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# Introducing Research Through Oral Surveys: French Students Meet Witnesses of the Holocaust by Bullets

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**Abstract:** French students in the third and final year from the Humanities and Social Sciences *license*<sup>1</sup> degree course traveled to Ukraine and Belorussia between 2017 and 2020, in order to carry out surveys of eyewitnesses to the so-called “Holocaust by Bullets.” The subject-matter stands out in the French scholarly scene, as the Holocaust usually attracts little attention at this level of studies. Students registered in the course hail from *license* degrees in History, Social Sciences or Geography, and have chosen to attend the course labeled “European Historical Heritage and Citizens’ Thoughts” as a complement to a more classical curriculum, and as a way of enhancing their own university curriculum. The research professors involved have also volunteered to participate as authors of the aforementioned multidisciplinary program, with the aim to raise awareness to research practices on the Holocaust. University professors and teams from the Yahad-in-Unum<sup>2</sup> NGO take turns leading the two-hour weekly sessions. The professors help establish theoretical focus and provide methodological tools, develop lines of investigation on various areas of interest (e.g., mode of operation used in the shootings, collaboration and rescue operations, and neighbors of the crime scene), as well as the context (anti-Semitism, racism, local

1 A *license* is the first national university degree and it is completed in six terms.

2 Since its foundation in 2004 by Father Patrick Desbois (2007), having researched Soviet and Nazi Second World War records, the organization has been tirelessly surveying all Eastern European locations associated with the Holocaust by Bullets. It has been collecting villagers’ testimonies supporting the evidence of a genocide, documenting the locations of mass graves, and at times identifying victims. The results of such meticulous research have been made public on an interactive online map displaying the locations of all the mass graves recorded – over 2000 to date – and making the information and testimony relevant to each of the sites available to web users. See [online] <https://www.yahadmap.org/%20-%20map/#map/>

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geopolitics, regional history, culture and society, etc.), while Yahad-in-Unum participants describe actual cases based on records, maps and filmed testimonies. They had the task to provide documents from Soviet and Nazi archives translated from Russian, or from German, and act as translators during fieldwork. Students are encouraged to participate as often as possible and have to prepare analytical reports and presentations following each session, while adopting the position of a researcher.

**Keywords:** Holocaust by bullets; field investigation; oral sources; epistemological reflection

For the purposes of this article, the term “witness” means any individual who can testify to the actuality and authenticity of the historical events in which he or she has been directly involved (Descamps 2006).

*How do students benefit from such interviews with the last remaining witnesses of the Holocaust by Bullets?*<sup>3</sup>

Many agree on the significance of the applied method, through which they acquire skills to gather stories that are inherently challenging to hear and difficult to approach with objectivity. We argue that gathering oral accounts of the Holocaust is intellectually stimulating in two aspects: firstly, in terms of acquiring “situated knowledges,”<sup>4</sup> and secondly, in fostering epistemological reflection. It is evident that the students<sup>5</sup> have fully immersed themselves in the lives of the witnesses, becoming acquainted with their backgrounds, affiliations, and the knowledge they have accumulated over time and in various places. Consequently, they become better equipped to understand the contexts tied to specific moments in history or geographical locations, as well as the family dynamics and societal issues that give significance to actions and judgments. Taking on the roles of investigators and interviewers in the context of such traumatic history, students experience the challenges faced by researchers when employing an approach that seems incompatible with the realities they encounter: seeking objective knowledge from subjective accounts or adopting a scientific and critical standpoint while also showing empathy to create a more comfortable interviewing environment. Moreover, the unfamiliar and sometimes alien settings in which interviews take place often present

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<sup>3</sup> Artières Ph. et Laborie P. “Témoignage et récit historique”, *Sociétés & Représentations*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2002, pp. 199–206.

<sup>4</sup> Acknowledging that knowledge is situated (Haraway 1988) allows investigators to understand that they can enhance their academic knowledge with more local, undefined, sensitive and personal awareness.

