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A Personal Research Entanglement

The 'Intimate' Perpetrator

Abstract

Dealing with perpetrator research, and especially with documents produced by perpetrators of the Holocaust, can be an emotionally challenging enterprise. This essay explores issues of intimacy and detachment as a researcher when working with perpetrator ego documents and interviewing their children.

A few winters ago, I found a large set of private letters in a Munich archive, written by a zealous and fanatical SS member.¹ It is a convolute of approximately 500 letters, German Feldpostbriefe or wartime letters, as it were, and their analysis is the subject of my dissertation, which is still in the making. Hence, this essay will not be discussing the letters or their analysis, but rather highlight the meta-level of emotional implications that surrounded my personal entanglement as a researcher with a source – letters – that fostered seemingly 'intimate' knowledge of the author.

The fact that dealing with mass murder, its victims, and its perpetrators comes at a cost for researchers has been explored on many different occasions; such research "operates in a dense emotional and moral field"² and as such it is little surprising that it intrudes – emotionally and otherwise – on us, even when we insist it does not. Navigating the challenges between involvement and detachment is not an uncommon problem in academia in general, but even more so when studying the Holocaust or any other instance of mass murder and genocide.³ I had encountered these taxing emotional dynamics before, as a researcher, but was taken somewhat by surprise by how difficult it would become this time around: Aside from working with material that deals with the victims of genocide, my primary research focus had now shifted to, exclusively, perpetrators of the Holocaust, more specifically the Waffen-SS.

Perpetrators of the Holocaust in Their Own Words

The letters touched upon here are all private letters that the Waffen-SS member in question had written to both his mother and his wife between 1939 and 1943. The author was himself actively engaged in the war as well as the perpetration of the Holocaust. As he was deeply antisemitic and anti-Slavic, as well as ideologically schooled after having voluntarily undergone the educational system of Hitler Youth and SS (*Junkerschule*), it was easy to feel repulsed by him. I discovered a man who was not only politically and ideologically unappealing, but who showed few other

1 Archives of the Institute for Contemporary History Munich, Feldpostbriefsammlung Maximilian G. 1939–1943, ED 885, Vols. 1–9.

2 Ugur Ü. Üngör, *Studying Mass Murder*, Oxford University Press' Academic Insights for the Thinking World, 8 June 2018, <https://blog.oup.com/2018/06/studying-mass-murder/> (22 November 2019).

3 Ibid.

traits that would have rendered him likeable. Through his own writings, I seemed to unmask a man who even towards his mother and his wife, people he professed to love and admire, often appeared stern and unkind, inflexible, domineering, and unforgiving.

Automatically feeling such a strong antipathy towards this man, I had to be aware of my emotional reaction so as to not cloud my investigative mind or investigator's gaze. I observed and examined my source base and later the author's former childhood home and surely, in doing so, one may well interject that this already went hand in hand with a bias of sorts in that "an observer is more importantly one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations".⁴ The Latin term 'observare' means "to conform one's action, to comply with, [or as in observing rules,] codes, regulations, and practices",⁵ and for me this meant to be as objective or perhaps as non-judgmental as I could be, a staple of a researcher's approach. At least, this was my premise and my aim. Yet, as an observer, I was automatically rendered in a powerful position in that the observer subsumes and takes possession of the subject they gaze upon, as basic photography theory also explains.⁶ Hence, in the end, I was not only subjective in my gaze, but I also filled it with emotion. I had to acknowledge this emotional bias, something I was only ready to admit over time. Working with personal correspondence of perpetrators over an extended period of time also meant becoming to a certain extent familiar with this SS man and becoming involved in his private life – with all its ups and downs. Such intimacy, as it showed him as a human being, was also an issue I struggled with: I felt his normalcy, the familiarity of emotions he spoke about to his wife, the mundaneness and everydayness of his life were detracting from his ideological zeal and his murderous activities.

There were many racist and antisemitic outbursts in his writings and it made reading his letters a deeply uncomfortable and emotionally challenging enterprise. What made it more difficult was that I could not step away from the letters or, by extension, from him. I had to keep going, reading, exploring, as, at the end of the exercise, a thesis was waiting to be written. I had little time for breaks and even when I did, I found his words, these scathing words, haunting me. This man, this historical actor who I had never met or seen, seemed omnipresent. I found myself speaking about the letters and about him not just to colleagues and supervisors at the university, but to friends, family, and acquaintances who, even when interested, soon tired of my research obsession and became exasperated. In a way, I found them mirroring my own feelings: I was both fascinated and exhausted, both academically intrigued and filled with a lingering reluctance to continue.

