

## INTRODUCTION

### Narratives of German Experiences

Conversations with older Germans about their pasts trigger amazing stories whose alleged facts are often stranger than fiction. For instance, during the night of March 16, 1945, Toni Schöffel huddled with her three small children in a shelter during a British bombing raid on the medieval city of Würzburg. When an air shaft was hit, “panic broke out since smoke spread through the room.” After digging through the blocked entry, they faced an inferno of flames that made the front of their apartment building collapse. “The firestorm was so strong that Toni had to hold onto the children to keep them from being swept away.” With the smallest girl sitting in a handcart, the bedraggled survivors had to walk twenty-five kilometers until a friendly farmer finally took them in. But there was no news of their father Paul, who served at the front: “Was he fallen, had he died?”<sup>1</sup> Beneath the veneer of postwar recovery, almost every family has such tales of lives disrupted or lost, showing the devastating impact of dictatorship and war.

Listening to such life stories greatly expands one’s perspective on the twentieth century, since it puts ordinary people back into the well-known narrative of major events. Instead of concentrating on the course of high politics, this reverse angle illuminates the human dimension, revealing an extraordinary mixture of prolonged suffering and surprising happiness. As Bettina Fehr recalled: “Only by retelling an individual fate can one really understand the thousandfold misfortunes that befell people.” On the one hand, many people struggled with forces beyond their control, becoming complicit with the demands of the Nazi or Communist dictatorships. On

the other, the survivors who emerged from these disasters rebuilt their lives in spite of the Cold War confrontation between the liberal West and the socialist East. A sustained look at unexceptional lives therefore dissolves the grand story of calamity and reconstruction into countless individual tales of survival and recovery that reveal the irresistible impact of political conflicts that ruptured peaceful existences but also offered new opportunities.<sup>2</sup>

In these personal accounts, the Nazi dictatorship, World War II, and the Holocaust emerge as the central vortex that irreparably altered millions of life trajectories. While the suffering of the First World War and hyperinflation seemed bad, the Weimar Republic provided a beacon of hope that progress would resume. But the devastating effect of the Great Depression created the mass disappointment upon which the novel National Socialist movement rode to power, renewing German pride by providing a warped sense of a national community. Though these stories attest to Hitler's initial popularity, they also demonstrate how the criminal war of annihilation eventually came back to haunt the German people themselves through mass death in military battle, civilian bombing, and ethnic cleansing. The drama of the final war years that turned erstwhile perpetrators into victims has deeply engraved itself in people's minds, since it cost many lives and scarred even those fortunate enough to survive.<sup>3</sup>

These life histories also suggest that the more peaceful second part of the century offered some relief by allowing individuals to rebuild their broken lives and get on with their private affairs. But many postwar decisions consciously or unconsciously tried to avoid the potential repetition of past disasters. During the Cold War, the personal and collective attempt to restore a degree of normalcy required an enormous effort that focused on the present. The pursuit of material wealth in the West and social equality in the East absorbed much attention for several decades. Many people succeeded in forgetting their nightmares, resuming personal relationships, basking in professional success, and reaping the spoils of prosperity by buying cars, building houses, and traveling abroad. But for some, with retirement, the terrible memories of defeat, flight, and expulsion and postwar hunger returned, forcing a delayed reckoning. It is that painful process of

self-examination that ultimately transformed many Germans into peaceful democrats.<sup>4</sup>

## ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES

Making sense of such disparate narratives requires a collective biography involving more than a single individual but less than an entire society.<sup>5</sup> One way of limiting the scope is to focus on a specific age cohort, such as the children born during the 1920s whose life stages were particularly shaped by historic events.<sup>6</sup> While their parents faced World War I and their childhood took place in the Weimar Republic, they were affected severely by the Nazi dictatorship because their adolescence coincided with the first years of the Third Reich, forcing them to take a stand on Hitler's rule. Their coming of age was further complicated by the hazards of military or civilian service, as well as persecution and mass murder, in the Second World War. Surviving defeat and destruction allowed them to begin their lives anew, reaching adulthood in the Federal Republic of Germany or German Democratic Republic, only to be surprised by the overthrow of Communism in the end. Rather than pretending to a nonexistent generational uniformity, it is the diversity of the entanglements between private affairs and public events that sets them apart.

