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Voicing New Identities. Two Case-Studies of Oral History and Displacement in WW2 and its Aftermath

By Simona Tobia

Abstract: The current refugee crisis is unprecedented, and it prompts many questions on how to tackle the emergency and on the mechanisms of international humanitarian aid. The Displaced Persons (DPs) crisis that followed the Second World War anticipated the problems that we are confronting today, and the chronological distance with the late Forties allows us to study the “voices” of DPs, refugees and asylum seekers under many more perspectives, and the lessons learned can contribute to the debates and projects on more contemporary questions. The aim of this article is to contribute to the lively debate on the lived experiences of displacement in the Second World War and its aftermath by looking at two case studies: that of refugees coming to Britain and the United States during the conflict on the one hand, and that of DPs resettled in the same countries in the aftermath of war on the other. The study of oral history interviews conducted by the author and those held at British and American sound archives shows how these participants composed their memory and voiced their identity, a new cultural identity which had been constructed in the decades between the war and the time when they were interviewed, and which is voiced in the interview itself. The analysis also shows that three elements have a deeper impact on the way memory is composed and identity is voiced in these oral history interviews: emotions, relationships and languages.

Keywords: *Oral history, displaced persons, Holocaust, WW2, memory and emotions*

Introduction: oral history and displacement

The world is struggling with the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) there are currently 70.8 million forcibly displaced people globally (UNHCR, *Figures at a Glance*, 2019), and the world is witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record. The UNHCR’s reports also show that “conflict, prosecution, generalized violence and violations of human rights” are the root causes of the current forced displacement, especially the Syrian conflict and conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa (UNHCR, *Mid-Year Trends 2018, 2019*). The current crisis is unprecedented, and it prompts many questions on how to tackle the emergency and on the mechanisms of international humanitarian aid.

The refugee crisis that followed the Second World War in many ways anticipated the problems that we are still confronting today, and the historical sources that are currently available allow us to achieve a deeper understanding not only of that period but, perhaps more importantly, of the wider issue of displacement as well. Oral history in particular is invaluable in understanding

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the lived experiences of those who were there, and left their testimonies decades after these events. Oral history not only records experiences, but also gives a voice to those seeking refuge thereby contributing to the current media and political debates, to re-humanize migrants and displaced persons.¹ The chronological distance with the Second World War allows us to study the “voices” of displaced persons (DPs), refugees and asylum seekers under many more perspectives, and the lessons learned can contribute to the debates and projects on more contemporary questions.

The so-called “victims of war”, the hundreds of thousands of refugees, displaced persons, exiles and escapers who had to leave their countries during and after the Second World War are among those who experienced close encounters in war. By the end of the conflict millions of people had been or had felt forced to leave their homes, including over ten million slave labourers who had been deported to work in German factories and mines, those involved in the compulsory population transfers, those affected by the shifts in national boundaries, by Nazi occupation as well as the Third Reich’s will to build a new racial order. Millions of Europeans had been concerned, including Germans, Italians, Yugoslavs, Bulgarians, Romanians, Soviets, Hungarians, Czechs and Poles. Malcolm Jarvis Proudfoot, in the first and still extensively cited work on displacement in the post-war period (*European refugees*, 1956), estimated that more than sixty million Europeans were displaced from their homes during the conflict and in its aftermath.

Historical research has concentrated on allied attitudes towards forced migration in the Second World War, especially in relation to policies towards wartime refugees and the issue of internment.² However, the problem of displacement in the aftermath of the Second World War has been largely overlooked (with a few notable exceptions, including for example Proudfoot) until the 1990s, when studies on DPs and resettlement policies started to appear (see for example Genizi, *America’s Fair Share*), until some more recent studies on post-war reconstruction, relief and humanitarian organizations.³ As Sharif Gemie and Laure Humber (*Writing History*: 313) have noted, the published studies on displaced persons and relief in the aftermath of the Second World War are largely “top down” histories (especially about the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, UNRRA). A “bottom up” study might allow some access to a more human type of history, examining for example the actors involved and their motivations (see Tobia, *Victims of war*; and Footitt and Tobia, *WarTalk*: 135-155). The available studies on the lived experiences of those involved can be grouped mostly in three clusters: published or unpublished memoirs (the list of which is too long to mention here), often analysed by literary

specialists; works on the living conditions in DP camps; and last by not least the more specific group of works about children's experiences (e.g. Gigliotti and Tempian, *The Young Victims of the Nazi Regime*).

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the lively debate on the lived experiences of displacement in the Second World War and its aftermath, and it looks specifically at two case studies of displacement: the case of refugees coming to Britain and the United States during the conflict, and that of DPs resettled in the same countries in the aftermath of war. The study of both the oral history interviews conducted by the author and those held at British and American sound archives shows how these participants composed their memory (see Thomson, *Anzac Memories*) and voiced their identity, a new cultural identity which had been constructed in the decades between the war and the time when they were interviewed, and which is voiced in the interview itself. The analysis also shows that three elements have a deeper impact on the way memory is composed and identity is voiced in these oral history interviews: emotions, relationships and languages.⁴

