

Interviews with eyewitnesses – dealing with living history

The questioning of eyewitnesses is referred to as “oral history.” For a long time, the study of history only addressed itself to states and statesmen, but oral history, among other things, has changed that. Oral history deals with the subjective experiences of individuals, especially those who are not in the limelight. The memories of these people are retrieved through interviews. Through personal memories, history comes alive. Facts taken from books become “human,” more exciting, more vivid and more immediate.

Where are eyewitnesses?

Anyone can be an eyewitness. The best way to find one is to look in your immediate surroundings, among neighbours, relatives and acquaintances. You can also turn to clubs, associations, parties and houses of worship. These can help you to make contact with possible interview partners. An appeal published in the local press can also be helpful in finding eyewitnesses. Depending on what you want to learn, it can make sense to interview people from different generations or social classes. Sometimes it is also advisable to compare different points of view (political, ideological or religious).

What can you learn from eyewitnesses?

During your interview with an eyewitness, you learn something about the person’s way of life. From the personal memories of your interview partners, you can learn how political and social changes affected their lives, how they experienced these changes and how they judge them retrospectively. In individual cases, the testimony of an eyewitness can throw light on circumstances missing from written sources. But the main focus of interest in an interview with an eyewitness is not the historical facts but the personal experiences, perceptions and processing of past structures and experiences in the life of the witness.

How does one conduct an interview with an eyewitness?

You might think “anyone can speak and answer.” You simply “grab” yourself a witness and get going. But through such an approach, both interviewers and eyewitnesses have had painful experiences. The conversation was broken off early because recording equipment didn’t function, because the interviewer couldn’t think of any questions or the witness felt him or herself to be misunderstood. Here are some tips to assure that this doesn’t happen to you:



Preparation

- Inform yourselves as extensively as possible about your subject and the historical background (via schoolbooks, lexicons, reference books on the theme).
- Think about whom you want to interview (grandparents, neighbours ...).
- Gather initial information about the witness (name, age, profession, stages of life, academic background).
- Make personal contact via letter and/or telephone call and introduce yourself and the project.
- If the witness hesitates, you can suggest that you send the questions in advance. His or her testimonial contribution can also be made anonymous.
- Think about what the goal of the interview is: Do you want to receive factual information on your subject or is the life story of the witness more important? Look for a "common thread" for your interview.
- As much as possible, pose questions that are open (How? Why? What?), short and comprehensible.
- Do a "try-out interview," e.g., with your parents.
- Sometimes it is very difficult for an eyewitness to speak about his or her life. Some might weep. If you are afraid of such situations, consider taking an adult along when you conduct your interview.

Directly before the interview

- Check the recording equipment (cassette recorder, camera, MP3-Player, dictation machine). Ask yourself, for example: Are the batteries loaded?
- When you go as a group to conduct an interview, consider how to divide up the interviewing roles among you. Who should ask which questions? Who should be in charge of the technical equipment? Who pays attention to the time?
- Memorise your leading questions so that you don't have to read them off stiffly from your notes. Consider a straightforward opening question, such as "What made you decide to emigrate?"
- Buy a small thank-you gift to offer to the witness, e.g., a bouquet of flowers.

Conducting the interview

- Be punctual and thank the witness in advance for the interview.
- Introduce yourselves, report briefly on your project again.
- Begin the interview in a way that encourages your interview partner to speak (pose a direct opening question, bring along photos or other sources, e.g., a newspaper clipping). Do not interrupt the witness often in this early phase; instead, note down possible further enquiries in brief outline form.
- During the second part of the conversation, check your notes and ask questions in order to fill holes in the witness's story (biographical information or explanations for specific decisions in the life of the witness).
- Ask the witness about photos, documents, newspaper articles on the subject.
- Thank the witness for the conversation and ask him or her if it might be possible to meet again if you have new questions.



Evaluation

In order to evaluate an interview, trying sticking to the following steps:

1. Write down the interview, in entirety or in part. This makes it easier to find important passages later.
2. Write a short biography of the eyewitness, containing all the important events from birth to the time of the interview.
3. Try to create a portrait of the person: What were the most important events and experiences in the life of this eyewitness?
4. Now evaluate the interview in terms of its relation to your research interest: What have you learned that is new? What seems most convincing to you? Where are there missing elements or contradictions in the interview? How can you explain these gaps? What clues reveal the witness's viewpoint towards issues that are central to your research?
5. Compare the statements of your eyewitness with other information. What do other eyewitnesses have to say about the theme? What do historians write in their books about the theme? Are there contradictions between the statements of your eyewitness and those of other people? How can these contradictions be explained?
6. What are the most important statements of your interview partner regarding the topic of your research project? Write them down word for word, so that you can cite them later in your work.