Until today, Freud’s essay "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through" is seen as a milestone on the way to a theoretical understanding of memory. Freud’s concept of "memory" aims to describe the unconscious dimension of the process of memory and the power of its effects. Freud emphasized the interplay of "repression" and "memory", for the analysand reproduces that which was forgotten "not as memory, but as an act, he repeats it, without of course knowing that he is repeating it." Freud has thus sketched an elementary pattern in dealing with things past: to characterize a look into the past as a cognitive act would be inadequate, for it must be distinguished theoretically from unconscious processes of remembering which are nonetheless equally relevant for one’s actions. The term "repetition" is of central importance for this unconscious recollection of past events.

Freud understood "repression" to be a specific kind of defense mechanism. The aim of repression is to, for example, retain threatening affects or instincts in the unconscious or to again submerge them there. It would be incorrect to suppose that the process of repression is a "event which takes place once, the results of which are permanent, [...]; repression demands a persistent expenditure of force, and if this were to cease, the success of the repression would be jeopardized, so that a fresh act of repression would be necessary." The repressed exercises continuous pressure on consciousness, which lead Freud to develop his understanding of the "return of the repressed."

The "return of the repressed" is not to be equated with the psychic working out of that which has been repressed, but denotes instead a repetition in the form of dreams, symptoms, and scenes acted out, for "a thing that has not been understood inevitably reappears; like an un laid ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken."

The dynamic of experience, repression, repetition and renewed defense is, as an unconscious process, characteristic of the individual handling of traumatic experiences. Jan Philipp Reemtsma takes up Freud’s metaphor of the un laid ghost when he compares the essence of traumatic experience with that of ghost stories. The "simultaneousness of a terrifying presence and foreignness" not only characterizes this literary genre, it is the hallmark of individual trauma. The traumatized individual experiences the "terroristic presence of the past" with the simultaneous feeling of "psychical exterritoriality." The perceived foreignness of the traumatic experience also expresses itself as a limited capacity to verbalize, a phenomenon which Alfred Lorenzer has called "the destruction of language."
The term trauma, which is now used in an almost inflationary way in the public arena, is increasingly in danger of banalizing or losing sight of the massive psychical wounds it is supposed to characterize. Few other medical models have experienced such a boom, sad as it is. Accidents, natural disasters, the experience of sexual violence, persecution, war, and torture – the list of possible sites of traumatization could be extended. In general, trauma is seen "as an event or series of events defined by its intensity, the subject’s lack of capability to react adequately, shock, and the permanent pathogenic effects which it elicits in psychical organization." A significant portion of the people in our society has personally suffered experiences which are traumatic or trauma-like or is concerned throughout their entire lives – consciously or unconsciously – with wounds which have been passed on from earlier generations – in particular as a result of World War II.

Although interdisciplinary trauma research has contributed significantly to a more differentiated understanding of psychical wounds, the genuine interplay between trauma, memory, and narrative remains controversial and in need of further explanation, from the perspective of both the natural and the social sciences. Today, one must hardly emphasize that remaining silent about traumatic experiences, even for decades, must not be construed as forgetting. The repeatedly observed speechlessness of traumatized individuals does not mean that their traumatic experience does not reach the exterior. It is in fact the motor of action, but it would appear that trauma often requires other forms of expression than that of harmonizing narration. At the same time, memories of past traumatic experiences are always situated within the context of biographical construction. In other words, traumatic experience must be integrated, on the one hand, as an individual experience; into a personal life history. On the other hand, it is a specific characteristic of traumatic experience that it seems to be totally or partially beyond the reach of symbolization through language. Thus, it seems obvious to ask whether there are other forms of biographical memory, besides those which employ language, which stand for the often painful attempt to integrate traumatic experience into one’s personal history.

Scholarship on the biographical self-presentation of survivors of the Nazi concentration and death camps has shown that biographical memories can take at least three different forms. First, the oral or written testimonies of survivors can be subjected to deep hermeneutical analysis. Furthermore, one can observe what I would like to call biographical memory. Third, one can describe a kind of condensation on the level of interaction. These nonverbal forms of memory in no way characterize conscious work in the sense of Freud’s "working-through"; instead, they move on the level of repetition mentioned above, since they take up central aspects of the traumatic experience and actualize them. In the following I would like to explicate the three different forms of biographical memory with the help of a case history.