<sup>5</sup> Four year groups (2016/17, 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20) of around 20 students each have been studied.

contextual uncertainties, necessitating interviewers to adapt to previously unexperienced social and cultural norms.

Before the analysis of these reports, we will define the position of our study concerning the literature on students' reception of oral history, and the chosen investigation methodology. We will then provide the context and the unique characteristics of Holocaust eyewitnesses interviews. Lastly, we will explore the academic progress made by students as a result of being introduced to a method for interviewing witnesses. Finally, we will show that this work is an inspiring first step encouraging trainee researchers to consider the process of scientific knowledge production, and the difficulties arising from using oral sources.

## **1 Reception of Oral History in the Context of Teaching the Holocaust: A Topic Yet to Be Approached**

In several European countries, the challenges associated with teaching the Holocaust have led authorities to consider organizing school trips to extermination sites and facilitating classroom meetings with genocide survivors. In France, oral accounts of the Holocaust were recognized as an obviously valuable teaching tool in the early 1990s. Since then, witnesses have been invited to participate in educational settings to enhance the teaching, sometimes even acting as proxies for teachers (Lefebvre 2010), however, the impact of their contributions on students has not been assessed (Hondius 2015). Works on this subject are scarce and most often are about the witnesses: their stories, memories and deaths (Fink 2020; Wieviorka 2013a, 2013b; Zembrzycki and High 2012). Examining the reception of oral history by students, most researchers focus on the emotional effects (Langer, Cisneros, and Kühner 2008; Roder 2021), the personalization of history, the tendency to identify with witnesses (Fijalkow and Fijalkow 2015), the speaker's moral authority (Obens and Geißler-Jagodzinski 2009), and the presumed trustworthiness and legitimacy of witness accounts (Ballis and Schwendemann 2022). In most works, these circumstances are described as likely to alter students' capacity to acquire knowledge and, more importantly, to prevent any critique or interpretation of the sources, which would be essential for the development of scientific thinking (Bertram, Wagner, and Trautwein 2017). Since witnesses give talks almost only to primary and secondary school students, university students are seldom studied as a group. We created a teaching blueprint for university students, which we have found worth investigating due to its distinctiveness. Our goal was to find out what students extract from eyewitness accounts, whether they seek to deepen their understanding of witness testimonies

and the underlying representations, the backgrounds of the speakers (such as family, social environment, country of origin, and age) and the context in which narratives are given (be it during the investigation or an account according to the witness). Our purpose was to assess students' ability to distinguish between the processes of traumatic memory and emotion, and a researcher's structured and critical work of interpretation of the accounts (Fink 2020). We wanted to determine whether through targeted university training, students can recognize the significance and unique nature of oral witness accounts compared to other sources (Gomart 2000) as well as to foster reflexivity in the investigation scheme and the construction of knowledge. This seemed particularly relevant, as the Holocaust by Bullets is a lesser-known part of history among the French public when compared to surviving Jewish eyewitness accounts.

The answers presented in this article derive from "ethnographic interviews," a research approach combining observations made by students and the thoughts expressed by them before, during and after the witness interview process, which requires attentive listening (Beaud 1996; Beaud and Weber 1997). Through the research methodology of "direct observation," an approach inspired by the Chicago's first school of sociology, researchers observe the subject's social practices, expressions and body language (attitudes, feelings, etc.) in real time and in their natural environment while allowing the students to express themselves openly (making statements or comments, and asking questions) to bring up any subject they found interesting and without feeling guided or observed by an investigator (Arborio and Fournier 2021). With this, we intended to avoid asking our students to verbalize topics that are too difficult for them, and to prevent them from producing preconceived narratives after the enquiries with Holocaust eyewitnesses. The underlying assumption of this investigation technique is that data should be obtained in a context of trust, which can foster genuine conversation.<sup>6</sup> Investigators must remain focused on the objectives of the investigation and memorize any observations made where taking notes or recording is not possible. The data collected are pooled and analytically organized on the systematic nature of the observations (Peneff 1995).

