences, you cannot translate this into English]: you follow up the sequence of these *Erlebnisse* in your personal biographical recollection.

J.G.: *Doesn't this mechanism contradict the functioning of our autobiographical memory, which is selective, deformed, and operates more based on associations than chronology?*

F.S.: *Ex-tempore* narrative rendering might look selective and deformed from the point of view of an imaginative "reality judge" looking from the outside, but not from the point of view of the biography incumbent. Much of the criticism you mention comes from memory studies of natural-science oriented psychologists (and

possibly historians, too, as far as they are focused on objectively understood “factual events”). These critics would pick important historical data – as for example the assassination of John F. Kennedy or the destruction of the World Trade Centre in NYC – and would check if the informants would be able to lively remember the historical situation: i.e., when, in what life situation, they became aware and started to focus on it. But many people cannot remember these life circumstances and situations. For them, famous historical events seem not to be important enough in terms of their own life situation during these days of a pivotal historical event. The homology thesis only refers to personally experienced events, which are important in one’s own life course. And what is important is solely defined by the overall biographical structuring of one’s life history, as far as it is visible as an orientational *Gestalt* or personal outlook on one’s personal life course.

As I mentioned earlier, I am also very much interested in the disorderly phenomena of autobiographical *ex-tempore* narrative rendering. The autobiographical informant doesn’t like to talk about events and related experiences which are difficult, sad, painful, disappointing, guilt-ridden, etc. Hence, the informant tends to fade them out of her or his autobiographical recollection or even to repress them. Currently, I am analysing those phenomena on a basic theoretical level: one class are several types of background constructions, another class is extremely laconic reporting, a third is the phenomenon of the split coda. Even psychotherapists and psychoanalysts are interested in my research results. All these empirically discernable disorderly phenomena convey the features of deformation and selection you mentioned in your questions. That is, these disorderly text phenomena are very rich empirical markers of difficult autobiographical experiences; they do not lead to distortions of socio-biographical reality by the biography incumbent and narrator. Of course, you must develop treatable methodical operational steps about how to analyse them – which is what I am attempting to do right now.

Association is an important text phenomenon, too: as bundle of mental operations, it is embedded within certain cognitive figures of *ex-tempore* autobiographical storytelling (as, for example in the presentation of social situations that have to be described, characterised and interpreted in a “densified mode”). Associations are a bundle of mental activities that normally don’t distort the mechanism of narrative rendering. On the contrary, they enhance the expressive and presentational power of the dominant elementary communicative scheme of narration in the course of following up certain tasks of retrospective reconstruction. Associations are normally expressed through the sub-dominant elementary communication schema of description and sometimes even through the sub-dominant elementary communication schema of argumentation; both are embedded within the dominant elementary communicative scheme of narration.

Most importantly, all of these activities of selection (e.g. in terms of fading out), deformation (e.g. in terms of secondary legitimization and rationalisation)

and of association can be detected by formal text markers in the actual course of *ex-tempore* narration. This is what I am working on right now: to delineate the respective text markers and how to use them for the analysis. Autobiographical *ex-tempore* narrative presentation activities as such are fallible and prone to distortions; they themselves do not produce scientific propositions as reasons and proofs for ideal courtroom-type of discourse about socio-historical and socio-biographical questions of what happened and what the socio-biographical and socio-historical reality is. In order to formulate scientific propositions on the empirical basis of *ex-tempore* narrative renderings, these narrative renderings must be carefully analysed with regards to the oblique forms of their expressions and presentations. They contain many phenomena of textual disorder. To deal with them scientifically and to use them as empirical markers for socio-biographical reality, they must firstly be delineated in their general textual forms. And, secondly, the results of this basic-theoretical and methodological pre-analysis can then be utilised for the critical analyses of the fallible texts of *ex-tempore* narrative renderings.

However, we must keep in our mind that in many cases of oral-historical and social-science research projects, for their most important “reality fields” to be studied, we just have as an empirical objects these fallible texts of autobiographical-narrative interviews and there is no other avenue to reach a stable point of observation that would allow us to examine the question of what happened and what would its basic process structures be.