Whereas a refugee can be defined as any uprooted, involuntary migrant who has lost the protection of his or her former government after crossing a frontier, with many refugee waves throughout history, the term Displaced Persons, or DPs, is more complex. Today this term is used to explain the forced movement of people from their habitual environment and it is a type of social change which can be caused by many factors, the most common being war. In relation to the Second World War, the term refugee refers largely to those who left Austria, Germany, Italy as well as other occupied European countries between the emergence of Nazism and Fascism and 1945. The expressions related to displacement came into existence when the Allies started to plan the relief operations for the post-war period, in 1942-43, when they were aware of the millions of slave labourers used by the Germans, but concepts such as the Holocaust or genocide had not yet been formulated: "the planners' model was based not on genocide but on the displacement of populations. 'Displaced persons', the shorthand they used for Hitler's victims, became the defining mental construct for the rest of the decade." In the wake of the war, Allied troops liberated millions of forced labourers, prisoners of war and concentration camps inmates and it promptly became apparent that "the war's most important legacy was a refugee crisis" (Shephard, *The Long Road Home*: 2). The military authorities were quick to repatriate the majority of these DPs during the summer of 1945. "Meanwhile, several hundred thousand Germans died in the course of being expelled from Eastern Europe, but those that survived were not categorised as 'displaced persons'; they were 'refugees' and, as such, at the bottom of the

pecking order" (3). Also, a number of these refugees refused to return to their homelands, and were consequently labelled as "non-repatriables" and placed in DP camps in Germany, Austria and Italy, which were administered by Allied authorities and by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), and later by the International Refugee Organization (IRO). The last of these camps, Föhrenwald, was closed in 1957 by the German government.

Scholars generally tend to consider refugees, DPs, asylum seekers and forced migrants more as helpless victims rather than persons, the field of history being no exception (Elie, *Histories of Refugee*: 30). The study of "those involved" in forced migrations and their agency is limited, making the refugee "less an unknown of history than a missing, untraceable and unnameable character of the historiography" (30). The Second World War certainly represents an exception to this rule especially thanks to the practice of oral history that led to the creation of many sound archives on the Holocaust and on the conflict itself. Nevertheless, these archives are still only partially exploited, and the plurality of studies on displacement linked to the Second World War mentioned above focuses on the humanitarian effort. As noted by Nando Sigona, the humanitarian actors' dominant representation of the refugee and DP is that of an "agency-less object of humanitarian intervention" (Sigona, *The Politics of Refugee Voices*: 370), and recognising their "voice" for example through the study of oral history can also respond to their quest for recognition as political subjects. This is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary debates, but in the case of the 1940s the analysis of DPs' voices is significant particularly in relation to the study of the construction of a new cultural identity, and the role of human emotions and relationships in this process. Looking at the way they constructed their identities gives them agency, allowing us to conceive of them as persons rather than helpless victims.

The first step we can take in this direction is to recognise that refugee voices are plural and represent a variety of diverse experiences. Gender, age, race, ethnicity and social class are all part of a range of cultural issues that contribute to the plurality of experiences of refugees. Each person's experience is also at the same time individual and collective, as every subject draws on collective cultural repertoires and memories. In the same way, the testimonies about these experiences are simultaneously rooted in the past and in the present, and we have to take all of these issues into careful account to make sense of the way emotions are narrated and memory is composed to construct and voice a new diasporic identity, based on individual as well as shared memory. As we know memory, as identity, is both socially constructed and culturally specific, but there are examples of memory making practices that are specific to diasporic communities,

such as the Jewish memorial books in which testimonies are collected to create a collective memory of community (375-377). Shared and collective memories (see Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*) connect the private sphere of emotions and relationships to the broader imagined community (see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*) and for this reason it is interesting to analyse available testimonies with a focus on those intimate memories of experiences voiced in DPs oral history interviews.

Empowering those who have traditionally been marginalised both by history and historiography has been one of the main aims of oral history as a methodology of historical research. Memory is not only conceived as a methodologically problematic issue, but as an object of study in itself, with the aim of giving “meaning” to narratives. Alessandro Portelli in 1979 argued that oral histories could help understand the past especially in relation to continuity and change in the meaning of certain events (see Portelli, *What Makes Oral History Different*).⁵ Interestingly, Portelli also argues that subjectivity and the subjectivity of memory, among other issues, are part of the strengths rather than weaknesses of oral history. Memory is not only selective, but it re-shapes the narratives into meaningful accounts which are inevitably affected by the subjectivity of the speaker, and influenced by the passage of time, shared histories and collective memory of certain events such as, in the case of this article, the Second World War and the Holocaust. The oral history interviews examined here will thus be considered as active processes of construction of meanings rather than a passive repository of facts (see Portelli, *What Makes Oral History Different*).

Since Portelli developed these approaches, oral history has often been used to voice previously silenced accounts of past experiences, thus becoming empowering for individuals even when it is not involved in truth and justice processes. With regard to displacement for example, some scholars have shown how forms of memory work have been regenerative in communities fractured by diasporas (see Field, *Imagining Communities*) and how these communities can be revitalised through the recuperation of culture and memory (see Impey, *Sound, Memory and Displacement*).