The age cohort born between the end of World War I in 1918 and the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 contained numerous illustrious figures who left their mark on the twentieth century. In politics, they ranged from Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (born 1918) to his successor Helmut Kohl (1930) and included President Richard von Weizsäcker (1920), Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher (1927), GDR spymaster Markus Wolf (1923), Premier Hans Modrow (1928), and US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (1923). In culture, it comprised writers such as Heinrich Böll (1917), Günter Grass, and Martin Walser (1927), as well as Christa Wolf (1929). Among social thinkers, Niklas Luhmann (1927) and Jürgen Habermas (1929) are the most significant. Other celebrities include soccer player Fritz Walter (1920), artist Joseph Beuys (1921), film star Hildegard Knef (1925), and conductor Kurt Masur (1927).<sup>7</sup> While most of these people's lives are already quite well known, they share with ordinary Germans many of the formative experiences detailed below.

The more than six dozen accounts selected include a broad spectrum of reactions to National Socialism, ranging from enthusiastic support to courageous opposition. The most difficult to find were those of fanatical Nazis who supported Hitler, because they did not want to write about their complicity in crimes. More forthcoming are the dozen or so nationalist collaborators who celebrated their military success until 1942. The majority of memoirs are by apolitical folks who merely took pride in surviving the Third Reich through ingenious stratagems. Less numerous, at about one-tenth the total, are the critics of Nazi rule who recount their small acts of noncompliance as proof of decency. Only a few accounts stem from the small minority who actively resisted the blandishments of the Third Reich. Since the voices of Jews or other Nazi victims were largely silenced by mass murder, only a dozen accounts by survivors of the concentration camps (KZ) or people rescued by timely emigration could be incorporated. These written testimonies therefore reflect a somewhat truncated set of responses that characterize the experiences of the majority.<sup>8</sup>

Another cluster of responses to politics had to be chosen for the second half of the century, because Nazi defeat sorted people's life chances anew, turning allegiances topsy-turvy. One key difference involved adherence to the conflicting sides in the Cold War—either joining the capitalist reconstruction of the Federal Republic or the socialist experiment of the GDR. In the majority of accounts from the West, the texts show that economic success inspired people to accept democracy at least nominally, while only a critical minority pushed for further reforms. By contrast, the two dozen East German autobiographies reveal that the anti-Fascism of the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) initially attracted much support, but the imposition of a new Marxist dictatorship created another set of victims and forced critics to flee. As a result, the East Germans eventually overthrew Communist rule and joined the Western system, reunifying their country.<sup>9</sup> These contrasting stories of material prosperity and ideological disappointment add a different postwar trajectory to the narratives.

In order to go beyond the elite bias of most written accounts and recover the voices of ordinary people, this study attempts to present wider segments

of the German population.<sup>10</sup> Autobiographies from various social strata are included, with about half hailing from the upper middle class, one-third from the petite bourgeoisie, and one-tenth from the working class. Texts from various regions were chosen in order to reflect the wide geographical range of German society: two dozen individuals came from the West, eighteen from the East, and one dozen from Berlin. The book incorporates different religious perspectives, since confessional affiliations retained a powerful force in Central Europe: the majority were Protestants, a substantial minority Catholic, and the rest Jewish. Whenever possible, accounts have been picked that cover an entire lifespan so as to combine narratives of earlier events with subsequent reflection on their meaning. In contrast to more limited studies, this stratified sample of more than six dozen individuals represents a broader range of personal and collective experiences.<sup>11</sup>

Because popular life courses were highly gendered during the twentieth century, the distinct if related experiences of men and women must also be represented. The men who make up two-thirds of the sample tend to write about their job histories and their military service on the front or in POW camps in the tone of adventure stories. They openly engage political questions, describing how they collaborated with or tried to escape from the reach of National Socialism. By contrast, the women report more on their families, relatives, and friends, reconstructing a dense network of human relationships. Especially in difficult times, their stories center on providing food, clothing, and shelter—that is, the basic survival of their own family unit. Politics rarely makes an appearance, viewed generally as an intrusion from the outside. Of course, in some areas such as courtship, marriage and children, or absence and death, the two strands are closely intertwined. But it often appears as if the sexes lived in different worlds, divided not only by age or occupation but by gender.<sup>12</sup>

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SOURCES

Promising sources for such a cohort biography are the autobiographies written in retirement during the 1990s as retrospective accounts after German unification. Some writers composed them for their grandchildren in order



1. An author's self-portrait. *Source:* Deutsches Tagebucharchiv.

to portray the background of their ancestors or communicate exciting experiences, formalizing oral stories by writing them down. Others had a psychological compulsion to justify problematic decisions by explaining past circumstances, the books serving as a form of personal therapy. Still others responded to increasing media interest in German suffering after President Richard von Weizsäcker's injunction in 1985 to engage popular memories.<sup>13</sup> Many of the narratives, like that of Ursula Baehrenburg, are richly illustrated with family snapshots, personal drawings, maps of battles, and newspaper clippings concerning civic engagements (image 1).<sup>14</sup> Though directed primarily toward creating private family memories, these amateur accounts also offer a public substitute for the disappearance of oral testimonies due to the passing away of the eyewitnesses.