J.G.: *When doing oral history projects, we often meet so-called professional storytellers, people who one can always find in communities (ordinary people usually say: you must ask him or her, he or she remembers a lot) or in organisations, like for example associations for veterans or ex-prisoners of concentration or labour camps, where the specific memory is cultivated. Are such narrators still able to tell their life stories in this “ex-tempore” way? And in consequence, is the homology in their recollections not disordered?*

F.S.: As I said, normally, I work with people who have never told their life history, but, of course, in some cases it can be different. Therefore, we have to look at the individual interview as such. You can differentiate between the ritualised aspects of canonical stories, on the one hand, and what is really interlinked to personal experiences or what may even be newly told this time, on the other (the general meaning of the term “canonical storytelling” is just: pre-arranged and often told). I don’t want to draw a clear line between these two types of storytelling: the canonical and the personal. In any given interview you might encounter both types of storytelling. But even canonical parts of storytelling can be rooted in personal experiences. What is important is that you would have to look at which part of the interview is dependable in terms of personal experiences, and which is not. Normally you can quite easily do this task of differentiation of text parts.

I am now closely involved in a study of an instance of mass murder in the intensive care units (ICUs) of hospitals in Oldenburg and Delmenhorst.³⁹ There was this male nurse Niels Högel, who was sentenced for the killing of 85 patients. He underwent several court trials and, of course, he was really used to giving some sort of canonical storytelling about his repeated practice of destabilising blood circulation, often resulting in the death of the patient. Even in this case I found parts of the storytelling closely connected to his own personal experiences. It had happened that he gave an interview which was conducted by a young female journalist, who visited him in prison some years ago. We got this long interview, which was not allowed to be broadcast due to some legal concerns; however, we were allowed to have it transcribed and to analyse it. Right now, I am just doing this kind of sorting out of what is canonical storytelling of giving secondary legitimations to his crimes and of playing down his guilt, and which are his personal experiences. So, you can do this, but this is quite difficult work.

You can see this type of analytical work even applied to autobiographical narrative texts originally produced in written form. The necessity to differentiate between strings of personal experiences and those of canonical rendering is even higher for written autobiographical texts than for *ex-tempore* oral ones, since the inclination to formulate in a canonical mode is even stronger when producing written texts. For example, I wrote a long single-case analysis about an American Indian, an Apache Indian, who wrote down his life history himself. In his own autobiography, you can see canonical stories of Apache history and culture, or of Pentecostal religiosity, on the one hand, and his personal experiences of them, on the other. In the published book, you can find his life story written by himself and other researchers and my analyses of his written life history.⁴⁰

J.G.: *So, it still makes sense to go to communities who have their own collective memories...*

F.S.: Yes, and if you do this, normally you will see that they add their own personal experiences, too. And you can use the differences in personal experiences

39 See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/06/german-nurse-niels-hogel-second-life-sentence-murder-of-85-patients> (accessed: 10.12.2021). The ongoing research into these mass killings and the potential that something like that could happen at other places, too, is supported through the financing of the meetings of a study group on killings on intensive care units by the Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg Delmenhorst Institute for Advanced Study. The study group is led by Detlef Garz, assisted by Gerhard Riemann and Klaus Kraimer.

40 F. Schütze, *Biographical Process Structures and Biographical Work in a Life of Cultural Marginality, and Hybridity: Don Decker's Autobiographical Account*, in: B. Treichel, G. Bartelt (eds.), *Don Decker's Apache Odyssey*, Berlin 2012, pp. 159–242.

that they formulate in relation to collective history. You use these personal differences very much for your analysis.

J.G.: *And there is no risk that, for example, their memories are disturbed because of this collective remembering?*

F.S.: Yes, there is this risk, at least to a certain degree. For example, I did an analysis on two interviews by Studs Terkel. As I said, he conducted some sort of oral history and I was very intrigued by his work. In Rasmus's interview, even in the printed form, there are background constructions, one of those unorderly phenomena. And there you can see that this is Rasmus himself remembering; it is not some sort of canonical storytelling of being in combat during Second World War in Germany.⁴¹ So, you can always see the difference between some sort of canonical storytelling and narrated personal experiences. Of course, there are lots of connections between these and we must bear in mind that some elements of canonical storytelling about a period or situation in the past might in the beginning have been a rendering of personal experiences and later on crystallized into canonical stories. I would be interested in conducting such a research project on the interface of personal experiences and canonical stories together with historians, but to date I have never had the opportunity to do this. You are the first who has asked me to look at phenomena like that.