Karl Himmel was born in 1919 as an illegitimate child in a small town with textile and metal factories in West Germany. His mother was a domestic employee. His father remained unknown. When the boy was three years old, his mother married Himmel, the owner of a coffee mill, from whom she was pregnant at the time. Karl Himmel was adopted by his stepfather. In the years that followed, there were severe disagreements in the family, in part because
Karl’s stepfather and half-brother continuously reminded him that he was illegitimate and therefore did not belong to the family. Karl Himmel repeated several classes in school, ran away from home several times and attracted attention because of deviant behavior. In 1935, he was sent to a home for young delinquents for the first time. At the time, Karl Himmel was an apprentice in a grinding shop. Throughout the Thirties, he lived in a number of different reform schools. In his files, the institutions Buchenhof (Herford) near Schweicheln and the reformatory in Freistatt/Kreis Sulingen are specifically mentioned. His file in the youth welfare agency notes the youth’s "subjective delinquency", which manifests itself in "vagrancy", "refusal to work" and "innate feeblemindedness". Following notification of the authorities by the head of the reformatory in Freistatt, Karl Himmel was sent to a local government physician for an examination. According to his own testimony, Karl Himmel refused to answer political questions and today views that as the reason why the physician subsequently recommended sterilization, which was approved by the Erbgesundheitsgericht Verden (Nazi court charged with deciding cases relevant to the eugenics laws) in 1936. Karl Himmel was subjected to forced sterilization in Bethel, after unsuccessfully attempting to avoid the operation by fleeing from that institution several times. In September 1938, Himmel was released from reform school and the jurisdiction of the youth welfare agency. During the next two years, he worked intermittently, hired on as a sailor, was charged several times with begging and vagrancy and served several short prison sentences. Charges of a violation against the Heimtueckegesetz were dropped by the Sondergericht (Special Court) in Dortmund after an expert medical opinion attested to his diminished criminal culpability according to § 51 of the German Criminal Code.

Karl Himmel began his military duty on January 1, 1941 with an assignment to naval training in Stralsund; he was later transferred to Kiel. He refused to obey orders several times during the first few weeks and ignored leave restrictions imposed upon him. A military court again commissioned a medical opinion which labeled the defendant as "unequivocally feebleminded" and ascertained "significantly diminished culpability". The court subsequently judged Himmel guilty of being "absent without leave" (AWOL) and sentenced him to four months in a Wehrmacht prison, which he served in Anklam. Instead of returning to Kiel from Anklam after serving his sentence, Himmel again went AWOL and was arrested a few weeks later in Hamburg. The Navy War Court of the second admiral of the Baltic Sea Station charged him with desertion in 1942 and a medical witness again diagnosed "feeblemindedness", this time with "psychopathological traits". Desertion was punishable with death but the court held the intention to desert for unproven and sentenced Himmel to one year in prison, to be followed by "detention". Karl Himmel again served his sentence in Anklam and was then sent to the closed psychiatric ward of the Neustadt State Hospital by order of the court. Since he purportedly expressed opinions detrimental to the state while in this institution, he was transferred to the Neuengamme concentration camp in May 1944 as a prisoner of the Wehrmacht special department. He was sent to various satellite camps before becoming part of a so-called evacuation march from Sandbostel to Flensburg in the spring of 1945 and finally being liberated by British troops in Flensburg. By this time, Karl Himmel was fatally ill and spent nearly two years in
hospitals and sanitariums. After 1947, he lived in Hamburg, working at times as an unskilled laborer at the harbor in Hamburg. Up until the eighties, he seldom had a permanent place of residence and lived on the streets or in shelters for the homeless or for single men. His criminal record shows that, up until the seventies, he was charged nearly every year with various crimes including vagrancy, forgery, larceny, fraud or begging. From 1955 to 1962, he was legally incapacitated and spent several years in this period in the Ochsenzoll General Hospital in Hamburg. His efforts to be recognized as a victim of Nazi persecution remained unsuccessful for a long time. It was not until the eighties that he received the lump sum of 5,000 DM as compensation for forced sterilization. Karl Himmel used this money to rent his own apartment in downtown Hamburg.