After a while, I found myself wondering why it was so hard for me to detach from my subject of study. After all, this was by no means the first time I had dealt with archival sources that laid bare hate speech, considering this field of study. Maybe it was simply that this was one of the biggest and therefore most time-consuming projects I had embarked upon so far. Maybe it was just that normal feeling of being overwhelmed that many PhD students experience at least once in their postgraduate career. To be sure, I was not the only researcher dealing with difficult biographies: Robert Gerwarth remarked on the difficulty between personal entanglement and

4 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge 1992, 6.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Christina von Braun, *Staged Authenticity. Femininity in Photography and Film*, in: Jyoti Mistry/Antje Schuhmann (ed.), *Gaze Regimes. Film and Feminisms in Africa*, Wits 2015, 18-32, here 22; Crary, *Techniques*, 27.

objective distance in his biography on Reinhard Heydrich,⁷ as did Catherine Epstein in her biography on Arthur Greiser,⁸ noting also how the examination of personal letters lends a humanness to perpetrators that may seem difficult to integrate with the fact that they were involved in the execution of mass murder and policies of oppression and exploitation. Finally, Emily Robinson touched on a similar issue when she spoke about “the affective nature of the historical research process and in the historian’s responses to ‘pastness’, to the otherness of historical distance”.⁹

Emotionally Entangled

I felt I had been entirely ‘reeled into’ the past universe of my subject of study. This feeling was heightened by another discovery of sorts, about a year into my research. Her acquaintance would impact me immensely, albeit in a positive manner: It was the daughter of said Waffen-SS officer, who had given her father’s letters to the archives almost a decade before. Meeting her added to the depth of my emotional investment, not because I disliked her, but because I felt obligated to her and because, almost instantly, we connected over a common enemy – her father.

The archives established our initial contact. Meeting her felt like a collision between past and present, as the first time I had encountered her was in an epistolary conversation between her parents, half a year before she was born in late 1943. I was reflecting on this sense of collision again when I carefully trudged along the icy and snowy sidewalk in the south of Munich, on my way to the house where the author of the letters I was examining had grown up. I was on my way to meet Louisa,¹⁰ my interviewee for this study and the Waffen-SS officer’s daughter, for the second time on a cold winter day in early January 2017. Just in time for the New Year, Bavaria was in the firm grip of a cold front, resulting in temperatures dropping to -20° C at night. More than a metre of snow and ice-packed streets made it difficult to move along quickly. The last time we had seen each other had been in August 2016, a swelteringly hot summer day. The contrast could not have been greater and, strangely, these opposite weather conditions reflected my fluctuating moods regarding the letters.

It had been a long and arduous academic journey from the day I first discovered the letters in the archives until this, our second meeting. I went to interview his daughter for the first time in early August 2016, and we would meet a total of three times until mid-2018. Louisa had kindly agreed to meet with me after I had contacted her first by mail before speaking to her twice on the phone. I remember having initially drafted four or five different letters, as I had been nervous to reach out. Would she turn me down? Had she given the letters to the archives and then decided she never wanted to hear of the matter again? After all, her father’s criminal past could not have been an easy issue for her to work through growing up, even if she never met him in person, as he died at the front shortly before she was born. Or would the opposite be true? Was she maybe – like some children of Nazi perpetrators, whether openly or covertly, such as Heinrich Himmler’s daughter, Gudrun

7 Robert Gerwarth, *Hitler’s Hangman. The Life of Heydrich*, New Haven 2011, x.

8 Catherine Epstein, *Model Nazi. Arthur Greiser and the Occupation of Western Poland*, Oxford 2010, 9-10.

9 Emily Robinson, *Touching the Void. Affective History and the Impossible*, in: *Rethinking History* 14 (2010) 4, 503-520, here 505.

10 I have changed the name here to protect my interviewee’s privacy.

Burwitz,¹¹ or his adoptive son, Gerhard von der Ahé¹² – someone who had idolised her father beyond his death, or would she perhaps like Silke Sassen¹³ or Heydrich's children who, through whatever means of justification and explanation they employ, have a hard time coming to terms with their fathers' crimes?

I realised with great relief, and somewhat foolishly, that I had worried in vain. My interviewee was enthusiastic about meeting me and was very accommodating to my request. A friendly and warm person, full of laughter and kindness and wit, she seemed like a potent antidote to the bleakness that usually surrounded my subject of study. She is an artist, creating pottery and sculptures, intricate works full of colours and floral patterns, golden leaves and animals adorning her art, and she has presented her work at various exhibitions across Bavaria. One of her works of art now sits in my Berlin apartment, a chocolate-coloured fruit bowl with large bright green ginkgo leaves imprinted into it. Already during our first telephone conversation, which had followed my letter, she had offered to show me further documents and even photographs relating to her father, and I quickly learnt that she, just like me, found this SS officer deeply unappealing. Even more so as a daughter, she was disappointed and upset at her father's misanthropy. Before turning the collection over to the archives, she informed me, she had read and sorted her father's letters and struggled with similar issues like myself, albeit on a much more personal level. She had, very consciously, decided to entrust the letters to the archives, as she wanted them to be accessible to researchers who, so she said, could maybe make more sense of them than she had managed to do.

