



70 years on. Generations in dialogue

A project by the Anne Frank Zentrum
on the intergenerational dialogue about history



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Introduction

Learning about the present from the past - hardly any format of historical and civic education is as capable of living up to this claim as directly as encounters between young people and contemporary witnesses who experienced the Nazi dictatorship and who are still able to recount their memories today. 2015 marks the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. The Anne Frank Zentrum has taken this anniversary as an opportunity to provide partners in the »70 years on. Generations in dialogue« project in a total of seven towns with support for holding intergenerational dialogue projects. Employees of municipal authorities, youth clubs, multi-generation houses, town museums and other civil organisations received continuous training on how to arrange encounters between local young people and senior citizens that focused on the memories of the Second World War and post-war periods. The »70 years on. Generations in dialogue« project is based on the project »Children of war – paths of life to date«. This likewise intergenerational project took place in 2011-2013 in three medium-sized towns in the east of Germany: Neustrelitz, Saalfeld and Schwedt. This project was also made possible by the generous funding of the federal programme »Zusammenhalt durch Teilhabe« (»Social cohesion through participation«) of the German Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI) and the »Evangelische Hilfsstelle für ehemals Rasseverfolgte« (»Evangelical Support Centre for the Formerly Racially Persecuted«). The experiences, methods and knowledge gleaned from the project were transferred on a large scale to the current project. With respect to the format of the contemporary witness encounter in particular, we were able to learn and transfer a considerable amount from the project.

Personal encounters with the contemporary witnesses made history come alive for the young people. They were encouraged to ask the senior citizens questions. The paedagogical support provided to the young people also enabled them to critically examine the memories of the contemporary witnesses and place them in a historical context. Many of the - often very old - senior citizens who participated in the project talked about their experiences and memories of the National Socialist period for the very first time in their lives.

One or other reader may stumble at the use of the term »contemporary witness«. In contrast to how the term is usually used, contemporary witness accounts in this context do not necessarily mean the experiences of victims of the Nazi dictatorship. Rather, we use the term »contemporary witness« to refer to all those who are able to talk about their childhood during the Second World War and their memories of the post-war years. In many towns, particularly in rural or provincial areas, these are usually non-Jewish senior citizens of German descent, who did not have to fear being persecuted along with their families at the hands of the National Socialists. The history of the Nazi dictatorship is thus recounted from a certain perspective, which in turn places specific demands on the paedagogical support provided as part of this dialogue project. The »70 years on. Generations in dialogue« project took place in the towns of Brühl (North Rhine-Westphalia), Cuxhaven and Georgsmarienhütte (Lower Saxony), Deggendorf (Bavaria), Merseburg (Saxony-Anhalt), Mühlhausen (Thuringia) and Kyritz/Wusterhausen (Brandenburg). In this project, the

Anne Frank Zentrum made the conscious decision to work with partners from medium-sized towns. The numerous institutions in these towns provide an infrastructure for a socio-cultural and historical debate. However, it is especially the case in small and medium-sized towns, that there are often fewer opportunities for historical, political and cultural projects than in larger towns and cities. It is therefore all the more important to provide effective support to all those civil stakeholders and dedicated individuals who oppose marginalisation, anti-Semitism and racism and stand for a democratic coexistence and responsible handling of history. In addition to handling history in a responsible manner, the second main objective of the project was namely to strengthen the local civil stakeholders and to develop networks and neighbourly relationships, which, formed during the joint project work, will remain viable beyond the project duration.

The first text, *Life stories as an opener for the dialogue between the generations* comes from the »Children of war – paths of life to date« project. It emphasises why life stories and personal memories of a wartime childhood and the immediate post-war period are particularly suitable for stimulating a dialogue between the generations. The contribution entitled *Contemporary witness interviews about childhood during the Second World War and under National Socialism* highlights the opportunities but also the challenges of the contemporary witness interview format. It focuses on the blank spaces in the discourse which the memories of the contemporary witnesses can generate. It is essential that these are touched on and compensated for by the paedagogical support. This is even more important when – as is often the case in rural areas or smaller towns – it is not possible to access the perspectives of the victims of the Nazi dictatorship through personal contemporary witness encounters. This contribution presents formats that can be applied in addition to contemporary witness encounters, e.g. paedagogical work with biographies of Nazi victims. These were prepared and made available by the Anne Frank Zentrum. The experiences in the contemporary witnesses projects show that reminiscing and the telling of life stories are always influenced by the subsequent politics of memory and the prevailing commemorative culture. The life stories recounted in East and West Germany differ considerably to some extent, because the experiences of the post-war period in the two German states lie like a film over the events of the Second World War and continue to have an effect today. In this respect, specific knowledge of the commemorative culture in the GDR is required in order to understand in depth the contemporary witness accounts in the

former East German states. The interview with Dr Annette Leo, *Ruptures in East German contemporary witness reports*, highlights this. The main format used by the Anne Frank Zentrum during the project was the contemporary witness interview, i.e. young people interviewing senior citizens about their childhood experiences during the Second World War. However, there are many other formats that are suitable for an intergenerational dialogue about history. The section entitled *Intergenerational dialogue formats* provides an overview. A more in-depth insight into the support and assistance provided to the project locations by the Anne Frank Zentrum as part of the »70 years on« project is provided in the section entitled *Strengthening local expertise and networks – supporting and coaching history projects by the Anne Frank Zentrum*. Finally, the section entitled *Dialogue on history raises awareness of today's challenges* highlights how this dialogue can raise awareness of the challenges faced by society in the present. The town of Kyritz in Brandenburg is cited as an example of how the experiences of senior citizens can motivate young people to empathise with refugees and develop an understanding of their life circumstances and desires. The brochure ends with an interview entitled *Strengthening civil society by means of intergenerational exchange* conducted with Timon Perabo, who as Project Manager at the Anne Frank Zentrum, was key to designing and structuring the »70 years on« project up until the summer of 2015. In this interview he demonstrates how a dialogue between the generations can help strengthen the local civil society.

We hope that the experiences gained from this project, which is of great importance to the Anne Frank Zentrum, will also inspire many other partners and stakeholders within the boundaries of the intergenerational dialogue and we wish you a stimulating read.