The Holocaust is likely the subject that has generated more oral history interviews and more research with a focus on the memory of trauma. Analysis of oral history interviews with Holocaust survivors in relation to memory and how traumatic events are remembered has focused on the complexity of issues related to concerns for accuracy and the difficulty of remembering an unbearable reality (e.g. Roseman, *Surviving Memory*). For the purposes of this study, however, it is the relationship between memory and identity, beyond the impact of the traumatic experience, that seems more interesting. Alistair Thomson famously

addressed the issue of “memory composure” in his work on Australian First World War veterans, which highlighted the ways in which their identity was shaped by war memories and at the same time how changes in cultural memory impacted his memories of the conflict (see Thomson, *Anzac Memories*). This notion of “memory composure” was first developed by the Popular Memory Group at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, and it relates to the way we construct – compose – our memories in a way which makes us feel comfortable and in alignment with our past, present and future lives. As a result, identity and memory become deeply interrelated.

Escaping war

Despite the horrors of war in continental Europe, being admitted to Britain or the United States was not granted for anyone, not even Jewish people. Louise London’s study on the British response to the problem of refugees coming to Britain shows how British policy severely restricted refuge during the conflict (and during the Holocaust) and consistently limited admissions on a purely humanitarian basis, considering British self-interest first and foremost: “Alien admissions were severely restricted and evaluated by reference to the requirements of the war. The policy of non admitting refugees – alien or British – to the United Kingdom solely on humanitarian grounds was repeatedly affirmed at Cabinet level.” (London, *Whitehall and the Jews*: 173). To be granted entry into the United Kingdom being war refugees or even racial refugees was not enough. One had to fit into the “war effort” category or to qualify on political grounds (178). However, refugees still arrived from Nazi occupied countries even without permission, they had to be dealt with at ports of entry, and the procedures established to manage them were set up mainly for reasons of security and intelligence, rather than for relief or humanitarian concern.

When the exodus of civilian refugees from continental Europe started, the first arrivals reached Southampton and Portsmouth and then proceeded to London. Plans for the reception of these refugees were tardy and badly implemented. The Ministry of Health was in charge of the matter, and together with the London City Council it set up nine reception centres in the city, which was questionable given that at that time Londoners were being relocated to safer areas. At those centres, refugees were “fed, bathed and medically examined before being transferred to the twenty cooperating borough councils for billeting” (Atkin, *The Forgotten French*: 35). Later, when places at reception centres started to become insufficient, refugees were housed in prisons until they could be vetted by the authorities. These “aliens” arriving to Britain had to be thoroughly examined to make sure they did not represent a threat but also to verify whether they

possessed any information that would be useful for intelligence. The refugees were then taken over by the Internment Camps Divisions of the Home Office, and dealt with at a facility called Royal Victoria Patriotic School (RVPS), which opened in January 1941 to manage matters related to the reception of aliens from allied and friendly countries, and later on also from enemy-occupied countries. German and Italian civilian arrivals were sent to other camps, such as Internment Camp 001 and the Oratory Schools in London, where they were treated as “enemy aliens”. Soon refugees started to arrive at ports all around the British coastline, and there they were generally kept in prison until they could board the first available train to London (see also Tobia, *Victims of War*: 133-135).

The most remarkable exception to the policy limiting entry into the United Kingdom for refugees was the so-called *Kindertransport* (Children’s Transport) programme, which admitted about 10.000 children between 1938 and 1940, about 75% of whom were Jewish. After *Kristallnacht* the British authorities decided to allow Jewish children younger than seventeen to enter Great Britain from Germany and other occupied territories, mostly Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland. The children’s care, their education and emigration were paid by private citizens or organizations, and the British government granted temporary visas for them. However, their parents or guardians were not allowed to accompany them, because *Kindertransport* was understood only as a temporary solution, with the children returning to their families after the “crisis”, but history had different plans for them. Once in Britain, the children were entrusted to foster families, sometimes after a period of time spent in a camp until a family could be found. About half of the children were allocated to families, whereas the others stayed in hostels or farms throughout the war. Many of these children later became part of the group dubbed the “King’s most loyal enemy aliens”, and joined the war effort fighting with the Allied forces. After the conflict, they did not go back to their families, who had been wiped out in the Holocaust or the war. Instead, they remained in Britain or emigrated to Israel, the United States or Canada.

Among those who were able to reach Britain, about 75.000 German or Austrian refugees, there was a group of about 10.000 who enlisted in the British forces, generally starting in the Pioneer Corps. They were then made to swear allegiance to King George VI, thus becoming the “King’s most loyal enemy aliens”, and joined the fighting forces contributing to the Allied victory. After the war the vast majority of them was sent back to their countries of origin to join the occupation and denazification efforts, and they proved extremely valuable especially thanks to their knowledge of the local language and culture. By that time, however, they had already developed a new identity.