## 2 Teaching Based on Field Investigation

Each year the program is led by three teaching researchers from different disciplines (history, sociology, and geography) supervising 20 students, while a team of five or six (a historian, several local investigators, translators, chauffeurs, and a

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<sup>6</sup> This methodological approach is also advocated by Greenspan and Bolkosky (2006) for interviewing Holocaust witnesses.

photographer) is in charge of carrying out the fieldwork. The program intends to shift from the lecture-based learning and bring the thinking process into a more tangible context. The inverted teaching method<sup>7</sup> is applied making it possible for students to establish connections to content, experiences, teachings and their own perspectives and interpretation of the world, as well as current events.

In line with the approach, learning is divided into two stages. The first stage determines the lines of investigation for the research, a review of relevant scientific literature (state of the art) and methodological preparation. The second stage includes the field investigation itself, its preparation and its analysis.

Following a brief overview of historiography, students are encouraged to use a transdisciplinary approach (history, geography, sociology), and consider epistemological issues and debates inherent in the witness accounts. The sociological investigation from a historical perspective is carried out over a significant period.

During the first semester, students attend sessions prepared by their teachers, who introduce the course and lay out the expectations. The sessions focus on various themes, such as the branches of Judaism, in-depth history and geography of the soviet territories of Ukraine and Belarus during the Second World War, and their current geopolitical stakes. At each new session, students work in groups on these issues, prepare and present reports, which the class discusses and the teachers summarize followed by questions.

The second semester is focused on a preliminary study of the locations where the investigation is to take place using archive material, and preparing for the trip and the interviews. After 6 months of preliminary work and sessions of critical analysis of video-recorded witness accounts from *Yahad-In Unum*, students can meet the witnesses and interview them. Specialists and historians assist the teaching researchers in finding the relevant witnesses based on the topics explored during the preliminary work. The *Yahad-in-Unum* team of researchers selects witnesses according to the topics approached in the preliminary witness accounts collected, while preparing for fieldwork. These accounts correspond to the questions raised earlier by the students.

Year after year, topics vary and complement each other, depending on the locations of the investigations. During the first academic year, in 2016–17, students worked in groups based on fieldwork carried out in Ukraine in the Lviv, Lutsk and Rawa-Ruska areas on the following topics: “On Ghettos: Exclusion Serving Ideology”, “Barbarity, Indifference and Submissiveness”, “The Holocaust Put to the Test of

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7 To this end, classes are taught in a room known as “active teaching room” specially equipped for group work: it is composed of four tables with seating for six students to facilitate group discussions, each with good Internet connection and a large screen which can be displayed at any time on a classroom projector, so that all can exchange views.

Images”, “Competing Memories and Contemporary Legacy of the Holocaust by Bullets in Ukraine”, “Rawa-Ruska, a Place for Tormenting Enemies of the Reich”. The following year group in 2017–18, also worked in teams on several topics based on their field of study in the Eastern Bucovina area in Ukraine: “The Einsatzgruppen: Ordinary Men?”, “Living with Crime: from Next-door Neighbors to the Murderer Next Door”, “Life in Jewish Communities Before and After the Holocaust: Value and Limitation of Oral Sources”, and “Europe Faced with its History: Current Stakes and Memorial Superimposition.” The third year group of 2018–19, worked in groups on the following topics, covering Odessa and Ukrainian Transnistria: “From a Racist Vision of the World to the Negation of Man”, “The Spatial Extents of Genocide and Rescue Work”, “The Language of Executioners, the Language of Victims”, and “National Discourse and the History of Europe.”