Patrick Siegele

Director of the Anne Frank Zentrum

Bianca Ely

Project Manager, »70 years on. Generations in dialogue«

Life stories as an opener for the dialogue between the generations

A dialogue needs a theme that both appeals to the participants and is geared towards their needs. With its pilot project, »Children of war – paths of life to date«, the Anne Frank Zentrum has tried to bring young and old together to discuss the topic of childhood during the period of the Second World War and National Socialism. The discussions are to be based on the life stories of the senior citizens involved. This dialogue-based approach initially threw up a host of questions: Is this a topic that interests both sides and will it engage them? Are senior citizens prepared to open up to the young people and share their difficult and often painful experiences? Will the young people be able to relate personally to these life stories? And how can the young people participating in the project be given space to talk about their own experiences?

Intergenerational city tour.



Dialogue about childhood during the Second World War and under National Socialism

When the Anne Frank Zentrum established contact with organisations in the towns of Neustrelitz, Saalfeld and Schwedt to find partners for the project, the considerable degree of interest in this approach quickly became apparent. All partners shared a crucial reason for participating in this project: »We have to give young people the opportunity to find out first hand what it meant to grow up during the Second World War. Soon it will be too late, because no-one will be around to talk about it.«

There was a wide range of reactions from the towns' senior citizens. Some got in contact having found out about the project in the press or from acquaintances. They were very interested in being able to tell young people about their wartime experiences. Some of them had already given talks to classes in schools, or written down their memories in order to pass them on. Conversely, there were also elderly people who declined to participate in the project. For them, this chapter of their life was closed, and they were not prepared to open it up again. This reaction alone made it clear, just how great the responsibility was to proceed with caution and sensitivity in order to do justice to the diverse range of emotional needs.

In the beginning, the young people seemed to be only slightly interested in the topic. However, it was possible to engage them through projects and working groups in schools. They often only became enthusiastic about the dialogue during the contemporary witness interviews they held with the senior citizens involved. Many were touched by the fact that elderly people were sharing their life stories and wartime experiences with them. Special workshops were held to prepare them about how to conduct interviews. They learned how to prepare questions and, in so doing, also addressed their own life path.

During the evaluation process at the end of the project, the participants were asked why it was particularly important for them to take part. It was worth noting, that both young and old agreed that they had been motivated to participate by »the topic of the 'Second World War'«. For the senior citizens, the opportunity to »tell their own life stories« was

another important reason to participate in the project. The young people, on the other hand, considered the opportunity »to hear life stories« as an important motivator for getting involved. Life stories therefore not only create a means of accessing historical topics, they also bring the young and old together.

Other events in recent German history could also be used as an interesting basis for contemporary witness discussions between young and old, e.g. the division of Germany, life in the GDR, the history of the 1968 movement and the associated social unrest and moral upheavals, plus the experience of the peaceful revolution and the post-reunification period. It would also be significant to include migrants in the dialogue with their stories and view of historical events in Germany in order to treat their experiences as an equally valued part of the history of our society.

Accounts of small and very personal events and experiences without any direct link to historical events are also an important bridge between young and old, because simply hearing others talk about their own lives, and finding people who want to listen to one's own life story can be enriching for both parties.

Regardless of whether the life stories told consider a specific historical event or recount episodes from a biography, the participants find out a lot about one another from this form of dialogue. The openness created by recounting important life experiences engenders trust and generates knowledge about what made the other person who they are today. Connections forged as a result of these discussions can be long lasting. Conversely, this also needs the young people to treat these stories with sensitivity. It was therefore discussed in advance, for example, how they would deal with situations in which the contemporary witnesses became sad or started to cry while telling their stories. When people open up to this degree, it also requires greater engagement. It is precisely when difficult experiences are being discussed that it is important for the young people to re-establish contact with the senior citizens after the discussion and not to leave them alone with the memories that have been awakened.



What makes a dialogue?

During an event in Schwedt, one elderly lady was asked what would interest her about the young people. She replied: »Whether they really are interested in the stories of elderly people.« This situation clearly illustrates the fact that, even when it is possible to get young and old to discuss a topic together, it does not automatically result in a dialogue.

For the »Children of war – paths of life to date« project it was important for the participants to bring with them, or develop the ability, to be sensitive and open to other people. This includes a willingness not just to do the talking, but to listen to others. In an effective dialogue, both sides are active, alternating between asking questions and recounting. A couple of elderly people who gave the impression that they only wanted to impart their view on history to the young people, or who wanted recognition for their own experiences and achievements, were therefore not included in the dialogue with the young people. There was concern that they could rob the young people of their enthusiasm for the dialogue. Instead, the senior citizens were asked about their lives by the project organisers.

Even when the contributors are open for a dialogue, creating a real dialogue is a challenge, especially when historical topics are being discussed on the basis of the life stories of the elderly participants. This is because the roles initially appear to be clearly divided, with the elderly participants in the dialogue usually doing the recounting, and the younger participants asking the questions and listening. In order to ensure a reciprocal dialogue, the participants in the children of war project were encouraged to meet again after the »wartime childhood« contemporary witness interview. In the follow-up encounters, the interview topics were

taken up and explored in more depth, for example, by examining the role they play in the lives of school children today. This gave the young people an opportunity to talk about their own experiences and opinions. The topics included, for example: What was the child-parent relationship like then and what is it like today? What would the ideal school for the youth of today look like, and what did young people seventy years ago think about it?

Follow-up meetings could also revolve around some completely different topics. A workshop held in Saalfeld discussed the preconceptions of, and prejudices against, other age groups: How do young people view senior citizens and what image do the elderly have of younger people? Visions of the future are also a suitable topic for discussion. This is a way of promoting a reciprocal exchange. While this requires more time, it enables a deeper understanding between the generations and creates the feeling on both sides of being appreciated and taken seriously.

However, the evaluation of this project shows that during only a portion of the encounters was enough space given to the young people to talk about themselves. Just under half the young people stated that the senior citizens asked them about their lives. And only half the senior citizens stated that they found out something new about the lives of the young people. Yet the evaluation also shows that many senior citizens were interested in that respect. Some even expressed disappointment that they did not find out more about the young people. There had perhaps been a lack of opportunities in this regard. It may also be the case, however, that the participants felt restricted by the format of the discussion – contemporary witness interview – to keep mainly to discussing the experiences of the elderly participants.