Trauma and the destruction of language

My memory of the interview with Karl Himmel is of an extremely strenuous, emotionally ambivalent conversation charged with feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, in which the limits of biographical interviewing became visible or – more precisely – palpable. This experience included, on the one hand, the concrete communication in the interview, which was hampered by numerous mutual problems in achieving understanding; on the other hand, the story transports a degree of devalorization and destruction which is particularly disquieting because of its biographical continuity. Karl Himmel’s recollections of his life are characterized by a fragmented, at times disjointed and seemingly diffuse narrative form. Sentences left unfinished, sudden changes of subject, unintelligible narrative units are the most striking traits of this text. Communication was also marked for long periods by Himmel’s generally indistinct and hectic manner of speech with its numerous expletive utterances. The resulting difficulties in the acoustic perception of Mr. Himmel’s report generated dissatisfaction and impatience, which sometimes ended in resignation. The interview thus illustrates which pre-structured expectations of the interviewer when she asks her interview partner to provide a biographical summary. Biographical interviews are usually oriented around culturally and socially determined patterns of representation. The persons involved are generally hardly aware of these patterns; they structure self-presentation automatically, as it were. In talking to Karl Himmel, ritualized narrative forms of bourgeois (middle-class) origin were, paradoxically, revealed as normative, precisely because this interview partner hardly had them at his command and/or they were not applicable. When, for brief moments, Karl Himmel took up parts of a standardized pattern of biographical narrative, such as had been expected from him in the course of medical examinations or during the legal proceedings to obtain financial compensation, a deceptive feeling of understanding developed. Although these narrative segments provided, to a certain extent, orientation in time and space for the listener, they also represent those portions of the conversation which are so transformed by rules of discourse and genre that they virtually preclude any attempt to understand the subjective experience of the interview partner. Thus, seen "from the outside", Himmel’s oral speech is characterized by a high
degree of confusion. This impression is confirmed if one attempts to sort out the thicket of jumbled information and subjective impressions. Altogether, one can summarize Mr. Himmel’s narrative by saying that he attempts to portray both his forced sterilization and his convictions by military courts as political persecution. This self-interpretation as a politically persecuted individual must be viewed before the backdrop of West Germany’s post-war practice of compensation, which denied the victims of forced sterilization and those convicted by German military courts financial redress. In the face of Mr. Himmler’s drawn-out, unsuccessful attempts to be officially recognized as a victim of the Nazi regime, it is therefore understandable that he conceives his story as one of political persecution. But this self-conception also includes repression, which I would like to reconstruct here at first on the level of language. When, for example, Karl Himmel reports on the examination by a government physician in Diepholz, the results of which later lead to his being sterilized, he mentions that he did not answer any political questions. "I forgot, a year before, I was also in there then. Then the sterilization..., I was sterilized 1937. Before that. And uh, I did uh, the questions and so on. What was your..., ch? And (?) the women, they don’t have political questions, yeah? For example, (?) I didn’t answer political questions. I don’t answer political questions, yeah? Yeah?"

The connection made between an examination by a government physician and the refusal to answer political questions leads to a biographical construction, according to which the medical opinion which served as an argument in favor of sterilization was forged. By Focusing on this denial during the examination, Karl Himmel is attempting to prove that he was persecuted for political reasons. To what degree the forms of persecution suffered by him can be considered "political" is not at issue here. I am only interested in his biographical self-conception and not in a classification of the reasons for persecution according to the criteria of the Bundesentschaedigungsgesetz (German Federal Law on Compensation). Therefore, we must remember that Himmel’s sterilization in Bethel did not occur as a result of political opposition; rather, the examination by the government doctor Focused on the question of whether or not Karl Himmel was considered mental "normal."

Even if the examination methods employed at the time must be viewed as medically unacceptable, the examination was concerned neither directly nor indirectly with the political loyalty of the examinee, but only with his mental status. Karl Himmel has been asked about his soundness of mind throughout his lifetime – by physicians, psychiatrists, judges and educators – and this is precisely the question, and not the political ones, which he can not or will not answer.