The United States did not have a refugee policy, and the American immigration laws establishing quotas which would privilege immigrants from “desirable” countries in Northern Europe and limited less “racially desirable immigrants” (including Jews) were not revised during the conflict. Obtaining a visa to emigrate to the United States was a rather difficult and long process, even for those able to qualify, for example because they had a financial sponsor and were therefore able to prove they would not become a burden to the U.S.. With the conflict, obtaining a ticket across the Atlantic was also increasingly hard as many passenger lines reduced or stopped the numbers of vessels for fear of attacks by German submarines. American immigration laws clearly reflected the interwar climate characterized not only by economic insecurity but also racism and antisemitism. American popular opinion was largely against the idea of accepting more arrivals, despite the emergence of the refugee crisis and the outbreak of the war in Europe. In spite of this climate, there were some private refugee aid organizations, Jewish and Christian, which provided assistance and help, mostly in the form of food, clothing, money, and assistance to find affidavits for those who did not have family or sponsors in the States. The screening of visa applicants was centralized in Washington, D.C. during the summer of 1941 and at that point emigrating from Nazi-occupied territories became nearly impossible. The United States too managed to organize the transport of children, but despite the efforts of a few lobbyists, it never became a governmental project, and it was instead managed by relief organizations such as the German Jewish Children’s Aid and the U.S. Committee for the Care of European Children. This last body saw the active involvement of the First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and of the Quaker pacifist organization American Friends Service Committee. All in all, about a thousand children were brought to America between 1933 and 1945, a tenth of those saved by *Kindertransport*.

How do these refugees compose their memories in oral history interviews and construct their identities? If we examine the set of interviews I personally conducted between 2009 and 2010 as part of the “Languages at War” project,⁶ as well as pre-recorded interviews held at sound archives,⁷ we can identify a series of issues with a profound impact on this process: the specific type of project of which the interview was part, cultural issues such as languages and emotional issues, including relationships and feelings. All of these questions have an influence on how the narrators compose their memories (see Thomson, *Anzac Memories*) and construct their identity.

The narrators who are part of this case study all had very similar experiences:⁸ they arrived in Britain or the U.S. as refugees from Nazi oppression to then join the Allied military effort. They spoke German and had to learn the English

language while still refugees or, in the British case, when part of the Pioneer Corps, and were already fluent when they joined the fighting forces. Between the end of the conflict and the occupation of Germany they were eager to join the denazification process, mostly working in intelligence. Their added value to this area of work was not only that they were able to speak both languages fluently, but also that they could perform multiple identities: the German/Austrian identity, the Jewish identity, and their British or American identity shaped presumably by the Allied system of recruitment and training of this corpus of refugees. However, is coming to Britain or the States as a refugee and being recruited and trained by the Allied forces enough to explain such a complex concept as the shaping of a new cultural identity? Language plays a crucial part in shaping the multiple identities of these soldiers with different nationalities, with consequences which would impact on their post war lives. And so do emotions, especially relationships and intimate feelings. The fact that the refugees changed their names during the war years, even if it was done to avoid the treatment reserved to traitors in case of capture by the Germans, shows the extent to which they had to construct new identities (Footitt and Tobia, *WarTalk*: 48-61).

Willy Field⁹ was seventeen years old when he had to say farewell to his family at the Bonn railway station, after spending four nightmarish months at Dachau concentration camp (Fry, *From Dachau to D-Day*: 29-43). It was the month of May, 1939, and Willy did not speak any English when he first came to Britain, so he had to make himself understood and learn the language very quickly “and it was not very easy”, as he declared in his interview, “but when you are young – he added – it is much easier to adapt yourself to the language.”

As he remembered seventy years later, being Jewish was what made him feel welcome “not a stranger” in the UK. All of a sudden, he was part of a community and he narrates that everything became easier for him when he lived in the Jewish area of London. It was there that he was able to develop personal relationships which helped him pull through the hard times, but he did not forget the family that he had to leave back. He kept in touch with them by letter, at the beginning, but even decades later he still remembers the trauma of separation vividly as something that shaped his future. He told me how he had to say goodbye at that station in Bonn to both his parents, his brother and sister and to his uncle: “We always had hope, perhaps we will see each other in two months time”. When I asked him if there was a place he could call home, he said: “Not Germany, I had to forget that.” His feelings of vulnerability were not openly narrated, but could still be recorded by his oral history interview, and it was through this emotion,

provoked by the memory of separation, that he started to construct a new identity.

Close relationships and the idea of family resurface when he talks about his combat experience: “In fighting everybody, fellow soldiers, became a sort of family.” Very quickly he remembered how his experience in the Pioneer Corps was still a sort of identity limbo, shaped this time by the fact that: “We still spoke German, we still carried on speaking German, even in Australia because I didn’t have to speak English, that’s why it took me so long to become fully fluent.” That changed when he was allowed to join the fighting corps, the British unit which would become his family. Emotional ties as well as cultural issues – speaking the English language – are both part of the construction of his new identity:

Then, when all of a sudden I went to a British unit, I didn’t want, couldn’t speak German anymore. I forgot my German name, I became Willy Field, and I had and wanted to lose my German identity. When fighting according to the British authorities and in the eyes of everybody else I had lost my German identity, to become a British soldier.

The feelings he relates this time are no longer feelings of vulnerability, but more positive emotions about trust and brotherhood, shaped presumably during training: “We were trained to rely on each other, it was different from Pioneer corps.” This became even more evident after the war, when he, like all German speakers, had an opportunity to join the Intelligence Corps. He was offered the chance to go to Brussels and train to become an interpreter, but Willy did not want to leave his fellow soldiers: “I said no, but the commanding officer sent me to Brussels because it was a pleasant location [...] and I failed the course. I made sure to play as if I could hardly speak German. I refused because I had such an excellent relationship with everybody” including the other soldiers and the officers. At that time, he was a sergeant.