Suggestions for future projects

The Anne Frank Zentrum regards holding a dialogue about a historical topic using contemporary witness accounts as a great opportunity. However, a couple of things are necessary in order to enable a reciprocal exchange:

1. Sufficient time is needed for each encounter between the young people and the senior citizens. It is worth them having a minimum of two meetings. In addition to a contemporary witness interview, this makes it possible to offer other activities during which the young people are given space to talk about their own lives. This is particularly important with a topic such as »children of war« as it initially determines who is doing the narrating, and who is doing the listening.
2. It may be the case that neither side has experience in participating in a dialogue with others. It thus helps if the discussion is moderated. Moderators are able to get the discussion going and initiate a group-building process between the young and old.
3. It is advisable not to use the very first meeting for a contemporary history interview. At the beginning, it is best for everyone to get to know each other by breaking the ice and having supervised discussions about topics which affect both young and old and about which they all have something to say. It is important to communicate this sequence of events to the contributors to ensure that the elderly individuals in particular are not disappointed if they are initially unable to talk about their life stories in depth.
4. Interviews are not always a suitable method for dealing with contemporary history. There are other possible approaches, e.g. intergenerational theatre projects, which can enable an intensive dialogue between the generations about history, without interviews having to be held first.

Under these premises, talking about life stories can encourage many people to participate and create a reciprocal dialogue. The »Children of war – paths of life to date« project has already accomplished this in many cases. Many of the participants continue to meet on a regular basis after the project. And they take the topic of »wartime childhood« back to their families where the discussions between the generations continue.

Pictures help to remember.



Contemporary witness interviews about childhood during the Second World War and under National Socialism

What role can discussions between the generations on childhood during the Second World War play in historical and civic education? What is the significance of young people approaching the topic of the Second World War mainly by means of interviews with contemporary witnesses? We begin by outlining the opportunities and challenges associated with this approach. Then we introduce concepts and methods for successfully holding a responsible discussion about the Second World War and National Socialism based on contemporary witness accounts. This has been developed by the Anne Frank Zentrum as part of the children of war project. Finally, the experience gleaned from the children of war project is used to illustrate the constraints of this methodology.

Despite many stories, blind spots remain

The Anne Frank Zentrum believes it is important for senior citizens to have the opportunity to talk with other people about their childhood during the Second World War and under National Socialism. The keen interest of elderly people in the children of war project bears testament to a considerable need for these discussions. As this space has hitherto predominantly been offered in revisionist, nationalist and right-leaning circles, the Anne Frank Zentrum believes it is necessary to create an alternative forum. At the same time, young people should also be trained on how to deal responsibly with contemporary witness accounts from this period.

Many previous contemporary witness projects about the period of National Socialism focus on the suffering undergone by the victims of the Nazi dictatorship. This has given the victims of National Socialism a voice and they have been able to attest to the crimes. The »Children of war – paths of life to date« project deals with the same period of time, but the topical parameters discussed are considerably broader in scope. The contemporary witnesses who are over seventy years of age were invited to talk about their childhood and youth. This approach can mean that the marginalisation, deportation and extermination committed by the Germans are only touched on, if at all. Instead, the focus may instead be on the displacement, bombing and occupation experienced by a large part of the German population. This can result in the impressive contemporary witness accounts leaving the young interviewers with the impression that the majority of German children suffered. And this can mean that the German responsibility for the war and the Holocaust is not discussed.

Of historians and anthropologists

Therefore, with this project, the Anne Frank Zentrum set itself the objective of initiating intergenerational discussions, but it also wants to encourage young people to deal with the recounted stories of wartime childhood in a responsible manner. They will be trained in how to reflect critically on what they have been told, and to place it in its historical context. This reflection will be structured to ensure it does not impair the appreciation and empathy that the young people show their interview partners, as these are fundamental for the dialogue between the generations.

The Anne Frank Zentrum has developed the following criteria and measures for dealing responsibly with these life stories:

1. Young people experience a multi-perspective view of history.

They recognise that there is no one correct view of history, but that everyone recounts history differently. Each of these perspectives, with the exception of racist, anti-Semitic or any views which discriminate against other groups, has its place. Yet at the same time, they can only be generalised to a limited extent because they are recounted from a specific perspective. During the preparation for and follow-up workshops on the interviews, in particular, it is important to stress that our understanding of history always depends on the perspective from which we view history.

Prior to the interviews, the young people acquire background knowledge. Local history can be discovered as part of a guided tour of the town against the backdrop of National Socialism, for example. Important national and local events and developments during the National Socialist period can be marked on a time line. The experiences shared by the contemporary witnesses during the interview can then be added. This allows them to compare the different perspectives and note the differences. When evaluating the interviews, the young people can discuss what angered or surprised them. This often indicates where discrepancies have been perceived between the statements given in the interview and their own knowledge.

The young people hold discussions with several contemporary witnesses, who bring different perspectives of the war due to their varying backgrounds, socialisation or age. They are then classified according to topics and compared with one another. The selection of specific passages from various interviews can also help to highlight contradictory statements, which can then be discussed with the young people.

2. The young people are encouraged to regard themselves as anthropologists rather than historians.

The aim of a contemporary witness discussion should not be to gather as many historical facts as possible, but rather to understand how people deal with their past and why they speak about history in a certain way. The contemporary witnesses are not talking as historians; they are sharing memories, subjective experiences and life events. The diversity of perspectives should not motivate the young people to clarify which of them is true or false, or

even whether the contemporary witnesses have lied. Rather, they should support them in asking what led them to the respective perspective. In this way, they study the perspective from which people have experienced history and can examine the current context in which the people are doing the talking: What expectations do they feel they have to meet? Which perspectives of history do they regard as being politically intended, and which not? How would they like to portray themselves?

It is important to make the young people clear about the aim of the interview beforehand. It is less about researching history, and more about finding out how people talk about history. In addition to the past, the present in which the discussion is taking place is also of great importance.

The interviews begin with a round of introductions in which the contemporary witnesses and the young people talk about what motivated them to participate in the discussion. This initial stage permits the young people to obtain an initial insight into the reasons behind why the contemporary witnesses talk about their histories in a specific way.

Exercises allow the young people to experience in advance how a common experience or historical event can be remembered differently, e.g. the last school trip, the tsunami in Japan in 2011.

During the evaluation, the young people gather reasons as to why contemporary witnesses give short answers to some topics, react emotionally, say nothing or do not want to say anything about certain aspects of the period. This also means that the young people are aware that they also may not necessarily want to tell strangers intimate things, or talk about events in which they find their own role inglorious.