The fourth year group traveled to Belarus in 2019–20 to carry out investigations from Minsk to Pinsk, and made a documentary film from archives and witness accounts collected on site. A journey for a week to such a remote place from the students’ dwellings is only possible once a year, for obvious logistical and financial reasons. However, that week is undeniably the highlight of the whole program, during which students learn about collective endeavors and the constraints of fieldwork. Logistics involves 20 students’ travel outside the Schengen area to Ukraine<sup>8</sup> and to Belorussia, and it demands considerable preparation for the teaching team, funds from Yahad-in-Unum (finding sponsors for the airfare, accommodation, etc.), as well as administrative tasks (valid passports, residence permits, register at the *Ministère des Affaires Étrangères* [Ministry of Foreign Affairs], and travel insurance). Other preparations involve setting an itinerary, arranging for travel abroad, and securing accommodation, translators, in addition to making sure that the sound and video recording equipment is appropriate for the harsh winter conditions, as fieldwork generally takes place between late February and early March. The selected locations for investigation are in the former Soviet republics, therefore, students can learn from the many cultural, linguistic and geopolitical differences they encounter, and understand the role of the researcher in the context of a socio-geographical investigation – which often requires swift adaptability due to unexpected events (Petit 2010), even with routes planned ahead of time. Investigations are certainly too short for participants to become immersed in a truly anthropological experience, but they last long enough for students to be aware of the diversity of data sources and be acquainted with a theoretical culture, going beyond the boundaries of their fields of specialization (Olivier de Sardan 2001).

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<sup>8</sup> Since the 2022 Russian invasion, this location has been replaced by Poland.

The events investigated had taken place in or near residential areas, which often attracted the interest of the local population, who facilitated them voluntarily or under constraint. The study of relevant records helped in identifying locations, local features, and events. Yahad-in Unum typically searches the study area for witnesses, at times even going door-to-door. The elderly are approached and their testimony is cross-referenced with oral accounts and written records. Prior to, and concurrently with this, Yahad-in-Unum archive search teams document the locations explored and accumulate historical data gleaned from Nazi, Soviet and local records. If the testimony is reliable and the case is well-supported, relevant preparations for an on-site visit is made. In the field, students are accompanied by instructors in charge for setting up and monitoring interviews, a translator to facilitate communication, and by an educational and scientific manager.

From an educational standpoint, the program treats students as scientific proto-actors, capable of tackling any subject and carrying out theoretical research to comprehend complex topics, as well as collect field data and of produce analyses. This approach facilitates that on-site students introduce and provide context for the visited sites, create historical, geographical and sociological frameworks, and highlight points of interest in certain locations (reading accounts, novels, works of a local author or artist, etc.).

For example, the student research teams visited Eastern Galicia, Ukraine during the 2018 trip and travelled to the village of Bolekhiv, which is where *The Lost*, an essay by Daniel Mendelsohn (2009), is set. Once on site, students, already familiar with the book, read extracts about Mendelsohn's investigation, which retraces the footsteps of Shmiel Jäger. They provided context for the premises and locations in the book, and interviewed witnesses to learn about the fate of a Jewish family of butchers.<sup>9</sup>

Witness interviews take place in accordance with a well-established, scientifically tried and tested investigation protocol. The Yahad-In-Unum educational and scientific manager asks the first questions relating to the identity and geographical origin of the interviewee, and to the historical background of the events. Such opening questions help build rapport with interviewees, acting as a useful "ice breaker" for witnesses, most of whom are not comfortable to share their long-repressed traumatic events in front of an audience. Students, who have only read or heard about the locations and have to deal with a significant socio-cultural

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9 Such an approach, mingling historical research, journalism and literary investigation, is reminiscent of a study by Laurent Demanze, in his book *Un nouvel âge de l'enquête. Portraits de l'écrivain contemporain en enquêteur*, ed. José Corti, "les essais": "This type of real-life literature spans a bridge between argument building and storytelling by defining issues, collecting materials and challenging hypotheses [and] it feeds on personal fiction in its attempt to comprehend reality" (2019, 23).