Willy says that “you will never forget your original culture, no matter what happens in life.” However, he also adds that “being a British citizen meant a hell of a lot to me.” He feels connected to his origins through the emotional feelings for the memory of his family, but he also constructs his identity as distanced from the German culture which he links to the brutality he experienced when he was a concentration camp inmate, and was interrogated by the Gestapo: “I could never do what the German tried to do, the way they treated you in the concentration camps. I always tried to be correct.” Willy went on to live the rest of his post-war life in the UK with his wife and children.

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Gerd Miller¹⁰ came to the United States in 1938, after being forced to leave his hometown Cologne. After Pearl Harbor he was quite eager to join the Army, but could not because he was an enemy alien, so he volunteered to be drafted and after about six months actually managed to get drafted. He was sent for intelligence training at a facility called Camp Ritchie, MD, part of the MIS: “The first question he asked me, in perfect, flawless German, ‘where did you learn to speak German?’ And I told him, ‘the same place you did’ (laughs) And you know, we spoke, but he had been naturalized, he had been in this country a little longer.” In Europe, Gerd followed the frontline from France, working with the French resistance, all the way into Germany, and interrogating prisoners captured at the front line, a first line of interrogation to get strategic intelligence needed immediately in the field. He talks about how his “cultural preparedness” was key in intelligence gathering in the field:

We had a lot of information. Well don't forget that there were a lot of people, like myself, that had lived there. For instance, in the area around Cologne, we used to ride our bicycles there on weekends and go on day trips. And I knew it like I knew the back of my hand, you know. And there were other people from other parts of Germany that knew the area very well. There was a lot of good information that we got from people who lived there and who knew.

His language and cultural knowledge were what helped him be effective in his military role with the American forces.

In his interview, which was collected as part of a project on liberators of concentration camps, follows the typical format of general “wartime experiences” oral history interviews collected by the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress, and is therefore not specifically tailored with questions about the construction of identity, Gerd seems to be distancing himself from his German identity. He explains how his knowledge of not just the language, but also the territory, was useful to him in his capacity of intelligence officer, and how he was able to play with his knowledge to trick the prisoners into thinking of him as “omniscient” – that he already knew many things so it was not worth trying to hide information. At the time of the interview, he does not perceive his identity as German anymore – he refers to “those Germans”, as if he was not and had never been one of them.

As in Willy Field's case, military and intelligence training probably had much to do with the construction of a new identity. The way both veterans “compose” their memories to reconstruct a past that they can accept, at the time when they are being interviewed,¹¹ is similar. In both cases languages and cultural

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knowledge represent the key for their military effectiveness but also they open the door to their post-war life. In both cases their emotions are key too. Gerd talks at length about the difficulties of leaving his home in Cologne, Germany, and how hard life had become in his home country despite the fact that he came from a Catholic family rather than a Jewish one. He was able to leave with his parents, leaving the rest of the family and their life behind: “It was all so very difficult. Not only we had to get a permit to leave Germany. In fact, my father lost everything we had there”. His tale of his trip reflects the feeling of vulnerability created by the loss but also by the unknown they were facing, including arriving in New Orleans and having “to learn a little English and so forth”. He remembers the difficulties of going to high school in Texas and having to learn the language there, while his father was working as a cleaner.

The other emotions that resurface in his testimony are those linked to his role in the liberation of concentration camps in Germany, and when those feelings about the past resurface, they are key in the process of “memory composure” which makes him distance himself from his origins and construct a new identity:

They said, we need every German-speaking soldier to go to Dachau. And I knew right away what Dachau was, because I knew it since I was a kid. But I never suspected to find what we did there. I mean, it was... I can't begin to tell you. It was hell on earth. I mean, it was like Dante's *Inferno*. [...] When we approached the village of Dachau, the smell ... the smell was so awful. Now, we had all been in combat. And we had all seen and smelled dead soldiers, dead cows, and horses. [...] The camp was completely enclosed in high tension wire. And somebody had cut that power out, but we found like half a dozen guys hanging in there. They had committed suicide by jumping on to the live wire. And I tell you, this may sound bad, but they were the lucky ones.

Gerd goes on to talk about the horrors of seeing rotting bodies and survivors who were like “zombies” and this had a profound effect on him. Seventy years after the events what he remembers very vividly are his feelings of helplessness:

I think that night after Dachau, we all got back to our headquarters there in Munich, and we drank a lot of booze. And you feel so helpless. From what I can remember to this day, that horrible smell and those damn people in the town of Dachau telling us they didn't know anything that was going on there – and you, you could smell it all the way. And you're so helpless.

He distances himself from Germany and from the German people, to compose a memory which he can accept in the present:

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I will never understand. I will never understand – a country like Germany, educated people, you know, how could this happen? I don't know. I don't know to this day how can they be that gullible? How can they be that uninformed? But a lot of them saw things that were going on and looked the other way.