3. Young people also learn to recognise the perspectives of so-called »silenced groups«.

The danger of a one-sided narrative about the National Socialist period that unburdens the majority of society is also associated with the fact that those affected by the Nazi persecution and extermination policy were, to a large extent, murdered or no longer live in the areas of the project and are therefore unable to talk about it. It is therefore necessary to try and invite victims of Nazi persecution to participate in contemporary witness discussions with the young people in the various locations, even if they have no biographical link to the location. Alternatively, films and biographical texts can be used to communicate how the members of »silenced groups« experienced war and National Socialism as children.

The Anne Frank Zentrum wants to use these methods to create a comprehensive means of dealing with stories of childhood during the war and under

National Socialism. The young people recognise the subjective perspective of the stories of contemporary witness without distrusting the people telling them. And they hear the stories of people persecuted by the Germans during the National Socialist period. Both should enable them to look at the Second World War with a differentiated view.

Lessons learned from the children of war project

The children of war project attempted to deal with the stories of childhood during the Second World War and the National Socialist period in a responsible manner. However, this was difficult to implement. At the beginning of the children of war project, the objective of the Anne Frank Zentrum was to enable as many people as possible in the project locations to be able to carry out their own contemporary witness projects. Local project organisers received training on how to prepare and follow up young people for and on contemporary witness discussions. However, over the course of the project it became clear that this was insufficient. Local people were only able to guide young people successfully in the contemporary witness work if they already had prior experience of historical and civic education and oral history.

To that extent, workshops were also offered to the school children participating in the project. The workshops prepared them for the interviews with contemporary witnesses and followed up on the content of the interviews. This approach was also only partially possible to implement because occasionally the schools only made a few hours available for the workshops. It was also the case that many of the fourteen and fifteen year old pupils who participated in the project had not yet dealt with the Second World War and National Socialism in their lessons. Introducing them to the topic also required time. The time the schools allowed in the form of exemption from lessons to complete all the tasks – introduce the pupils to the basic principles of childhood during the Second World War and National Socialism, make them aware of the fact that they would be dealing with subjective memories, impart interview skills and develop a questionnaire with them – was much too short. It was only possible to touch on the various topics. Due to the density of the teaching material, some schools were unable to make time available for a preparatory workshop. The standard lessons left little spare time for extracurricular projects.

It was therefore necessary to catch up on a lot in the follow-up workshops. Here it was



The generations exchange views at the youth center in Cuxhaven.

possible, at least to a limited extent, to talk about questions on the topics thrown up in the interviews and about various perspectives of the period, and to illustrate the difference between subjective and objective histories.

To prevent overloading the pupils, and to develop an understanding for the complex topics, it seems sensible to work only with young people aged 14 and over. In Schwedt, primary school children aged nine and ten took part in the dialogue. For them, holding a discussion with contemporary witness on topics such as the Second World War or National Socialism is an enormous challenge. There is a danger of them becoming confused or frightened by the accounts, or developing a very distorted understanding of the period.

As part of the project, the young people were successfully introduced to the perspectives of »silenced groups«. In Saalfeld, one contemporary witness discussion was held with Holocaust survivor Zvi Aviram in which a number of pupils participated. In Neustrelitz, some of the participating classes visited the former Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück concentration camps. A memorial trip to Auschwitz was also organised. Following in the footsteps of Sinti children who were deported during the National Socialist period from Neustrelitz to Auschwitz where they were murdered, the young people journeyed together with senior citizens from Neustrelitz to Auschwitz. Together they visited the memorial and researched the Sinti children in the archives. Following the trip, they passed on their experiences to the other young people in Neustrelitz in the form of a presentation.

Processing the interviews was also made more complicated by the fact that the contemporary witnesses often also talked about their experiences of life in the GDR. Although the young people did not directly ask questions about this topic, many of the elderly people had a particular need to talk about it. It was impossible to deal with this period in the preparatory and follow-up workshop sessions as well. For the young people, some passages of the contemporary witness accounts were therefore incomprehensible and questions about the GDR history remained unanswered. In this respect, it is worth finding a way that meets the needs of the elderly people – to talk about their lives in the GDR – and answers the questions from the young people.

However, the question about how to be able to handle the stories of childhood during the Second World War and National Socialist period responsibly is not only concerned with how to work systematically with the young people. It is also concerned with whether all contemporary witnesses are permitted to participate in interviews with school pupils. For example, one contemporary witness in Saalfeld clearly had radical right-wing opinions on the policies of the National Socialists. This was apparent in the preliminary meeting the project organisers held in advance with everyone to be interviewed. This contemporary witness was therefore interviewed by the local project coordinator rather than by the young people. The school pupils then listened to the recorded interview during the project follow-up workshops under professional supervision.

Ruptures in East German contemporary witness reports

A discussion with Dr Annette Leo

Dr Annette Leo, a historian, was born in 1948 in Düsseldorf and has lived with her family in East Berlin since 1952. As part of the »Children of war – paths of life to date« project, she led a workshop with school pupils in Neustrelitz in which contemporary witness interviews were evaluated and followed up. This interview was conducted by Bianca Ely, an expert working on the »Children of war – paths of life to date« project at the Anne Frank Zentrum.

Project presentation in Deggendorf.



Bianca Ely: Dr Leo, does it make a difference if a »wartime childhood« project takes place in East or West Germany?

Annette Leo: Yes, different stories will be told than in the former Federal Republic. The elderly people have experienced another dictatorship layered on top of the childhood experiences of the Nazi dictatorship. The persecution of the Jews actually plays no role in many accounts. Unless the contemporary witnesses come from a family that itself was persecuted. But this is generally an exception. For the majority, it was the end of the war that was terrifying – the battles they experienced and having to flee. Or the absence of their fathers. Up until this point, the same histories were shared in the East and the West. However, they diverge from the moment the Soviet Army arrived. Following the end of the war, they lived side by side with the Soviet Army for many years. This occurred in Neustrelitz or Fürstenberg, for example, where a large part of the town was occupied by the Army. Even today, this continues to have an effect on how the stories of flight and rapes in the post-war period are recounted.

The GDR experiences of those interviewed also play a role. The majority of the interview partners that I got to know did not feel as if they were living under a dictatorship in the GDR. They had careers and naturally adapted to the political situation accordingly. To some extent it was the case that the contemporary witnesses did not actually want to discuss their time as children of war that much, but would rather talk about their professional success in the GDR. For example, everything they achieved as a teacher, all about the family they had raised and the reasonable level of prosperity they built up. However, with these accounts they occasionally got in a muddle. On the one hand, they have positive memories of their lives in the GDR. On the other hand,

they are aware that today, the history of the GDR is publicly and officially categorised as a dictatorship. These contradictions and ruptures in the stories often are not apparent for the school pupils. Even if sometimes they may have already heard accounts about the GDR from their own grandparents.