gap, also benefit of this, as they have to cope with the delayed translation, entailing replies only after a question has been fully answered. Yahad-in-Unum professional investigators (mainly trained as historians) encourage students to engage in the investigation giving them an opportunity to compare the actual field work with their prior research. The professionals from Yahad-in-Unum are familiar with local culture, so they help students interact with witnesses to make sure to avoid insensitive or inappropriate questioning (which is termed “police-like questioning”). The Yahad-in-Unum team held preliminary interactive workshops for such interviews in order to provide students with a cultural reading grid and a method for structuring their interviews, taking into account the age and social profile of interviewees as well as other specific conditions.

At the end of each day, teachers and professional exchange views on the information collected, the attitudes of interviewees, their replies, the work of investigators, any difficulties encountered, the constraints and objectives of the methodology. It is also a time for students to share their feelings on any situation or witness account.

### 3 Experiencing and Making Sense of History

On location, only a few remnants indicate a Jewish presence dating from eight centuries ago, a Yiddish culture and the genocide. Unearthing the signs requires the assistance of a guide with expert knowledge in local history, and the geographical and cultural features of the places. Consequently, field investigation is essentially collective and requires a division of roles among the local investigators, translators, Yahad-in-Unum researchers, local historians, the teaching team, and students-researchers. Students cross-reference Nazi and Soviet records with witness accounts and topographical data on the history and the Jewish presence. Despite the language barrier, as all documents and witness accounts are available to them through translation, students are still deeply aware of the historic and social significance of their undertaking. In towns and villages, most Jewish homes, shops and synagogues have been razed to the ground or repurposed and are not always identifiable at first sight, yet certain architectural traces do remain. In addition, memorial plaques hardly exist. With the urban landscape having been remodeled, only the archives, and witness descriptions help to reconstruct the historical layout of the towns and villages.

Interviewing a Holocaust witness on location for the first time is a major experience for students, as they find themselves immersed in reality in contrast to the academic studies at university. Mikhaïlo, an interviewee, was born in 1932 in Bolekhiv in Western Ukraine; he witnessed the shootings of members of the Jewish



community at the Jewish cemetery and around the village. He talked about life before the war and the coexistence of the Jewish, Polish and Ukrainian communities, about the stages leading up to and the execution of the massacres. Mikhaïlo drew, with precision, from memory a map to help students visualize the perimeter of the ghetto and picture the subsequent changes, as well as the life of men and women there and then.

Oral testimony brings subjectivity into the accounts, to the historical narrative and helps students understand the political, social, economic and family-related contexts. In the future, the program could be further developed by bringing a psychologist into the team to help students grapple with the traumatic past connected to the Holocaust, and deal with the delicate endeavor of interviewing witnesses face-to-face. However, being a small university with limited financial and human resources, *Institut National Universitaire Champollion* cannot even consider such an intervention. Nonetheless, teachers' attentiveness, in particular during fieldwork, ensure the students' emotional well-being.

It is obvious that individual accounts are not necessarily consistent with the official accounts of executioners, victims and witnesses. This is the case when a person saved Jews for a variety of different reasons, therefore his or her persona is not quite consistent with that of a hero. Sometimes, local actors cannot easily fit into the box of either as an executioner or as a collateral victim. In the town of Pinsk, Belorussia, students interviewed Louba, who was born in a nearby village in 1929, and who witnessed, when she was only 12, the shooting of men, women and children of the Pinsk ghetto. Her first statement was, "every time I think about it, my heart just sinks." Her account left students puzzled, especially when she told them that her father gave assistance to the Jewish pharmacist because he was a pillar of the community and was likely to have resources to offer. By conducting witness interviews, students have found that a single event can be experienced from different perspectives with each individual remembering in his or her way, singling out secondary aspects at times, and significant aspects at other times (Browning Christopher 2010).