J.G.: *So, there is still room for mutual collaboration. Leaving theoretical issues aside, however, I would like to move on to questions about ethics. In oral history, at least from the 1980s, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee and the kind of dialogue they perform has been of key importance. Is this extraordinary relationship also a key principle for you? Or rather, is this more about information about life experiences, and as such not very closely linked to a definite person, but still necessary for the further analysis of social phenomena?*

F.S.: Basically, it is a very personal relationship that happens with me all the time when I do an autobiographical-narrative interview myself. It is an ongoing interaction. But even if I did not conduct the interview myself, but rather a friend of mine or one of my co-workers did it, then, too, I personally meet the person who is a living human being showing up in the transcription of the autobiographical narrative interview. This is the person who is giving me the gift of letting me know about her or his life and I am very grateful for this. So, it's this type of relationship. Of course, this is an extraordinary situation, because normally a person would not tell his or her life story to an unknown person. In addition, most often

41 F. Schütze, *Autobiographical Accounts...*, op. cit.

you need the encounter with a professional as a stranger to tell your own life history, because if you are in interaction with your friends you always make the assumption that they know all or most of your life history, which is not true. In those situations, you cannot overcome the hurdle of assuming that your counterpart knows most of your life history and, therefore, you would not be able to give new information and insights to her or him. Thus, you need a person who is listening to you as a stranger. The encounter situation of the autobiographical-narrative interview is an exceptional situation because you put lots of trust as a narrator in this unknown person – especially, that she or he will be careful when using the material. It's a trust relationship with a person you don't know.

J.G.: *But then in sociological research the transcript is anonymised, and the interviewee is, let's say, deprived of subjectivity, and becomes an individual case or an example of wider social and collective phenomena. Instead, in oral history there is an assumption that the recorded life stories or memories about past events are a kind of personal account, in some circumstances even called testimony and are placed in an archive under the name and surname of the narrator (also available for re-use by other researchers). There is a belief that this procedure values the person, gives him or her subjectivity. An individual voice may be heard. Is there any space for "giving a voice to the voiceless" (one of the more famous oral history slogans) in biographical research done by sociologists? Also, is it the voice, the sound itself of the interviewee that is important?*

F.S.: My experience is that the voices of the informants can be much clearer and more powerful in cases when the researcher promises to anonymise the real name of the interviewee, and actually does it later. An *ex-tempore* autobiographical narrative rendering quite often touches on very difficult and very emotional personal experiences and inner developments. My feeling is that the informant must be protected against situations of being criticized for what he or she said in the interview and how she or he did this. Of course, the interviewee quite often claims: "I don't have anything to hide." But through the constraints of *ex-tempore* storytelling she or he would probably tell "difficult" personal experiences of life events she or he was involved in, which she or he would not like to recollect and, hence, normally would not mention in ordinary communication situations. Therefore, the interview arrangement would be in danger of being felt to have become a trap for the informant. We don't want anything like that to happen. That is the reason for the systematic anonymisation. Perhaps the difference between the normal type of oral history interviews and the common type of autobiographical-narrative interviews in the social sciences is that in the latter there is more room for expressing really personal or even intimate biographical developments.

In addition, the utilisation of autobiographical-narrative interviews in our sociological type of research – which is very much informed by the "sociological"

social psychology of George Herbert Mead, Anselm Strauss and other Symbolic Interactionists⁴² – normally would not be very useful for “testimony situations” within the sort of courtroom-like collective proceedings, into which history discourses sometimes might develop into. Of course, the autobiographical-narrative interview should prod the informant to talk about socio-historical collective phenomena – as seen and experienced from the perspective(s) of the informant. For example, autobiographical-narrative interviews should offer the chance to understand how inhabitants of the former state-socialist societies experienced and handled the governmental and organisational exertion of power. But – at least, this is my opinion – it should not elicit voices of courtroom-type proceedings on the state-socialist regulations and arrangements with simple answers being totally right or totally wrong. Instead, it would offer research procedures for collecting, analysing and intersecting different perspectives of experiencing and handling – i.e., searching for a socio-historical and socio-biographical reality of various intersecting perspectives of experiencing and handling.

It is very useful to collect autobiographical-narrative interviews in archives. But in our understanding of sociological biographical research, this is only possible on the basis of the anonymisation of the informant and his fellow-interactants mentioned in the interview, since during the interview negotiation we, the interviewer and social researcher, promise the informants that her or his personal identity and those of their fellow-interactants mentioned in the interview narrative will be protected. This is especially necessary regarding the long-term use of autobiographical-narrative interviews in archives accessible to everyone.

However, sometimes an interview or a series of interviews is so expressive of a historical and social situation of mundane life, cultural milieu or societal condition (e.g. the state-socialist pressures on ordinary life or on cultural productions) that we prodded and helped the informant to publish the interview or the interview series as a book, and of course, then the authentic name of the interview partner as author would be used.⁴³

J.G.: *Don't you think that anonymisation is a form of taking this subjectivity from the interviewee?*

F.S.: Almost the only cases in which I did not use anonymisation were the interviews with myself. In that interview Kaja Kaźmierska conducted with me, and

42 See, for example: G.H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, Ch.W. Morris (ed.), Chicago 1934; A.L. Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks. The Search for Identity* (with a new introduction by the author), New Brunswick-London 1997 [Original publication: 1959]; *idem*, *Continual Permutations of Action*, New York 1993.