The accounts about childhood experiences of war can also only be understood in context. When contemporary witnesses talk about the Nazi period now, they incorporate a lot of what was taught about this period in the GDR. This differs from what has been presented since 1989/90 in the united Federal Republic. Today, the Jews receive a lot of attention as a group of victims. This was not the case in the GDR. The commemorative culture is changing and the memories are also being realigned to a certain extent. Naturally, this is not always the case. In the interviews, this was apparent in subtexts and contradictions in the accounts. I pointed these out in particularly striking cases. Initially, the pupils were mainly fascinated by the terrible, sad stories about the experiences of the period at the end of the war. I then specifically drew their attention to some ruptures. We then stopped the tape and I replayed the relevant part and asked them »Why do you think he put it like that?«. And then we worked on it together. The young people did not yet have any awareness of contradictions which then urged them to find an answer. They had other questions about the interview. And, of course, we discussed them as well. My impression was that the pupils were to all intents and purposes able to follow me. And that was precisely because we were able to discuss specific sections of the interview.



Performance by young people about the National Socialist era.

BE: Can you describe a section of an interview where it was possible to point out the ruptures and contradictions to the young people?

AL: For example, there was an interview with one lady who spoke very impressively. She talked in great detail about the important role she had played in the GDR, the famous people she knew etc. For me, it was very clear that she was speaking out against the later invalidation of her life achievements. As with all the interview partners, the young people asked her whether she had had any Jewish friends. She replied immediately with: »Yes, of course we had Jewish friends!« The young people wanted to know more and asked further questions. It turned out that she wasn't apparently friends with this Jewish family. In actual fact, she knew absolutely nothing about them. Perhaps her parents were friends with them, or knew them, but that was it. She was then asked about the fate of this Jewish family and the concentration camps. She reacted very defensively to this: »We didn't know anything about this, and couldn't have done. And there were no camps near where we were.« She began to speak with a strong Berlin accent, which she hadn't done before, and which illustrated the extent of her agitation.

On the one hand, these are common stories. Children of war who grew up in the West would tell them in a different manner. But then this life experience of the GDR is imposed on top, which potentially requires additional justification. This creates interference.

These sequences enable us to deduce that contemporary witness reports are always fed by various sources: the child's emotions from that period and the person's own observations from an adult perspective. It is difficult to keep everything separate afterwards, and the speakers aren't aware of it themselves. Justifications are also included. People usually recount their history so that it is seen as rounded from today's point of view. This is why the focus of the stories and even the assessment of what has been experienced changes with time. It's not only the personal point of view that changes, in this case, the general diction changes too. I attempted to communicate this. To some extent this overstretched the pupils. At any rate, they were completely exhausted after the workshop.



Talk with a contemporary witness.

BE: Does the middle generation, in other words the parents' generation, play a particular role in this respect? You yourself have experienced in East Germany how the discourses about memories have changed with the political upheaval and are therefore perhaps more in a position to detect ruptures and contradictions in the accounts.

AL: I think that the parents of the pupils would have been just as overstretched. Being able to interpret biographical accounts and uncover the ruptures and contradictions is a very special discipline. At best you could entrust it to teachers. But - at least in my experience - most of them also have problems dealing with their own role in the GDR.

BE: In the children of war project, in some places it was clear that the elderly people had a great need to talk about their lives in the GDR. In this respect, these stories have partly blown apart the focus of the children of war project. How should that be dealt with?

AL: It also forms part of it. The life stories of the interviewees do not stop with the end of the war. The contemporary witnesses are now in their late 70s or early to mid-80s. They need to balance out their lives. The things they experienced as children during the war are surely an important part of their lives. In some instances, they have not spoken about it up until now. Nevertheless, the enormous need to talk about their lives is only natural. To talk about their achievements and what they've made of their lives. It all belongs together. It is good that the interview has given them the opportunity to do this. It would have been wrong to say that we are only interested up to a point and the other part is not so important.

Intergenerational dialogue formats

Additional approaches for bringing generations together through local or personal histories

In addition to the approaches already introduced for getting young and old to talk to one another, there are other formats which can stimulate a dialogue between the generations. In all cases, these dialogues need guidance or moderation. Some of these approaches are outlined below.



Intergenerational exchange in Mühlhausen.



Classical music offers an atmospheric start to the presentation in Brühl.

Explorations and tours

- **Joint sightseeing tours:** Young and old walk together in pairs or a group through their town and point out important places from their childhood and youth. If the elderly participants did not grow up in the town, they could also point out the places in which the participants have enjoyed being in recent years, or where they have experienced something special.
- **Time line:** A time line is created on the side of a building in the town centre. The most important events of the recent history of the town are marked on it. On a day when the town is busy and many residents are present, they are invited to add their own personally significant events to the time line. This creates a sketch of the chronology of the citizens of the town.
- **Visit a memorial/museum:** This stimulates an exchange about historical topics and local history. It enables a discussion of the various perceptions and also the development of the commemorative culture.
- **Long table:** Long tables are erected in a central place in the town, at which everyone eats together. As with a family event, the long tables bring the various generations together around one table and give everyone the opportunity to talk about their own histories. In order to get the discussions going, the participants could bring photos from their childhood with them. Or quotes, pictures, topic cards or questions could be placed on the table.

Public campaigns

- **Mementoes:** Personal objects and mementoes of the war-child generation are collected and publicly displayed. The elderly participants use these personal objects to recount their experiences and memories. The mementoes and the histories written about them can be displayed in a specific location or spread around the town, e.g. in various shop windows. Alternatively, the mementoes can be photographed and hung as posters around the town.
- **Construct a monument:** The young people and senior citizens work together to build a temporary monument. The monument represents something of importance to them for the shared life in the town. Alternatively, they could visit existing monuments together and discuss them. Finally, they create drawings/drafts showing how a monument today commemorating the war might look.