DPs in the aftermath of war

The planning to deal with relief operations in the aftermath of the Second World War started largely in 1942-43, when specific institutions were created to help Europe recover after the war. At that time the planners were not aware of the full extent of Nazi policies, but they were monitoring the use of so-called “slave labourers” by the Germans. For this reason the planning was based on the displacement of populations rather than on genocide, at a time when the concept of the Holocaust had not yet been conceived: “The concept of the ‘displaced person’ determined the shape of the Allied humanitarian effort after the war [...] the war’s most important legacy was a refugee crisis” (Shephard, *The Long Road Home*: 1-2). During the war, however, priority was always given to military victory over relief, or humanitarian aid to use a more contemporary term. Later on, the countries of Western Europe, the Americas and Australasia saw DPs as potential immigrants and they started to conceive of their policies and operations through the lenses of their “labour needs and philosophy of immigration” (3).

When the war ended the Allied troops set up DPs camps in the territories of occupied Germany, Austria and Italy, where the DPs were housed to wait for the authorities to decide about their future. Many of them either feared to return to their home countries for various reasons, including antisemitism which persisted in some areas, and the trauma they had experienced. Besides the Allied authorities, these DP camps were administered by the UNRRA, later replaced by the IRO, and they existed until 1957 when Föhrenwald, the last camp, was closed by the German government. The DPs who refused to go back to their home countries were called “non-repatriables”. Most Jewish DPs wanted to emigrate to Palestine, which was still a British mandate at the time, and many others wished to go to the United States, and remained in the camps until it was possible to leave Europe. However, the States still had quota restrictions and entry into Palestine remained restricted until the creation of Israel in 1948. At the end of 1945 President Truman signed a directive which made quota restrictions for entry into the U.S. more flexible for persons displaced as a result of the actions of the Nazi regime. Eventually, in 1948 the U.S. Congress passed the Displaced Persons

Act, thanks to which hundreds of thousands of DPs could enter the United States between 1949 and 1952.

Psychology professor David P. Boder from the Illinois Institute of Technology of Chicago undertook an ambitious project in 1946. He travelled to Europe and visited refugee camps to interview Holocaust survivors living there. Carrying a state-of-the-art recorder, he was able to interview 130 DPs, and these recorded interviews represent the first oral history testimonies of the Holocaust. As a psychologist, his first aim was to record and study the impact of trauma on these survivors and their personality, but he also wanted to increase the American public's knowledge about the Holocaust experience, which he thought was extremely limited. In terms of methodology, Boder included in his project subjects from various nationalities and language groups from across Europe, and from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. He generally started by explaining to the interviewees the importance of telling their own story to raise awareness about the Holocaust on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, to then adopt a semi-structured type of interview. After asking some specific details including name, age, date of birth, where they were when the conflict broke out, Boder left his informants the freedom to talk at will about their experiences (for more about the Boder interviews, see Rosen, *The Wonder of Their Voices*, and the Voices of the Holocaust website <http://voices.iit.edu/>).¹²

More recently, between 2003 and 2006, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Oral History branch was able to collect a series of interviews with a few of the Holocaust survivors who had been interviewed by Boder in 1946, and this set of sources is the one that is of more interest for the purposes of this article, because informants also talk about their life since 1946, and the analysis of these interviews can offer some insights on the question of memory composure and the construction of identity of DPs who were able to enter the United States.¹³ Some of these testimonies offer an excellent case study to show that the strategies of memory composure of these DPs were not dissimilar from those that emerge from the interviews of wartime refugees who joined the Allied forces. Clearly, the oral history project involved generic questions on their overall memories, and it was not tailored specifically to study identity, but evidence of the importance of languages and especially emotions still emerges from their recorded memories.

Janine Oberrotman was originally from Poland and she was interviewed by Boder when she was in Paris, hoping to emigrate to America. In her 2004 interview account of her experience of life in the Jewish ghetto and then in hiding is very focused on her relationships.¹⁴ She talks at length about her mother and her feelings for her are very positive and pervade the whole interview: "My

mother is very sweet, if I can say.” Later she adds, with sadness: “I was her confidant, and her only child, and I was the apple of her eye. And I never imagined I could live without her. Right. Yeah, such is fate.” Janine expresses strong feelings when she talks about the rest of her family, too, because she does not have any information about any of them, apart some cousins:

There is one little suitcase that’s left. And, but, and the good thing is that we found my cousins, and there was a wonderful feeling, to, you know, you cannot imagine somebody is alive. Because when you so concerned you don’t even know who’s alive and who’s dead, cause the other people are dying elsewhere, and you don’t know what happened to them, for a long time, maybe never.

Another relationship that is very important in Janine’s memories is that of her husband, whom she married when she was still in Europe. In order to emigrate to the States, he too had to obtain a visa and for that reason they had to wait two more years and were only able to sail across the ocean in 1953. She describes him as “a very handsome young man” when showing his picture to her interviewer and they had three children together, one of whom was born in Paris and the other two in the States.

Seeing loved ones for the last time before being carried away is a very common memory among Holocaust survivors, and Alan Kalish¹⁵ remembers his mother and grandmother walking away from him: “And that’s the last time I saw them. And I had no idea what was happening to them.”

Jack Bass’s closest relationship was – and still is at the time of his interview¹⁶ – with his sister, who also reached the States to settle in California. Jack says that he and his sister were very close when they were young, and he adds “we are still close [...] I still call my sister almost every week. [...] In fact, I just called her prior to leaving, and yeah, we talk on the phone and reminisce, whatever we remember.”