43 See for example: R. Böhning, *“Ich wundere mich nur, dass wir alle mitgemacht haben.” Erinnerungen an mein Leben in der DDR*, U. Blömer (ed.), Opladen-Berlin-Toronto 2016.

in a much longer piece in German, published together with an interview with Ulrich Oevermann.⁴⁴ Both were very interesting experiences for me. Then, during editing my interviews and preparing them for publication, I felt some inclination to omit some parts of the transcribed text, especially in the second interview. In the end, I did not do this because I thought I always do this type of interviewing with my informants. This involves tasks where they tell their life history and also report and discuss difficult things, memories of suffering, memories of being ashamed. Taking this into regard, I thought I should do this, too: that I would keep all those difficult experiences in the text to be published. But the difference to other autobiographical interviews was of course that my identity is known. I have to admit that this fact posed some difficulty for me, and the people who did this interview with me were not fully aware of this problem as I wouldn't be myself. In the end, I kept everything that was in the oral soundtrack of the interview. I didn't like to talk about everything, but I felt I had to talk.

So, yes, I always try not to let the person be identified. However, there is now a problem of anonymisation in the research on the case of the mass murderer Niels Högel mentioned already. For a while we did not know how to handle this problem. If we would interview people, with whom Niels Högel worked together on the two ICUs in Oldenburg and Delmenhorst, they certainly could be identified, even if we would attempt to anonymise their names and their personal identities extremely carefully. It might be – at least this is the prosecutor's charge – that some colleagues of Högel hesitated for a too long time to talk about what was strange with the behaviour of their colleague, and they did not turn in time to the hospital organisation or even to the police regarding their diffuse "strange" observations or even suspicions (however, as far as we know, they never observed his detrimental or even murderous activities as such). And now these colleagues of Högel, too, are in court as defendants, because they failed to report about their suspicious experiences as assumed by the police, the prosecutor and even the judge of the two last trials. If some of these colleagues of Högel were interviewed by "us", the study group of the Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg, what should we then do with such interviews, which careful anonymisations could be always deciphered in the long run? Therefore, we decided not to attempt to interview them. Such interviews could be in danger to become items of evidence in court; it certainly is not our duty to do the investigative work for the court. The informants would put trust into the relationship with us, and we probably could not keep our promises not to report to the police and to the court. On the other hand, their narratives and descriptions would have enhanced our knowledge about what had happened tremendously. In order to do something

44 See: G. Detlef, K. Kraimer, G. Riemann, *Im Gespräch mit Ulrich Oevermann und Fritz Schütze: Einblicke in die biographischen Voraussetzungen, die Entstehungsgeschichte und die Gestalt rekonstruktiver Forschungsansätze*, Opladen-Berlin-Toronto 2019.

productive in this dilemmatic research situation and reach at substitutive empirical material, we did autobiographical interviews with persons (nurses and MDs) from other ICUs all over Germany in order to learn about the experiences, the mechanisms and conditions of their work on ICUs and the possibly related systematic danger potential, that something similar to that one which did happen in Oldenburg and Delmenhorst, could happen elsewhere, too.

J.G.: *Have your interviewees always been happy with this anonymisation? Have you ever had a situation where your interviewee said "Oh no, I don't want to be anonymised?"*

F.S.: It happens very often that they say "Oh, it's not important for me. You can just keep my name", but I still do it all the same because I think maybe people underestimate what might happen with their life stories. For example, if they were to be put into a book and his or her children were to read it... So even in those cases, which happens very often, I do the anonymisation.

J.G.: *The other thing is that in a book, even when anonymised, the narrator can easily recognise him or herself. Have you had situations where your interviewee was unhappy with your analysis, with your interpretations?*

F.S.: I cannot remember such a situation right now. Normally, I would give the analysis to a person who asked for it. If they don't ask for it, I don't give them our analysis. But I cannot remember there ever having been any unhappiness. People are usually very happy with giving the autobiographical interview itself because they have never had the chance to tell their life history as a whole and this is their first experience of biographical work, and this makes them happy. Even if they cry in between. And, of course, quite often I give them the interview transcription in case they ask for it. Very often I offer it even in advance.