Exchanges on specific topics

- **School:** Senior citizens are invited into lessons to talk with the children about school then and now.
- **Sport over the years:** Senior citizens are invited to sports clubs. They recount how certain types of sport were popular in their childhood. At the same time, they also find out about the latest trends among the young people.
- **»Girls' stuff«** What did girls used to do? What did they play with and what did they collect back then? The senior citizens bring old dolls, autograph albums, etc. with them. What do girls do nowadays? Are there things today which only girls do?
- **»Boys' stuff«** What things did boys used to play with? The senior citizens bring old toys with them and explain how they made their own toys.
- **Film afternoon followed by discussion:** A film is shown and then discussed. For example, the film could be about how memories are passed on within a family and how the war was/is discussed.
- **Intergenerational reading:** Contemporary witness reports, biographies or autobiographies, preferably with some link to the town, are researched and then presented by the young and old.
- **Religious communities in transition:** Contemporary witnesses from the community are invited into lessons to talk about confirmation, communion, Bar Mitzvah/Bat Mitzvah or Koran lessons. The topic could be religious education and the community then and now.

At the project presentation in Merseburg.



Interested visitors at the public presentation in Mühlhausen.



The exhibition in Mühlhausen focuses on forced migration.

Joint activities and products

- **Cooking:** Everyone presents their favourite dish from their childhood. While cooking and eating together, there is a relaxed discussion about then and now.
- **Intergenerational games room:** Old and new games are tried out together.
- **Playing music together:** In an intergenerational band, the elderly and young people play music that was or is important to them in their youth.
- **Fashion:** An intergenerational group sew together and talk about the fashion trends of then and now.
- **Intergenerational karaoke:** The young people show the elderly people how karaoke works. They sing old and new hits together and talk about their associations with these songs.
- **Video / federal competition video about the generations:** Both young people and multi-generational teams comprising up to 25 members up to 50 years of age may participate in the federal competition. In addition to the prescribed special topics each year, there is also the opportunity to select a topic of your choice and thus produce contemporary witness portraits or documentaries. <http://www.video-der-generationen.de>
- **Feature / podcasts:** Audio interviews with contemporary witnesses are conducted, sounds collected together and a feature produced with the help of a media centre or local radio station.
- **Audio guide:** The young and old work together to produce an audio guide on the history of the town. The texts are researched and recorded.
- **Letters to people who no longer live in the town:** The young people use letters to look into the experiences of the older generations who grew up in their town but who no longer live there (e.g. because they had to flee or have emigrated). They become pen-friends. The letters could be published or exhibited in some form, for example.
- **Discussion cafés:** Discussion cafés provide space for individuals to recount their life stories. One or two people recount their stories in as familiar an atmosphere as possible. The listeners are then able to ask questions and talk about themselves.
- **Newspaper:** The young people can use the contemporary witness interviews to produce a newspaper with the life stories of the elderly residents of their town.

Workshops

- **Digitalisation:** The elderly people bring in their photos and the young people help to digitalise them. The photos enable a discussion about life stories.
- **Taking photos of one another:** The young people and the senior citizens take each others' portraits and talk about how they perceive themselves or how they would like to be perceived and how other people portray themselves.
- **Biographical writing:** The participants are shown how to write their own life stories.
- **Creative writing:** Young people and senior citizens learn how to write creatively. In their writing, they deal with topics covered in the contemporary witness interviews and historical topics associated with their town.

Strengthening local expertise and networks – supporting and coaching history projects by the Anne Frank Zentrum

The Anne Frank Zentrum developed the idea for the »70 years on. Generations in dialogue« project based on the experience gleaned from the previous project »Children of war – paths of life to date«. One of the central objectives was to provide training to those in local government administration and civil society stakeholders throughout Germany. They were trained in how to implement projects in their localities and increase civil participation and social cohesion in the communities. An integral part of this process was the development and stabilisation of networks between political and cultural organisations in the various towns. Another important project objective was to initiate the dialogue between young and old about the Second World War and National Socialism. This was achieved by the contemporary witnesses recounting their experiences from their youth and childhood. At the same time, the elderly people were given access to the living environment of the adolescents. Around 8th May 2015, the outcomes of the inter-generational dialogues were presented in the various localities.

Implementation

In spring 2014, the Anne Frank Zentrum called on small and medium-sized towns to apply to participate in the »70 years on. Generations in dialogue« project. The basic precondition for the participation of a town was the willingness of one person from the town's administration and one stakeholder of a local educational, youth, senior citizen or historical institution to take responsibility for local project coordination. This also included participation in workshops held in Berlin throughout the process. A total of 15 towns applied in response to the appeal. The Anne Frank Zentrum selected seven towns in six federal states: Brühl (North Rhine-Westphalia), Cuxhaven (Lower Saxony), Deggendorf (Bavaria), Georgsmarienhütte (Lower Saxony), Merseburg (Saxony-Anhalt), Mühlhausen (Thuringia) and Kyritz/Wusterhausen (Brandenburg).

At the beginning of June 2014, the introductory workshop was held in Berlin, which acted as an ice-breaker for all the project participants. From the very beginning, it was clear that the mutual exchange of experiences and the discussions between the towns would be a significant help for the development of the individual projects. All the localities were highly motivated and also had a multitude of questions regarding how to implement the project. All the more important were the discussions by telephone with the Anne Frank Zentrum and the personal visits to the project locations.

Support provided by the Anne Frank Zentrum

The workshops that took place every two months, acted as an important communication channel for the project. They enabled the participants to talk about their progress and experiences and discuss how to handle any difficulties. Furthermore, each workshop focused on a specific issue. Topics included: »Handling stories of childhood in the Second World War in a responsible manner«, »What are the advantages of multiple perspectives and how can they be generated?«, »How to prepare dialogues between the generations?«, »How do you deal with prejudices in these discussions?« or »What to be aware of when conducting interviews with contemporary witnesses?«

The young people participating in the project also took part in seminars in their towns, in which they were instructed by experienced specialists from the Anne Frank Zentrum on how to prepare for and follow up after contemporary witness interviews. The follow-up workshops gave the young people the opportunity

to speak about the interviews, contextualise what they had learned and develop ideas for transferring what they had heard. It was important for the Anne Frank Zentrum to have a discussion about the fates of the minorities persecuted by the National Socialists, in addition to the many stories of bombing campaigns and occupation. The children of the Second World War underwent very different suffering. However, there was often no-one left living locally able to talk about the marginalisation and violence of the Holocaust. The speakers therefore presented biographies of people who had been persecuted and murder

Learning from history

A total of 23 stakeholders from the municipal authorities, independent educational institutions and historical museums managed the dialogue projects in their towns – together with the young people and contemporary witnesses – with impressive results. For many young people, participating in the project was an opportunity to look into the history of the locality in which they live in a very lively and human manner. Many of the contemporary witnesses were touched by the honest interest of the young people, which can be seen in the many video recordings that were made.