Finding life histories composed by ordinary Germans turned into a voyage of discovery that went beyond the customary sources of historical scholarship. The project started with an effort to recover stories told by friends such as composer Gerhard Krapf, Jewish émigré Tom Angress, and East German historian Fritz Klein. An inquiry by hairdresser Brigitte Stark about whether her mother's memoirs might interest historians propelled the ef-

fort further; her text and pictures turned out to be a treasure trove of popular experiences. From there the search ventured into a realm of similar grey literature by authors such as river captain Hermann Debus, published by small vanity presses. The effort to obtain permissions for citations and images from persons such as engineer Karl Härtel triggered a surprisingly positive response that led to phone calls, emails, and touching interviews with two protagonists, businessman Hellmut Raschdorff and pastor Erich Helmer, already in their mid-nineties. All of these respondents were delighted to have a professional historian take their stories seriously.

Though many manuscript autobiographies remain in private possession, others are located in public repositories. On hearing about the project, descendants such as Katharina Hochmuth and Ulrich Grothus offered access to unpublished recollections by their parents or grandparents. Moreover, beginning in 1955 the Leo Baeck Institute in New York has made a systematic effort to preserve the culture of German-speaking Jews by archiving approximately two thousand personal narratives.<sup>15</sup> In the late 1970s the writer Walter Kempowski also started to collect such accounts as material for his social novels and assembled over eight thousand volumes that are now housed in the literary archive of the Academy of Arts in Berlin.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in the late 1990s Frauke von Troschke began a parallel project to create a German Diary Archive in the small Badensian town of Emmendingen. This now contains more than fifteen thousand entries, about two-fifths of which are autobiographies.<sup>17</sup> With other accounts published by small presses, these texts constitute a veritable archive of popular memories, so far largely ignored by professional historians.<sup>18</sup>

The subjectivity of such ego-documents is both their weakness and their strength for analytical purposes. Of course, retrospectives late in life lack the freshness and authenticity of diaries or letters composed at the time of crucial events. Age also creates a tendency to forget, to paper over cracks, and to apologize, making the author appear in a better light. Moreover, autobiographies are shaped by intervening debates both in the family and in wider society that tend to influence the narrative. But, coming toward the end of a lifetime, many such accounts are surprisingly candid about previous errors

and failings. In quite a few cases, they are also based upon consultation of earlier documents, including letters or diary entries, in order to refresh later memory. And they tend to be self-reflexive, contrasting a prior self with the later persona and thereby providing clues to individual and collective learning processes. Since such self-representations seek to seduce the reader, they must be used with critical discrimination.<sup>19</sup>

The value of autobiographies lies precisely in their combination of event narrative and memory construction, missing in other sources such as letters or diaries. In the ruptures of the twentieth century, “biography and contemporary history are interwoven in a complex fashion, and at the same time both are actually produced through autobiographical narration.” Such attempts at self-historicization are simultaneously “a retrospective interpretation of one’s own life” and “a search for a socially acceptable form” of conveying experience. They possess a strongly diachronic character, representing earlier events and emotions through the lens of later reflection and evaluation. Moreover, personal narratives are products of social interaction and cultural debate. What they lack in accuracy of fact, they gain in textual presentation and reflection. Making sense of the evolution of an individual identity requires explaining the larger developments that have shaped and disrupted its existence.<sup>20</sup> Especially when compared with each other, autobiographies reveal the peculiar ways in which different Germans narrate the twentieth century.

The subsequent analysis of ordinary ego-documents builds upon but also seeks to transcend the tradition of everyday history. Instead of looking down from grand politics, this reverse perspective attempts to reconstruct the relations of ordinary people from below. Rather than focusing on key decisions, it tries to ascertain changes in their daily lives, the transformations of their *Alltag* existence. In contrast to government documents, it consults the memories of “eyewitnesses” who experienced developments, in order to get at their impact on the population at large.<sup>21</sup> But instead of using oral interviews, the current study analyzes written testimonies, generally a result of prior storytelling among families and friends.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it goes beyond a few prominent *Zeitzeugen* and searches for transpersonal patterns

by comparing more than six dozen accounts with each other. This method makes it possible to reconstruct changes in ordinary lives and to recover the agency of little people when confronted with big events.