J.G.: *Do you think the interview, the meeting with the interviewer can have any therapeutic influence on the person?*

F.S.: Gabriele Rosenthal did claim this in her habilitation thesis.⁴⁵ I would not go that far but it is a first step in biographical work. And biographical work, of course, you could say it's some sort of quasi-therapeutic work with yourself, but this is something which ordinary people do all the time. If they tell their whole life history, then of course it's much more intensive biographical work, but it's

45 G. Rosenthal, *Erlebte und erzählte Lebensgeschichte. Gestalt und Struktur biographischer Selbstbeschreibungen*, Frankfurt am Main-New York 1995.

still a normal type of biographical work. However, I would not say it's therapeutic. It could, nevertheless, be a first step to this.

J.G.: *Sometimes when going for an interview I am worried I might step into the shoes of a therapist, which, as a historian, I am not.*

F.S.: The principle is to be authentic. You should be an authentic listener. You should be an authentic fellow person. You should have compassion and you should show compassion, but I would never take the role of therapist because I am not a trained psychotherapist. But in such cases of telling difficult personal experiences and of suffering again through them because they are recalled in the ongoing interview, I would behave "naturally" with compassion as any "understanding" ordinary person would do: I would react with compassion, and, after the interview, I would talk to the person about the issues, and I would even meet the person a second time if she or he wanted to do this. But I would do this as an ordinary person and not as some sort of psychotherapist. It should be a normal, human reaction of the interviewer.

J.G.: *Are such experiences difficult for you? How do you deal with this later, when you go home?*

F.S.: As I said before, I would take the interview as a gift, even if what the person told me was very difficult. But I have never done interviews with people who have committed atrocious criminal deeds that I would know about or that I would assume; for example, I have never done interviews with former Gestapo or SS officers. So, I cannot tell you what would happen with me then. Normally, I have ordinary people as informants. In the case of this mass murderer, I did not do the interview with him myself. We, the study group of the Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg tried to interview him, but the prison officials didn't allow us to do this. So, I don't know what would happen if I were an interviewer in such a situation. But I suppose, it would have a big impact on me; however, after a short while – at least, I would assume – I would get over this and it would be like having read Dostoyevsky, Kafka or Odojewski, whose texts I see as realistic, very deep insights into the dark quarters of human existence. I assume, doing such an interview, I would feel like being enriched by realistic-analytical novel literature. Of course, I would suffer, and maybe I would think about the person, but I don't believe I would need some sort of emotional support. However, such an experience has not yet happened to me.

J.G.: *Not everybody, however, has so strong a character and I can imagine that especially younger and less experienced interviewers would have need of external support...*

F.S.: It happens very often that we talk with our colleagues about what to do with a difficult interview in such a very concrete situation. This happens quite

often, but I have never made use of professional support or suggested it. I have not had lots of interviews on a high level of ethical or emotional difficulty, and it has always been enough for me in terms of reworking my difficult interview experiences to talk to Gerhard Riemann or to Thomas Reim⁴⁶ and other friends doing research in social sciences. However, if it is a research project where we know we will encounter very difficult life stories, I could imagine that it would be very helpful even to have a trained support person, some sort of trained professional supervisor. But the basic condition should be that this person should know something about the realities of autobiographical-narrative interviewing.

J.G.: *The situation has dramatically changed in the last two years when the possibility of interviewing people has been hampered. I am curious if conducting interviews with people affected by various difficult circumstances will be possible remotely, in other words, if we will be able to get to a level of intimacy where telling difficult stories is possible. Do you think that the pandemic impacts on using your method of interviewing people? Is it possible to follow your method remotely?*

F.S.: Yes, it is possible. I have never done this myself, but some of my students have. This is totally understandable given the situation we are now in. For example, instead of just answering your questions in our electronic interview situation, I could have told you my whole life history or parts of it, too. Of course, I would always prefer to meet you personally in a private situation.

J.G.: *Would it be the same interview when it's done remotely and not in a face-to-face situation? Should we treat it, analyse it in the same way?*

F.S.: I could imagine that it would be a really good autobiographical-narrative interview, even if conducted and recorded remotely. But we would have to look at the text; however, up to today, I don't have much experience with remotely conducted autobiographical-narrative interviews. And I think not too many have – this we will see in the future. The methodological procedures of analysing such an interview would basically be the same as those ones for the analysis of normally recorded autobiographical-narrative interviews.

46 Thomas Reim (born 1952) – German sociologist, biographical researcher, tutor of student research workshops on qualitative analysis and the analysis of professional work. Former research assistant of F. Schütze.