As part of the »70 years on. Generations in dialogue« project, the question was also raised about whether it is possible to create a bridge between the forced migration experienced by the contemporary witness generation at the end of the Second World War and the situation of today's refugees. Could contemporary witnesses, by recounting their personal histories, engender a sensitive way of dealing with the current processes experienced by the new arrivals? The serious discussion between the project participants on this topic showed how much potential is hidden in the life experiences of this older generation. It also shows how urgently intelligent, effective methods are needed to shape the present.



Historical photos tell family stories.

Dialogue on history raises awareness of today's challenges

»Contemporary witnesses bring history alive«¹

As a result of the previous project, »Children of war – paths of life to date«, we already knew that the topic of wartime childhood was an excellent opener for an intergenerational dialogue. However, careful paedagogical support is an important part of the project.

The Second World War, the Nazi history and the Shoah are often part of the distant past for today's young people. Encounters with elderly people and their memories of this period thus make history tangible and bring it to life. The encounters are a major event for both the young people as well as the senior citizens. More often than not, the elderly people are talking about their experiences and memories for the first time. Therefore, both parties often express some fears beforehand: Are the young people really interested in my history? Will they believe what I have to say? Will the young people confront me with allegations? Can I really ask all the things I want to ask about? How will I react when painful accounts emotionally overwhelm the contemporary witness?

The young people learn in dialogue with the contemporary witnesses to reflect on the memories of the elderly and to compare them against the knowledge they have already obtained from other sources. Part of the learning process includes not only acquiring knowledge, but also learning how to formulate questions which animate the contemporary witnesses to examine their histories, to remember, but also how to deal with problems that might arise during the dialogue, such as intense emotions or evasive responses. This dialogue with contemporary witnesses encourages young people to actively examine history and draw conclusions about current circumstances.

Learning from history and enabling a change of perspective

However, only the vigorous preparation for and follow-up workshop on the dialogue between the young people and contemporary witness makes learning about history effective. At a slight distance and in the absence of the contemporary witness, it is possible to reflect on the accounts: Which ruptures and omissions occurred in the contemporary witness accounts? What are the possible reasons for this? From what perspective are they talking? Whose memories are missing? How does historical analysis differ from the account of a contemporary witness? What is the ratio of independent to collective forms of memory? Only paedagogical support is capable of helping the young people contextualise the contemporary witness reports.

The follow-up workshops can also be used to reflect on possible difficulties. Specifically access to Nazi history through contemporary witness accounts can mean that the perspectives of the victims of the Nazi dictatorship and the Shoah are left out. The young people should reflect on any omissions during the follow-up workshops. These can be specifically compensated for e.g. by visiting memorials, looking at films or other paedagogical materials and forms of historical and civic education in which it is possible to learn about the perspective of the victims of the Nazi dictatorship.

¹ Comment made by a young person as part of the project presentation in Kyritz (Brandenburg) on 3rd June 2015.

Dialogue among the generations in Brandenburg

One example of a successful intergenerational dialogue illustrates the collaborative venture between the Anne Frank Zentrum and the Bildungszentrum Ostprignitz Jugend e.V. education centre in Brandenburg, which turned out to be a very dedicated partner in the »70 years on. Generations in dialogue« project. The project in the community of Wusterhausen/Dosse and the municipal authority of Kyritz was also supported. A total of ten young people from the Carl-Diercke senior school in Kyritz participated in the encounters with senior citizens. The project focused on the topic of »Fleeing and arriving then and now« and thus the content interwove history (flight and displacement at the end of the Second World War) and the present (current refugee movements). During the project, the refugee experiences of the older generation were discussed, family stories of migration were included in the intergenerational dialogue and current misgivings about refugees were expressed. In this respect, the topic of flight and migration was presented on several levels. As part of the discussion on the topics of flight, the root causes of migration and the living conditions of refugees, a journalist who fled Afghanistan several years ago was invited to talk to the young people about his flight to Germany and new start in Brandenburg. Kyritz and Wusterhausen/Dosse thus succeeded in making a bridge between refugee experiences in the past and the present. With considerable success, as is particularly impressively documented in the reflections of one of the sixteen year old pupils from Kyritz: »Before this project, I was against refugees.« (Anne Frank Zentrum, 2015). In the internet and in conversation with those of the same age she was always encountering derogatory comments about people seeking refuge in Germany and the typical slogans of racist and right-wing parties and groups. The pupil goes on to say the project opened her eyes. This is because during the discussions, she found out more about the lives of refugees, about the circumstances of the refugees and the difficulties associated with leaving your homeland and putting down roots in another place. Refugees stopped being a threat for the young people. They now want to have more encounters and to get to know each other better. Another young person from Wusterhausen expressed the wish to act as a volunteer for refugees in future.



Conclusion

Due to the positive experiences of the »70 years on. Generations in dialogue« project, the Anne Frank Zentrum is planning to support partners throughout Germany in implementing further intergenerational history projects in future. The current debate about the influx of refugees and the increasing protests and outbreaks of violence against refugee shelters illustrate the need to support civil stakeholders and administrative bodies in their commitment to human rights and a democratic culture. Intergenerational formats are particularly suitable in this regard. They enable a discussion about the past and present of a region based on specific life stories. This generates an understanding that flight and forced migration have always been present locally, even if it has often been concealed. The project thus raises awareness of the situation of refugees today and increases understanding and empathy for people currently seeking refuge in Germany. By getting to know one another, both young and old develop an understanding of the other age group. As part of the project work, numerous local networks have arisen which have brought citizens, town administrations and civil stakeholders closer together. In addition to the formats of historical and civic education, these networks are an essential prerequisite for empowering dedicated local stakeholders beyond the end of the project to commit themselves to a coexistence based on democracy and human rights.

Strengthening civil society by means of intergenerational exchange

Timon Perabo, 36, managed the »70 years on. Generations in dialogue« project at the Anne Frank Zentrum until the summer of 2015. He has worked intensively with and provided support to the partner organisations in the various towns over the past months. In this interview, he talks about the challenges of biographical learning, building local networks and the dialogue between young and elderly people.

Theater play with actors and school students.

Jan Schapira: Several hundred people took part in the »70 years on« project as participants and organisers. What was the initial motivation behind this large-scale project for the Anne Frank Zentrum.