An intermedial look at the many photographs included in the autobiographies reinforces and amplifies this narrative perspective from below. About half of the memoirs, like Ruth Bulwin's account, are richly illustrated with pictures of their protagonists, making them come alive as individuals. Family photos constitute a visual archive of images of significant life events such as births, confirmations, marriages, retirements, and deaths. In these private photos, politics only gradually makes an appearance through teenagers or men in Hitler Youth (HJ) or Nazi uniforms or portraits of Wehrmacht soldiers. During the war, shots of victorious troops proliferate; defeat and destruction are pictured much less because their photographers were busy with survival. In the postwar period, Western images focus on signs of success such as cars, houses, and vacations, while Eastern pictures show party activities as well. This pictorial record adds another dimension of rather unselfconscious self-representation to the written texts.<sup>23</sup>

A collective biography focused on an age cohort like the Weimar children makes it possible to look at the sequence of German regimes through the eyes of successive life stages. The Wilhelmine Empire appears as a nostalgic evocation transmitted by grandparents, while World War I and its chaotic aftermath show up in the struggles of the parents. A benign Weimar Republic comes into view through the childhood experiences of the authors themselves, whereas National Socialism is seen from the perspective of adolescents in the Hitler Youth. The Second World War appears in youthful reports of harrowing experiences in the military or the home front, reaching a climax in descriptions of suffering in the Holocaust. Germany's defeat and occupation surface as the decisive period in which different trajectories toward maturity opened up, only to diverge into Western democracy and Eastern dictatorship during the Cold War.<sup>24</sup> This linkage between life stages and regime changes opens fresh interpretative perspectives.

One key issue in working with a plurality of autobiographies is the distinction between their individual trajectories and the broader patterns to

which they relate. While each life story is unique, consisting of a personal fate different from others, if taken together, such narratives also reveal regularities that illuminate broader social processes. Grouping them according to criteria such as the subject's relationship to National Socialism allows the identification of typical patterns. Moreover, many lives have in common not only a progression of stages but, in a turbulent century, were subject to similar experiences—fighting at the front, sitting in air-raid shelters—which suggest similar reactions. Although the idiosyncrasies of such individual stories are fascinating, their points of intersection reveal *shared experiences* that shed light on collective responses. As in a mosaic where individual stones form a broader pattern, the comparison of over eighty such cases allows the identification of common tendencies that combine into a more general picture.

Another analytical challenge in dealing with individual life histories is the tension between their claim to represent actual experiences and their character as memory narratives. Ostensibly authors write in order to convey actual events from their lives, claiming a truthful rendition of their actions. But, due to the lapse of time, the veracity of presentation remains unclear, requiring corroboration through comparison with other sources. Moreover, autobiographies consist of stories centered on individual actors, who are able to choose what to include, what to leave out, and how to present it. The resulting narratives vary widely, from military adventure accounts to tales of suffering or heroic survival in concentration camps and to success stories of resilient recovery and postwar prosperity. But the repetition of certain stories creates *tropes of memory*, which suggest shared ways of telling and assigning meaning. A critical use of these ego-narratives therefore demands factual confirmation as well as narrative deconstruction.<sup>25</sup>

A final problem is the controversial emphasis of personal narratives on German suffering, which seems insensitive to the pain of their victims. Foreign observers and domestic intellectuals have therefore insisted on fashioning a history that memorializes the millionfold anguish of Jews, Slavs, and other targets of Nazi persecution. But Günter Grass rightly pointed

out in his novella *Crabwalk* that this shift of empathy ignored the memories of German sorrow, pushing them underground and leaving them to be exploited by a resentful Right.<sup>26</sup> Making only passing reference to the pain of Nazi victims, these autobiographical retrospectives indeed center on the German sense of victimization. But a critical reading need not accept their stories at face value. Instead, it can interpret the exculpatory tales of suffering as another impetus for postwar learning, which made many chastened Germans vow never again to commit such crimes, lest their dire consequences be once more visited upon their authors.<sup>27</sup>

Examining such an ensemble of life stories requires an almost novelistic technique of blending individual fates with collective narrations. Instead of creating “composite interviews” combining different people, this analysis focuses on a core of seventeen exemplary individuals, whose memoirs represent typical reactions and cover a lengthy period of time.<sup>28</sup> In order to provide additional depth on general subjects such as horrific war experiences, another twenty-one secondary characters are included. Finally, more than forty minor figures are used to illustrate specific points, such as motives for joining the Nazi Party. The repetition of stories, such as those of dramatic escapes from POW camps, makes it possible to discern patterns of shared experiences, while the manner in which they are told shows retrospective tropes of memory. Though more focused than Sabine Friedrich’s more than two-thousand-page novel on the German resistance, this multi-level approach yields a rich tapestry of collective fates.<sup>29</sup> Such a life-history perspective reveals how much ordinary Germans not only suffered from, but also contributed to their own catastrophes.