The interview process allows students to relate witness accounts to points in history, and understand that history itself is not the sum total of testimonies. Some students have observed that, by interviewing Holocaust witnesses, they are able to grasp individual experiences even though they have been trained to consider only general concepts. According to the supervisors the students gain a profound understanding of a policy of annihilation designed to reach across the entire territory of Central and Eastern Europe by the firsthand accounts of Holocaust witnesses on the implementation of exclusion measures and the shooting of Jewish populations.

Witness accounts given at the exact location where the crime was committed brings a human dimension into the process by inducing an emotional response. This is far from being ancillary or counterproductive to the understanding of the witness' life experiences, even when facts remain unclear.

The testimonies from very elderly witnesses, recalling remote and painful events, play a significant role in "humanizing" the subject matter of the study. Giving the students a vivid account on how the crimes were committed, a sort of role reversal took place: students could view the scene from the witnesses' standpoint. What the past means to those who have lived it became more accessible, genuine and tangible. This also made it possible for students to hear individual accounts from persons who, for the most part, had never provided any testimony before students prior to our visit. Many participating students had met French Holocaust survivors in middle or high school, however, their accounts were often "softened" to make them palatable to a younger public, or they became mechanical as a result of constant repetition. The interview of any witness speaking out for the first time is a powerful experience for students. For instance, from the icy banks of the Dniestr River, in the vicinity of Dorochivtsi in Southwestern Ukraine, Ivan's account is particularly stirring. Without that testimony, it would be hard to fathom that the peaceful stream known as Bucovine, which served as the border between the areas run by German and Romanian authorities during the Second World War, was once the stage for mass shootings targeting Jews. The massacre was organized during the summer of 1941 by the Romanians, shooting the victims directly into the river letting corpses drift downstream in order to save the trouble of digging a grave. The witness tells sobbing, that he was eight at the time, and in his parents' vegetable garden overlooking the Dniestr he saw a Jewish woman carrying an infant followed by her five-year-old son, drop the infant into the water as her son was gunned down before her eyes, just before she herself was shot.

Collecting oral accounts allows students to deepen their understanding of history from different perspectives, and also to have a better sense of "how witnesses feel about the events that took place." The fact that they cannot understand the language of witnesses may be an advantage, as interviewers will focus on details, which are generally ignored when collecting oral accounts: silent pauses, looks, any changes in facial expression, pace of delivery, any changes in the tone of voice and also gestures and countenance. Witnesses are sometimes at a loss to describe past events using words, and they often rely on still-visible parts of buildings, or remaining traces to better describe how crimes were committed or how life was before the war.

## 4 Epistemological Reflection on Knowledge Creation

The students' doubts and thoughts about the research methods in producing scientific knowledge have emerged during informal discussions, bus trips, meals, and daily meetings focused on reviewing interviews. The educational standard, where students are seen as passive recipients is discounted by the stances adopted, the discussions held, and a general commitment to embrace a more reflective approach.

Incomprehension, astonishment and anger are expressed by students, which shows how challenging it is for them to distance themselves from the object of their study. The students' need to voice their feelings indicates a deepening engagement with the investigation, and the field. This became clear during a visit to a German military cemetery at Potelitsch, in the vicinity of Rawa-Ruska. The place's maintenance, where over 15,000 Wehrmacht soldiers and SS and *Einsatzgruppen* members are buried, is entirely financed by Germany. The identities, dates of birth and death of the executioners are meticulously engraved on individual headstones, unlike the anonymous, common gravestones of the murdered Jews.