Thus, the wording "political questions" or "political persecution" express a repression based on a massive conflict. Dealing with the idea of not being mentally "normal" is so threatening that the individual reacts to this conflict with defense. But this repression leads to a argumentative blank space in the biographical narrative which Mr. Himmel strives to fill in by conceiving the persecution he has suffered as politically motivated. The content which has been repressed is replaced in speech by words which are less threatening. This displacement opens up a means of communicating the life story without all too obvious contradictions or explanatory deficits, while circumventing the repressed experiences.
Alfred Lorenzer worked out this mechanism theoretically in a manner similar to Freud’s case study of the little boy Hans: "Repressed contents are not only closed off from communication, from the framework of symbols which are the result of intersubjective agreement (aus dem intersubjektiv verständigten Symbolgefüge); rather, they have been taken up again in this confusing way by this framework of symbols through the back door, in the confusing manner, for which we would like to use the expression "pseudo-communicative private language." This private language makes it possible to maintain communication, it closes the gaps left by desymbolization and masks the repressed contents beyond recognition. Lorenzer therefore emphasizes that "the insidiousness of private language lies in the fact that, due to its being cloaked in general language, it can be revealed as private only indirectly by [examining] behavioral deviations." In other words, the shift of language may not necessarily be noticeable at first glance, it does not irritate by creating senseless connections, since it is linked to the context in question and is constructed within the text. In the case of Karl Himmel, it is not completely unfounded when he describes his persecution by the Nazi authorities as politically motivated.

Thus, with respect to a theoretically oriented discussion of the processes of memory, we can conclude that repressed contents by no means fall out of communication altogether. Instead, they are replaced by less threatening or neutral symbols and thus calmed. This shift is the prerequisite for conceiving a biographical narrative and dealing with the discontinuities which accompany trauma. Since every biographical recollection also involves experiences of identity and continuity, a biographical interview can rightly be seen as a contradictory process. Based on her conversations with Holocaust survivors, Ilka Quindeau notes that "the impossibility of speaking about traumatization causes survivors to again become conscious of the incomprehensibility of their persecution, an incomprehensibility which resists a narratively constituted context of meaning." Therefore, she goes on, it is sensible to assume an ambivalent effect of narration "which both constitutes subjectivity and destroys it again at the same time." The often emphasized cathartic effect of narrating ignores the problematic parts of biographical interviews, for representing trauma with language may lead, in a long therapeutic process in the sense of Freud’s "working-through", to its being calmed, but in an interview – due to the purely situative actualisation of the trauma – there will only be a repetition.

Biographical memory

In his published works, Alfred Lorenzer sketched the methodical concept of "szenisches Verstehen" (understanding through enactment) as a key instrument of psychoanalytic work. This approach proceeds from the assumption that repressed contents express themselves in a series of different scenes. In other words, the scenes remembered are variations on the same subconscious theme. Understanding the other does not connote grasping the current context of meaning of the individual scenes but rather their structural context of meaning. Whether these are past or current, real or imagines scenes is irrelevant, since the sole focus of the process of understanding is their structural
correspondence.

Lorenzer developed the concept of "szenisches Verstehen" on the level of both language and interaction. By taking part in life practices, it is possible, according to Lorenzer, to recognize the repressed contents in their scenic repetition. "The return of the repressed forces the patient to act out a scene in the same way again and again. The patient acts in scenes with the same dramatic pattern, the same dramatic design in a thousand different costumes. It is the task of scenic understanding...to grasp the meaning of these constantly repeated scenes, which remain the same in their type and structure."

Thus, a biographical repetition is always equivalent to a subconscious memory. Karl Himmel’s biography is particularly suited to demonstrating this with great clarity. The entanglements of experiences in early childhood and later experiences of persecution are seldom so obvious as in Karl Himmel’s narrative. His mother’s marriage in 1922 and the birth of his stepbrother mark a biographical rift which remains relevant for his actions throughout the further course of developments. There are two reasons for this: first, these events were connected with a massive experience of devalorization and estrangement and, second, they were the basis for Karl Himmel’s development of a behavioral mechanism which would have far-reaching consequences for his life. As a youth, he began trying to avoid the difficult and degrading family situation by running away. Due to his inner and outer restlessness, however, he was unable to communicate the motives for his repeated flight to his social surroundings. His attempts to flee were immediately followed by capture, until it appeared that being sent to reform school was the only course that would guarantee that Himmel be disciplined as society demanded. His social deviance was interpreted by officials as "subjective delinquency" due to "hereditary feeblemindedness."