Precisely because they are not elite memoirs, these untutored accounts provide a more vivid and personal picture of what it meant to live through the twentieth century. Instead of just recounting the differences between the successive systems of the Second Empire, Weimar Republic, Third Reich, and East and West Germany, they reveal the involvement of individual life decisions in dictatorship or democracy.<sup>30</sup> These narrations show the radicalizing effect of economic crises such as the Great Depression and demonstrate

the enthusiasm of youths for the Third Reich. More importantly they reveal the disruptions of lives at the front, in the bomb shelters, and in the KZ, as well as the difficult postwar efforts to resume normal existences. Finally, the accounts cast light on the Cold War decisions between the competing ideologies and the chagrin over the ultimate collapse of Communism.<sup>31</sup> In contrast to fictional media portrayals, these amateur narratives recount actual life events, revealing how ordinary Germans were shaped by outside forces and how they brought trials and tribulations upon themselves.<sup>32</sup>

## EXPERIENCES AND MEMORIES

These narratives suggest that Germans overwhelmingly experienced a sense of broken lives in the twentieth century, disrupted often beyond repair. While the first decade inspired hope for continued progress, World War I triggered a catastrophic chain of events that ruptured life plans in many social strata. The political conflicts of Weimar pulled families apart by forcing them to choose ideological sides. Economic instability created a pervasive feeling of insecurity that made all too many believe in the promise of a racist dictatorship. Mass murder and death during the world wars cut short millions of lives, leaving sorrow and despair. The flight and expulsion from the East uprooted countless individuals, taking away their homes and forcing them to start over elsewhere. Many of the responses during the second half of the century can only be understood if they are considered as desperate efforts to avoid a recurrence of such catastrophes.<sup>33</sup> Hence the postwar stress on success seems like a conjuring act, seeking to keep dangers at bay.

These stories are, in effect, narrative efforts to mend fractured memories, alternating between exculpatory claims of victimization and self-critical admissions of responsibility for crimes. Rarely describing their authors' own misdeeds, the autobiographies are full of shocking tales of German suffering, long ignored by academic histories. The reports of terror at the front, huddling in bomb shelters, mass rape, and flight and expulsion are credible enough, but they often fail to mention that their causes lay in earlier German aggression. Obdurate nationalists still present relativizing explanations

that “we [were] only doing our job” or “we were all misled by the Nazis” and “betrayed by the *Führer*.” More introspective writers try to examine their own conscience, admitting to at least partial involvement in war and repression. A few self-critical spirits even confront their guilt and show a subsequent desire to atone.<sup>34</sup> It is this effort to wrestle with complicity and show contrition that makes German memory culture an exemplary case of attempted rehabilitation in general.<sup>35</sup>

In these autobiographies, experiences and memories blend in a unique fashion that can make it difficult to tell them apart. Their content relates personal occurrences, ranging from humdrum daily life to exceptionally exciting moments, based on a core of actual events. But because these experiences were recollected decades later, their veracity is questionable unless cross-checked by comparison with other accounts, documents, and scholarly analyses. Written down on the basis of memory and seldom supported by actual records, these memoirs are selective, biased, and exculpatory, offering an incomplete picture. But they are also a compelling source showing how earlier experiences are remembered, often following collective scripts that have been constructed by social retelling, cultural reflection, and political discussion. Since such personal stories express memories of experiences, their narrative form needs to be deconstructed in order to get at their multiple levels of meaning. It is the horrible pain inflicted and suffered by Germans that sets their struggle to remember and forget apart.<sup>36</sup>

With their untutored presentation, these recollections reflect the human drama of the twentieth century more directly than many academic analyses. Instead of relating only major events, they present a myriad of individual experiences that interacted with broader changes. More than that of other countries, Germany’s development was shattered by surprising ruptures, territorial shifts, and regime changes that destabilized the very notion of a national state. Across these upheavals, ordinary people struggled to pursue normal lives, trying to progress from childhood to adulthood in a predictable fashion irrespective of grand politics. But transpersonal forces kept unsettling peaceful existences, threatening death and destruction.<sup>37</sup>

“Time has passed over us like a wild and turbulent wave of the sea, devastating everything,” mused the refugee Jakobine Witolla. Faced with such dangers, people sought to survive somehow by collaborating with dictatorships, ignoring their commands, or even opposing them. Their stories offer a unique window into popular lives and should finally receive their due.<sup>38</sup>