We realised that we bonded over a shared disdain for her father, a man neither of us had ever met but whose writings gave a clear indication of who he had been. During every one of our meetings, Louisa invited me to her home, her father's childhood home and the house she inherited from her grandmother (her father's mother). She had grown up here after the war, living at times under one roof with her mother and grandmother. We would have coffee and cake, speak about current events, our respective families, and political issues. Then we would proceed to the interview part, as well as reviewing documents from her parents that she had not given to the archives. As invested in the project as myself, it seemed, she inquired about my progress and kept telling me not to give up. After all, she had entrusted me with letters and photos that documented a part of her family history that was difficult and no one else had seen so far. Her confidence in me motivated and touched me.

Set in the middle of what in the summer looked like an enchanted garden with wild roses, apple trees, and chamomile flowers, entering the house as a complete stranger was at first an unsettling and then deeply insightful experience. The interior was a fusion of modern and turn-of-the-twentieth-century furniture and paintings. I recognised, now with my own eyes, items in this room that I had found being described in the letters written 75 years earlier. At the far end, by the door onto the terrace, a photograph of a young smiling woman in her early twenties in a long white lace gown caught my attention. As I went around the living room, taking in my surroundings, I asked my interviewee whom the photo portrayed and she explained to me that it was her grandmother, one of the letter recipients. The picture had been taken in 1917 and showed her shortly before her wedding. After that, Louisa proceeded to allow me to have a look through two family photo albums, wherein every

11 Katrin Himmler/Michael Wildt (ed.), *Himmler Privat. Briefe eines Massenmörders*, Munich 2014, 350-351.

12 Ibid.

13 Marc Perry, Saskia Sassen's Missing Chapter, in: *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 December 2014.

person I had gotten to know through their own writings appeared. These were photos that recounted the family narrative as weaved by the historical actors while they were still alive. Being able to attach faces to the names and exploring this photo narrative was important to gain a deeper sense of understanding, of familiarity, of intimacy perhaps.

It was these photos that really made me aware of the fact that I was now standing in the middle of the house in which every single person whose letters I had read over the past months had lived at one point in their lives. This realisation made me feel slightly uneasy, especially considering that this, too, was the house where said SS man had spent his childhood, as well as many months of rehabilitation and relaxation in between his many career stops within the SS and from where he had written volumes of letters to his future wife. Indeed, “the location authenticates the narrative, embodies it, makes it real, to the point where it threatens to re-engulf those who come to tell and to listen”.¹⁴

As I sat in her living room, surrounded by photos, furniture, and the discussion about people I had, so far, only known from her father’s private letters, I became aware that meeting Louisa – a person who had risen from a vague epistolary image to a real-life person – had brought about a powerful manifestation of “a feeling of emotional knowing”, an emotional and subjective response to studying history, indeed a common response in researchers.¹⁵ The journey that underpinned my research activities for my doctoral dissertation brought into the limelight, as it does for many historians, the emotional challenges of personal entanglement with our respective subject of examination. Where do we draw the line between personal investment and professional distance? How do we deal with and incorporate our biases and our emotions into our writing? Are we always aware of them? Most of the time, such emotional undercurrents do not make it into scholarly publications, despite the fact that they are such a common phenomenon. A case in point is that I, too, was advised to omit a discussion of the emotional and personal anecdotes behind the scenes of the research process from my dissertation. Nevertheless, the realities of “emotional labor”¹⁶ and its consequences and implications are no less relevant and omnipresent and they must be addressed in order to ensure sufficient reflection when we deal with the intimacy generated through historical sources that uncover perpetrators of the Holocaust.

14 Marianne Hirsch/Leo Spitzer, cited in: Robinson, *Touching the Void*, 506.

15 Sheila Fitzpatrick, cited in: Robinson, *Touching the Void*, 510-511.

16 Erin Jessee, *On Burnout, Trauma, and Self-Care* with Erin Jessee, Oxford University Press’ *Academic Insights for the Thinking World*, 10 November 2017, <https://blog.oup.com/2017/11/on-burnout-trauma-erin-jessee/> (18 March 2019).

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