Timon Perabo: We wanted to bring as many elderly and young people together in discussion as possible. The aim was to strengthen social cohesion in the communities by means of the dialogue about the Second World War and National Socialism. Getting to know each other promoted understanding between the age groups and their respective life styles. For us at the Anne Frank Zentrum, learning about history was of course a key objective. With the contemporary witness interviews, the young people had the opportunity to find out an enormous amount about the Second World War and the past of their own home town.

JS: Were there parameters for these interviews?

TP: We were in two minds about this. On the one hand, we wanted to give the young people as much freedom as possible when structuring their interviews. They should have the space to ask questions about the first love or other personal experiences. On the other hand, it is important for us to address topics such as the Holocaust, war or even enforced labour. Walking this tightrope between the various objectives and interests was resolved differently in the individual contemporary witness discussions. In any case, it was important for us that the young people examined what they had been able to learn in the interview about the past and the constraints there are in this context.



JS: What do you mean by constraints?

TP: Getting to know the local history by means of contemporary witnesses also means that the past is recounted from a specific perspective. These are the histories of people who experienced National Socialism in this town, or who fled there as Germans from Eastern Europe at the end of the war. The view of the past is always very selective and is also influenced by the way in which the person doing the recounting wants to be seen today. Events and their own actions that do not paint a positive picture are occasionally left out. Also, all those people who had to flee or who were murdered as members of minorities under National Socialism, are unable to tell the young people of today about their lives.

JS: To what extent was it possible to incorporate biographies of the persecuted into the project?

TP: Only in very rare cases it was possible for people from the respective towns who had been persecuted under National Socialism to talk to the young people themselves. We simply couldn't find any. These biographies were usually examined in the form of texts or film footage. Sometimes, the young people also looked at the fate of people who did not live in their own towns. For example, the group from Cuxhaven visited the museum »Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind« and the Anne Frank Zentrum on a visit to Berlin to examine the perspectives of the persecuted in this way instead.

JS: Did the young people reflect critically on the contemporary witness discussions?

TP: Some young people specifically noticed that the Holocaust didn't play a part in their contemporary witness discussions, or that not many questions were asked on this matter. In these cases, there was therefore no critical examination. An important factor in this regard was the strong empathy the young people had for the contemporary witnesses. The feeling of personal closeness that arose during the interview sometimes made it difficult to keep a critical distance from the person giving the account. Intensive preparation for and follow-up workshops on the discussions was therefore important. Sometimes we wished we had more time for this in this very work-intensive project.

JS: A general question - why were these discussions with the elderly at all important for the young people?

TP: Of course, the individual young people all took very different things away from the respective meetings. However, I believe that for the majority of them, one major plus was learning how to ask questions. It could be observed that the young people in the initial interviews often stuck very closely to the questionnaire they had written down. But the more experience they had, the more freely structured the discussions became. And the topic of war deeply moved all the young people. The accounts of the contemporary witnesses made the effects of this violence on people tangible for them.

JS: And what did the elderly people gain from these encounters?

TP: I believe that for many of the elderly, it was a great joy and a great pleasure to be able to retell their life story to someone. They were very grateful and benevolent towards the young people. As a result of the questions posed by the young people, some of the contemporary witnesses also started to think again about various aspects of their lives.

JS: Did this examination of the past also lead to a new way of thinking about the present?

TP: The topic of refugees in Germany was particularly important in this respect. The project caused many of the young people to rethink this issue. In Kyritz, for example, one young woman was very much against today's refugees. However, the discussions with people who had fled to her home town at the end of the Second World War and with an Afghan refugee made her rethink her negative opinion. She also told the other young people about this transition when presenting her results.



The contemporary witnesses answer all questions with vivid descriptions of their past.



Team and participants of »70 years on. Generations in dialogue«

JS: As an umbrella organisation, the Anne Frank Zentrum guided and supported the individual towns with their work on the »70 years on« project. Which criteria were particularly important when selecting the local participants?

TP: In the first instance, we looked for people who were prepared to commit themselves. This is because this project involved a considerable investment in terms of time. It was necessary for our project partners to set up a network of various supporters, to encourage elderly people and young people to participate, and to prepare them for the discussions. The discussions also produced »presentable« outcomes, such as films or exhibitions, which were presented to the public on special event days. So there was a lot to do! For me as the coordinator of the Anne Frank Zentrum, it was a great joy to see the great passion with which our local partners threw themselves into the project to enable this exchange between young and old.

JS: Apart from the considerable amount of work and commitment, what was also important for this collaboration?

TP: For us, it was also crucial that the administration and civil society in the respective towns cooperated closely with one another. The prerequisite for participation in the project was therefore that at least one person from a school, a youth club or another supporter was involved, along with at least one member of staff from the municipal administration.

JS: Why was this cooperation so important?

TP: The purpose of »70 years on« was to promote an exchange between the generations about history. Another key objective for us was to strengthen the cooperation between the local community structures. This cooperation between the administration and civil society was vigorously practiced by the project organisers. Contacts and common experiences were therefore forged which will make this cooperation easy again in the future.

JS: Does that mean the project will continue?

TP: We would love to support our partners for a while longer to consolidate the resulting local networks and the exchange between the participating towns. At the Anne Frank Zentrum we are currently considering how this will be possible under the working title of »Städte des Dialogs« (Places of dialogue). It is very important for us that this culture of cooperation continues. It will also be possible to focus on new topics. With the topic of flight it would be worthwhile entering into discussion with people who had to undergo this experience themselves during the Second World War. What facilitated their arrival and integration in the respective towns? The elderly people could become advisers on this issue, on how to create good conditions for new arrivals so that they can feel they are a part of the community as quickly as possible.

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Anne Frank Zentrum e. V.
Rosenthaler Straße 39
D-10178 Berlin

Telephone: : +49 30 2888656-00
Fax: +49 30 2888656-01
E-mail: zentrum@annefrank.de

www.annefrank.de
www.annefrank.de/facebook



Editorial staff: Bianca Ely, Christina Herkommer, Christine Wehner
Authors: Bianca Ely, Timon Perabo, Christine Wehner
In collaboration with: Jan Schapira
Editor: Patrick Siegele
Layout: Xenia Zenner
Translation: Sheila Owens, Karen Rutland
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Patrick Siegele (Anne Frank Zentrum):
Why is it so important for us today to commemorate
the Second World War and the Holocaust?