The other recurring element in the memories of these narrators, which is key in the composure of their memory and the construction of their identity is their emotions. More specifically, emotions relating to the memories of the time before their migration generally reflect feelings of vulnerability, or even fear. Jack Bass’ memory of arriving at Auschwitz Buna labour camp focuses on vulnerability, even though it is not explicitly mentioned: “But we got there, I think it was night time. It was darker now, and they opened up the, these sliding doors, and they told us raus, raus, you know, out, out, out, and beat us up, it... it came as a big surprise, you know, because I had never been beaten up by anybody before.”

The informant composes his memory in a way that is acceptable to his present self, and although he does not openly acknowledge how vulnerable he and his fellows must have felt, that emotion surfaces in his voice. As Thomson notes “there are many ways in which our remembered experiences [...] may threaten or disturb identities” (*Anzac Memories*: loc. 552), and this is particularly true for memories of traumatic experiences. For example, when the same informant talks about his experience in the camp itself, he insists on the lack of feelings both his own and those of the people who were presumably instilling fear. He repeats “without feelings”, “without emotions” “no feelings”. And interestingly, he remembers David Boder in the same way: “I had never kind of a close contact feeling with him [...] he was like, I don’t know, very... without feelings, like you know? Without emotions.”

Janine constructs the memory of her emotions in a very similar way, with feelings cantered on vulnerability: “You... what you were afraid of, you were afraid of what you didn’t know. You knew they had concentration camps.” When she was living in hiding at a time she and her companions became so afraid that they considered committing suicide: “She gave me a bottle of cyanide. So I don’t know, I was so... in such a despair that I decided I should... I should do it.” That life seemed almost unreal: “For me it wasn’t living, it was being suspended, like suspended living.” And just like Jack, she has a very negative memory of the interview with Boder. She reminisces: “I have a very neg... a rather negative memory of the interview, because I felt myself be very vulnerable during that interview.” Janine refers to her vulnerability of displaced person, waiting in a limbo to find a new home and a destination, very openly.

On the other hand, the memories of going and arriving to the States are quite positive for these informants, marking the role that the trip itself and the reception on the other side of the Atlantic had on the composure of their memory and the construction of their new identities. Janine for example said: “And the reception we received, it was a wonderful reception. [...] It was an unconditional positive regard, it was wonderful.”

Jack Bass says that he loved being in the States: “I thought it was great”, whereas Alan Kalish remembers his trip as “a very nice trip”, with good food and good treatment: “We were mixing with the passengers. So it was a very nice ship coming down to – coming to the States [...] I was physically recovered. [...] I had no idea what to expect in the States” but he was very excited to be there.

However, informants also openly acknowledge the role of memories and feelings about the past on their present self. Janine reminisces:

You know, and things like that you don't forget, you li... not... you don't forget it, but your unconscious mind doesn't forget them, and it... and it takes over. And I ne... and you make decisions, and you make... and you live according to what you're... yeah, what's dictated to you by your past, in a way. So I would never forget.

For Alan Kalish reminiscing about his past experiences as a Holocaust survivor is much harder. He prefers to negotiate his memories to construct his identity in silence, and when asked about what it was like, he does not want to talk about it:

I went through all that already, so don't ask me to tell you what happened to me. It happened and it's gone, it's for... forget about it. [...] I didn't want to talk about it, no. Even with my family or anybody, I didn't want to talk about it. [...] And sometimes I still will choke up, and wi...tear roll down.

Narrators in this set of sources refer to languages and the impact these had on the construction of their identity in a less obvious way compared to the refugee case studies examined above. However, they all mentioned the languages they had to learn, which for some of them included French, German and Hebrew. All of them had to learn English. Janine was lucky enough to develop a personal friendship with a "girl" who for a period of time tutored her in French and English, well before she migrated to the States. Her waiting period was so long that the wait itself became part of her identity. For Alan Kalish things were a bit different as he had to go to school to learn English when he arrived in Manhattan. It is remarkable that in none of the testimonies we can find mention of language difficulties, or problems to integrate themselves in the new country. This is probably due to the way they compose their memory at the time of their interview: they tend to remember more positive aspects of their arrival, therefore they remember having many friends, or being able to go to concerts. The fact of having had to learn the language is taken for granted and no longer problematised.

Conclusion

In refugees and forced migration studies there is a renewed interest on how we document and preserve the narratives and memories of those involved, because preserving the legacy of migration has become of primary importance, especially during the current emergency. Oral history resurfaces the importance of emotions within the memories of past experiences and dignifies them by inscribing them in the historical record, and re-humanizes the "victims of war".

A comparative approach was taken in this article to examine the way that war shapes identity and participates in the process of “memory composure” with reference to two case studies: interviews with former refugees, or “enemy aliens”, who came to Britain and the United States during the war and later joined the Allied fight against the Axis, and a set of interviews with Holocaust survivors who had been part of the group of DPs interviewed by psychology professor David P. Boder at the end of the war, and who had all later migrated to the United States or Australia. Their personal identities are all interwoven with the collective memory of the events they experienced because as Thomson demonstrated “it fulfils our common need for a sense of purpose and a proud collective identity” (*Anzac Memories*: loc. 442-453).