Students were faced with hard facts, as the investigation is characterized by immediacy and tangibility, which explains the strength of their emotional responses. Hearing accounts of the Holocaust rarely leaves students indifferent (Biscarat 2013; Drahi 2017; Fijalkow and Fijalkow 2012, 2021; Grandjean 2014; Grynberg 2005; Roder 2010). On occasions, confronting violence (a mass grave with scarcely any human remains left, signs that a civilization was annihilated, and the lack of memorials show how history is officially presented) and witness accounts overwhelmed students to the point of asking for a break before they were able to continue the investigation. Having seen places of suffering and having met with grieving interviewees certainly have had an impact on questions raised by students-researchers.

The contingencies inherent in field investigations, such as the death of witnesses or their poor health, which make it impossible for them to give accounts, the curiosity displayed by neighbors of the interviewee butting in during the interview, the inaccessibility or disappearance of a site, or the current geopolitical situation of a country, are all causes for concern to students who recognize the need for a collective problem-solving. Students have become aware of the fact that no on-site investigation should be taken for granted and that research in human sciences requires adaptability and resourcefulness. As written sources may be unreliable, so do oral sources may also fail to meet expectations. The students' implicit normative perception has been modified as a result. A researcher student writes:

After a 3-hour drive we arrived in Rawa-Ruska to study the Nazi concentration system applied in the case of "prisoner Resistance fighters". Around 24,000 French soldiers opposing the armistice and spurred on by a will to continue fighting were held prisoners here. The observations to be drawn should enable us to map out the premises and study how this retaliation camp was organised. Our Ukrainian interpreter got off the bus and, without uttering a single word, headed for the adjoining building to speak with a man in uniform. He walked back a few moments later and announced, looking miserable, that the Ukrainian army had forbidden access to the camp. The teachers seemed quite put out and asked him to insist, to explain that we have come a long way, that we are not mere visitors, and that we will not be coming back. Negotiations dragged on for several minutes and, eventually, the guard in charge decided to open the gate just a crack and agreed to let us walk down the central alley of the camp under his watchful gaze. We saw derelict buildings, neglected for much too long. We tried to draw and record every bit of what we were able to see, but we could hardly see anything ... (Field logbook of Léo, a geography student, Rawa-Ruska, Ukraine, February 2018)

This journal entry shows, from a social and a factual point of view, how data is collected, legitimacy, and the connection between data collection, the production of knowledge and the ethics of the researcher. Students have also focused on the approach and stance adopted by investigators, and the attitudes (how to deal with emotions, empathy, and ethnocentrism). They understand that preliminary work is vital, but not enough when dealing with elderly subjects recalling harsh experiences. Widely-taught investigation techniques in social science (Berthier 1998) have proved inappropriate when students of the same year group face an elderly subject recalling his ordeals. Students often have to accommodate apparent inconsistencies between general knowledge and individual experience, and resolve, or at least document the discrepancies. The tangible experience of on-site work highlights the emotional and sensory aspects of data collection *in situ*. Any emotions expressed may cast doubt on one's perception, which may or may not be consistent with the purpose of the investigation. Students understand that any unease experienced in the field may be considered as a resource, as it may prompt more attentiveness and receptivity to individual facts observed. According to Portelli (2016), dealing with oral history, interviewers are compelled to use listening techniques, which call for personal empathy while applying the principle of historical objectivity. Such a combination is essential to critical comprehension.

Witnesses emerge as unique individuals, leading to questions about data representation. Students realize that they actively contribute to data construction and that oral history involves navigating subjectivity.

Researchers grapple with objectivity and subjectivity in data collection, especially when personal memories and historical accounts intertwine, which are often conflicting or contradictory. Building an appropriate approach is all the more complex as personal memory – a mental ability which can lead to any number of interpretations – is called into play in an attempt to recall remote events, some of

which may date back over 80 years. As more interviews are conducted, witnesses no longer appear as mere information providers; instead, they are seen as individuals with an age, a life, a social status, a place of residence, who may adapt their narrative for the benefit of the interlocutors who have come all the way from France to interview them. Students may even wonder if those who agree to testify might be among the most confident at expressing themselves orally, as suggested by Pollak and Heinich (1986). With this, students understand that not only do they conduct interviews, but they also assist in building the data they collect (Kaufmann 2001).