Today, Karl Himmel’s perspective on being send to reform school is not purely negative, since his own disorientation was confronted with a system of order – albeit, a strict system – and fixed rules, creating a space which was not amicable but at least clearly defined. At this point, a game of flight and capture began. The image of a derelict and delinquent youth constructed by the authorities seemed to be confirmed, for Karl Himmel repeatedly broke social rules and began internalizing the pattern that had been assigned to him by others.

In the thirties and forties, this already calamitous constellation was caught up in a politically portentous current and ultimately threatened the life of Himmel. Because his individual behavioral deviations were reinterpreted within the framework of eugenic thinking, Himmel’s psychical problems were misread; his refusal to adapt socially was labeled as the result of a genetic deficit, although this explanation was unfounded from a medical standpoint. The social causes for his behavior were, for the most part, ignored. Karl Himmel was not only turned out of the Volksgemeinschaft, the Nazi ethnic community of all Germans, and detained in youth welfare institutions as a youth "unworthy of education." He was also forcibly deprived of his right to have children. He reacted with the same pattern, with which he had attempted to confront conflict situations to date. Although the chances that his flight would be successful were meager, this was the only means available for expressing his opposition to the authorities’ demands for obedience and
subordination. It is therefore hardly surprising that Karl Himmel was accused of being "absent without leave" a short time later. This "offense" was in keeping with his general behavioral mechanism, by way of which he expressed, on the one hand, refusal but also, on the other, repeatedly created situations leading to his capture.

In this repetition pattern "flight and capture" there also lies an element of unconscious provocation. If one can believe the files of the military court which convicted Karl Himmel in 1942 for the second time, then it is striking that he was arrested, more than two weeks after his flight, in uniform and in a tavern that was off limits for members of the Wehrmacht. He therefore took a risk which, thanks to the strict military controls in Hamburg, was bound to lead to his arrest. Although he risked his own life with this behavior, he also saved his own life in a certain sense, for the circumstances of his arrest were, for the court, indicative of the fact that there was no proof of premeditated desertion. This scene illustrates in a special way the entanglements between individual behavioral patterns and government measures to discipline and persecute individuals. During the Nazi regime, the slightest deviation from the norm sufficed to unleash the massive use of violence against so-called Gemeinschaftsschaedlinge, social vermin. In this context, the dynamic of flight and capture threatened the life of Karl Himmel, in particular during the war years. The time spent in concentration camps does not play a special role in Karl Himmel’s narrative. Even the satellite camp Husum-Schwersing, notorious among other former prisoners, appears in his narrative in the continuity of reform schools, prisons, hospitals and closed psychiatric institutions. Himmel perceived each of these as being different, but, with respect to their use of force to illicit subordination, they differed "only" in the degree of cruelty and misanthropy which reigned.

One might view Karl Himmel’s earlier experiences as one reason why he managed to survived persecution under the Nazis. His long years in correction institutions and psychiatric wards taught him how the apparatus of state social discipline generally functions and how one might best behavior towards the representatives of this apparatus to avoid being destroyed by its disciplining strategies. Karl Himmel was thus able to trigger certain ambivalent reactions in his pursuers. That did not protect him from suffering humiliation, debasement, and mistreatment but he was able to save his life, even though, especially during his internment in concentrations camps and during the so-called evacuation transports, this was often merely a matter of chance. If one reviews Karl Himmel’s biography, it is not particularly surprising that the year 1945 does not mark a massive watershed in his narrative. After a period of convalescence, the dynamic of flight and capture continued. In the decades that followed, Karl Himmel remained socially rejected, behaviorally deviant, and delinquent. Social rejection and stigmatization were interwoven with self-imposed social isolation and the refusal to adapt.