Informants from these two case studies had different experiences of the Second World War, the refugee and the DP experience, but they all deployed similar strategies to compose their memory and therefore construct an identity that they could live with comfortably at the time when they were interviewed at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Sometimes their attempts at composure were not entirely successful, and they were left with “unresolved tension, and fragmented, contradictory identities” (loc. 558), as is the case when remembered experiences threaten the construction of an acceptable identity.

The strategies of memory composure that the narrators in these case studies used revolve around cultural knowledge, on the one hand, and emotions and feelings, on the other. Languages, as well as cultural identity, emerge as a key element in the construction of identity albeit in different ways for the refugees, who explicitly remember using the English language to become accepted by their fellow combatants, and by DPs who take the fact of having had to learn a new language for granted in their testimony.

As to emotions, there are more similarities than differences in the two case studies. Family relationships before separation are remembered fondly, and the separation is mentioned as a time of deep sadness. The prevalent emotions of the time which followed departure is largely a feeling of vulnerability, which is problematic because sometimes it can be inferred from the narration, but it is not openly mentioned.

The recollections of life after arrival in the new country are conversely fond memories of the good reception with which they were met, of the good feeling of being able to have fun, going to concerts, spend time with friends.

In conclusion, each narrator’s experience is at the same time individual and collective, as every subject draws on collective cultural repertoires and memories. The testimonies about these experiences are also simultaneously rooted in the

past and in the present, and we have to take all of these issues into careful account to make sense of the way emotions are narrated to construct and voice a new diasporic identity, based on individual as well as collective memory. Much work still needs to be done on this approach, which by taking into account emotions resurfaces the humanity of those who experienced forced displacement. For example, it would be very interesting to compare the interviews recorded by Boder in 1946 to those collected by the USHMM in the early 2000s, which would allow to evaluate the impact of collective memory and the evolution of personal identity, as memory composure is not a static process. A gender approach to the way emotions participate in memory composure would also be very interesting. Again, a study of the impact of memory on personal identity which takes a cognitive framework, would also be very interesting. However, while this preliminary analysis is certainly limited, it can highlight the significance of issues like feelings, relationships and cultural knowledge on the way we negotiate our memory to construct a tolerable identity.

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¹ The Oral History Society has a special interest group on Migration, and the page dedicated to this topic reflects openly on the role of oral historians: "Can we as oral historians play a part in giving a voice to those seeking refuge, and in doing so, help to challenge the existing media

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- and political discourses associated with them?" <https://www.ohs.org.uk/information-for/migration/> (accessed on 14 January 2019).
- ² Including Conway and Gotovitch, *Europe in Exile*; Dove, *Totally Un-English*; Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe*; Berghahn, *German-Jewish Refugees in England*; Hirschfeld, *Exile in Great Britain*; Sponza, *The Internment of Italians*; Id., *Divided Loyalties*. The list can in no way be exhaustive.
 - ³ See for example Reinisch, *Relief in the aftermath of war*; Gemie and Humbert, *Writing History in the Aftermath of "Relief"*; Shephard, *Becoming "Planning Minded"*; Shephard, *The Long Road Home*; Gemie and others, *Outcast Europe*; Cohen, *In War's Wake*.
 - ⁴ The focus of this study is therefore the oral history interview, the narrator's composed memory and voiced identity as they are voiced in the interview. A study on narrators' memory beyond the oral history interview is beyond the objectives of this article, because it would require a different framework of analysis, including for example cognitive theories from studies on behaviour.
 - ⁵ This essay was first published in 1979 in the Italian language as *Sulla specificità della storia orale*. «Primo maggio», 13 (1979): 54-60. It was later translated as *On the Peculiarities of Oral History*, «History Workshop Journal», 12 (1981): 96-107 and republished several times, including in the three editions of Routledge's *The Oral History Reader*.
 - ⁶ The "Languages at War" project ran between 2008 and 2011 thanks to Arts and Humanities Research Council funding, and it was based at the University of Reading in the United Kingdom.
 - ⁷ The sound archives used were those of the Imperial War Museum, London and of the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
 - ⁸ I collected a total of 16 oral history interviews as part of this project, but in this article I will only refer to the one I deem to be the most exemplary one, due to space limitations. The other interview I refer to in this part of the article, is from the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project and I choose this particular testimony among the many that can be found in the same collection, for the same reasons.
 - ⁹ Oral history interview with the author, 2 December 2009.
 - ¹⁰ Gerd Miller Collection, Veterans History Project Sound Archive, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
 - ¹¹ Gerd Miller's oral history interview was collected on 9 July 2013 by Stephen M. Sloan as part of the project "Texas Liberators of WWII Concentration Camps" to be deposited at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
 - ¹² The recordings of these interviews can be found in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Recorded Sound Research Center and listened to on site in Washington, D.C., and are also available with transcripts on the Illinois Institute of Technology's Voices of the Holocaust website.
 - ¹³ In the article I will only quote three of the interviews in this body, the most representative ones, having to make choices mostly because of space constraints.
 - ¹⁴ Janine Oberrotman was interviewed for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum again on 30 March 2004.
 - ¹⁵ Alan Kalish was interviewed for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum again on 24 October 2003.
 - ¹⁶ Jack Bass was interviewed for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum again on 17 October 2003.