Source reliability and data analysis are usually debated when students find that interviewees have developed narratives that are seldom in line with the complexity of the relations within the Jewish community. *Is silence on the part of interviewees an unfortunate setback? Should their sincerity be called into question? Should information be corroborated for the sake of obtaining reliable answers or should the setting of the interview be reassessed, taking into account the identity of the interviewers? To what extent do the social status and lives of the interviewees, or the current geopolitical situation of their country impact their narratives?* These questions reflect the epistemological reflection undertaken by students. After respectfully listening to witnesses and empathizing with them, students collectively scrutinize interviews, discussing and critically evaluating the narratives. This process allows them to distance themselves from the accounts and adopt a systematic and critical standpoint.

The restitution of research findings is an extension of the work of reflection on the field investigation and knowledge production. Before conducting the on-site investigation, students consider various modes of presentation – exhibition of science posters, theme-oriented conferences, documentaries, and they undertake to carry out the relevant preparatory work. Students demonstrate the difficulties in developing analyses through some selected witness accounts. They have learnt the essential skills for field-work: not distorting any views expressed, recontextualizing evidence while preserving the anonymity of interviewees, organizing data in support of argument-building, and adopting a strict evidential approach. By then, students grasp what Bruno Latour (2001) described as “the huge gap between the commonly-held notion of existing science and the everyday trials and tribulations of researchers, the factual consistency of research, which is science being made” (11). They can understand the practice of science and the uncertainties it generates, in contrast with the general representations of science being indisputable, objective and factual. Students are not solely field investigators; by making their work accessible they must suppress any circumstances which may alter fundamental distancing rules between an investigator and his subject in order to achieve objective transmission (Gauvard and Sirinelli 2015). Professionals help students understand the practical value of investigation and the consequences of adopting a scientific approach. Students are themselves privileged witnesses to the last surviving

witnesses of the Holocaust, and feel obliged to honor the witnesses' right to express themselves, to give context to their accounts and to relate those accounts to the present time. This is particularly significant amidst the growing allegations of Holocaust deniers and conspiracy theorists, often stemming from lack of information and spurred by social network algorithms. They understand that, from an educational standpoint, it is essential to make their work available to the public and they adapt it to various audiences by organizing theme-based conferences at the University of Albi, and by giving lectures in local middle, and high schools. The last stage of the work involves tailoring the narrative to the audience, without oversimplifying, and taking into account the listeners' level of knowledge. This approach aligns with the emerging field of Public History,<sup>10</sup> and prompts students to explore further.

## 5 Conclusion

The advantage of this applied type of teaching practice rests in its capacity to approach reality and to bring students face to face with history embodied in real individuals. Interacting with witnesses offers a unique perspective beyond the knowledge acquired in university lecture halls. The stories of witnesses who lived through painful, traumatizing events, provide a different approach to historical facts: facts are completed with a focus on the individuals, their points of view and emotions, and the significance of local, political, social, economic and family contexts. Interviews enhance the understanding of reality perceived in all its subjective complexity and contradictions.

Interviews also pave the way for a work of introspection and reflection which makes it possible for students to understand that knowledge does not amount to a mere description of facts or a collection of data; rather, it is a work of constant development based on those facts and data, which requires making choices and excluding what is irrelevant to the study. Beyond the technical skills required when conducting an on-site investigation, interviewing Holocaust witnesses is most certainly challenging. This explains the trial-and-error nature of students trying to distance themselves from the emotional responses, the existing cultural gap, the challenging subject and the little time available for self-immersion.

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Cauvin, *Public History. A Textbook of Practice*, 2nd edition, New York/London, Routledge, 2022. See also the update by the same author in Blog Entre-Temps, 8 November 2022: <https://entretemps.net/quest-ce-que-lhistoire-publique-i/>

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