The dynamic of flight and capture exhibits appalling continuity in the life of Karl Himmel. In nearly all decisive situations in his life, the pattern is repeated, even when it produces a life-threatening constellation for Himmel. These consecutive scenes from his life practice are characterized by structural parallels: Karl Himmel avoids conflict situations by flight, thereby creating the conditions for his violence capture. It is plausible to assume that the source of
this biographical pattern lies in his family situation. Throughout his lifetime, Karl Himmel repeats a childhood conflict. It seems that he is not only incapable of distancing himself from this conflict, it is, in fact relevant for his actions and his behavior throughout his lifetime.

Interaction and scene

As Karl Himmel’s narrative has shown, biographical repetition is an indirect sharing of individual life practice, because it is transported only by narration. Since the interviewer is not directly involved in the daily life of the interview partner, the analysis of specific behavioral patterns based on the text is limited to an indirect plane. Within therapy, the therapist also has an opportunity of participating in life practice directly, by incorporating the actual relationship between analyst and analysand into the interpretation. From the perspective of method, this is a special form of compulsion to repeat, i.e., the transference of repressed contents to the current situation. During analysis, this process is expressed as a repetition of unconscious contents in the relationship to the analyst, to whom the patient transfers ideas from past contexts. Transference is also a part of memory, indicating existing resistance in the process of remembering, since the repressed cannot be verbalized. In this sense, transference also represents an element of defense and an "amalgam of past and present." Stimulated by the current situation, transference encompasses, in a structural sense, that which is past. In contrast to analysis, an interview opens up a temporally very limited personal contact. Since, as a rule, the development of a mutual relationship does not take place, the application of transfer analysis to biographical interviews can occur only with reservations. In spite of these qualifiers, it is precisely the personal encounter of interviewee and interviewer which opens up the opportunity for delving into deeper dimensions of biographical memory, for transfer phenomena are not limited to therapeutic processes. They can take effect in other relationship constellations as well.

Several parts of the interview demonstrate quite clearly the transfer context within which the biographical interview with Karl Himmel is situated. Because of Himmel’s biographical background, the conversation is positioned within a series of interrogations, examinations by experts and diagnostic procedures. The supposed boundary line between "now" and "then" proved to be quite permeable in this interview. Transference becomes especially striking when Karl Himmel reports on the examination by a government physician in Diepholz, whose medical opinion later lead to his sterilization: "I forgot, a year before, I was already inside then, too. Then the sterilization...I was sterilized in 1937. Before that. And, uh, I had uh the questions and so on. What was your ...uh? And (?) the women, they don’t have political questions, yeah? For example (?) I didn’t answer political questions, yeah? Yeah? For example: I had, you know, there was a question, there was one (?) and different things, but the political questions I didn’t ask, uh, answer." The equation of the interview situation with the examination by a government physician is expressed in the incomplete question: "What was your [question]...uh? And (?) the women, they don’t have political questions, yeah?" This demonstrates that Himmel was unwilling to answer "political
questions” during this interview, as he had been during the examination in Diepholz. He verified by repeated questions that I would not pose any "political questions", as is obvious in the confusion of words (ask instead of answer) at the end of the passage quoted. I shouldn’t ask the "political questions", which Karl Himmel had no intention of answering anyway. Due to this context of transfer, as an interviewer I was drawn into the role of a physician, psychiatrist or judge who would decide on the basis of a test or an examination what further measures were to be taken. For Karl Himmel, these transfer mechanisms resulted in an enormous amount of pressure to legitimate and achieve, for he made himself dependent on my opinion of him, an opinion which was in part imagined, in part in fact perceptible. He appeared to be extremely nervous during our meeting and complained after a while about a severe headache. This inner tension was in fact caused in part by the transference which was latent in the interview situation. But at the same time, Karl Himmel did not simply project these feelings into a vacuum, since the interview situation was in some ways similar to the examinations by experts which he had experienced. The interview was a hierarchically structured “dialogue” which gave only one partner the right to pose questions and simultaneously transported social and societal norms by presuming that specific cultural forms of biographical self-presentation were binding. This presumption of norms by the interviewer in effect caused unavoidable violations which manifested themselves as communication problems in the course of the conversation. My dissatisfaction and impatience increasingly became resignation in the further course of the conversation and, interestingly enough, precisely at those points where transference became particularly obvious.

"Well. Then I took care a bit, that I ..., I can speak a bit of French. Not much. English. Portuguese. In Portuguese you say: 'Una servesa venga. Mucho trabajo. Una servesa venga.'” – Interviewer: "What does that mean?" – "That means: 'Let's have a beer.' Mucho trabajo means lots of work. The Italian says: bella gracia. That means many thanks. And the Portuguese says muche gracia, that means many thanks." Interviewer: "Yes." – "French. The Frenchman says: Bonjour. Ça va. Good day. How are you? – (A long pause, during which Herr Himmel discovers some photos lying on the table) Oh, you brought along the photos. Yes." Interviewer: "Yes. Should we stop now?" – "Yes. I don't care. I am just, I said, I am a person just the same. I don't let myself go, since I'm not apathetic." Interviewer: "Yes. That's important." – "Also not labile. In spite of my age. I also do, so as not to go to seed, so to speak, I do gymnastics every morning, when I wake up, in the morning, at home." – Interviewer: "Aha." – "Seven or eight minutes. I do it. I have to." – Interviewer: "Exercise." – "Exercise, yes. The Englishman says too early, it is too early. In French they say non tout à l'heure." – Interviewer: "Good. Then I'll turn it off." As confusing as this interview passage may seem, it characterizes my conversation with Karl Himmel very well. Because of the transference constellation, he attempts to demonstrate during the course of the interview what knowledge he has at his command and to show that he is not "feebleminded." In this type of situation and in similar ones, he is the one who must prove to his counterpart that the impression that he creates also has something to do with the perception and the norms of his partner during the
conversation. By employing the symbols of various languages, of which he has a limited knowledge, he expresses the fact that certain problems of communication also exist in our conversation. My reaction—wanting to end the interview—reflects back to him my refusal to continue on this plane, although the interviewee points out that it is "too early" for that. It is possible that Herr Himmel recognizes at this point that I am also wondering whether he is mentally healthy. Helplessness and powerlessness accompany my attempt to end the conversation. Thus, in the counter-transference, I take up precisely the same mechanism which Karl Himmel employed when trying to protect himself. In this situation, the roles are inverted, for now I am the one who runs away, figuratively speaking. By wanting to flee from the situation, I allow Karl Himmel to take on the role of the person who is doing the rating. His direct reaction to my behavior is, in the end, his own answer to the question which was the unconscious focus of our conversation, as well as all the others. His answer is simple and at the same time disturbing: "I am a person, nonetheless." If one understands transference phenomena not as merely a bothersome accompaniment to human social relations, then they can aid in illustrating complex contexts of meaning which are so threatening that they must be excluded from language. Transference always includes fragments of memory and serves to transport structural elements of the past into current life situations.

In analyzing transference, we can reveal central elements of biographical experience which are repeated as condensed scenes in an interview. Grasping their symbolic significance is essentially based on a thoughtful and sensitive exploration of what actually occurs between interviewer and interviewee. Since "szenisches Verstehen" goes beyond the level of language in evaluating an interview, it can include in the process of interpretation passages which might otherwise resist the analysis of content alone. In particular when a biographical recollection is diffuse and fragmentary, analyzing only the text would mean forgoing a means of access to the subjective dimension of memory.

The conversation with Karl Himmel is clearly an extreme example. But precisely because of its exaggerations, it serves to illustrate the opportunities which personal contact between interviewer and interviewee can open up. Seldom does an interview reveal the rules of communication which govern meaning so obviously. Fixed patterns of narrative and behavior can serve to protect all of those involved from the massive destruction which adheres to these memories. Because narrative harmonization does not succeed, as in this interview with Karl Himmel, what is termed "de-structuralization" in an academic context breaks into communication. But this terminological abstraction cannot express the feelings that accompany it. In the interview with Karl Himmel, the only way I could find to confront these destructive elements was by fleeing, figuratively speaking. For my interview partner, in contrast, each attempted flight was soon followed by capture.

Translation from German: Paula Bradish

(Footnotes are only available in the rtf-file)