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“Guest Workers” in Mining

Historicising the Industrial Past in the Ruhr region from the Bottom Up?

Katarzyna Nogueira

Introduction

For more than 150 years, the Ruhr valley has been shaped significantly by immigration. Since the mid-19th century, millions of young job-seeking men were drawn to the increasingly industrialising region. During the first wave, they came from the neighbouring and rural areas nearby, later from further afield, both from inside and outside the wider German territories. People from the eastern provinces of the German Empire, from East and West Prussia as well as the provinces of Posen and Silesia soon became the biggest group of “foreign” workers in the Ruhr region (Peter-Schildgen 2007; Schade/Osses 2007). More than 60 percent of these so-called “Ruhrpolen” (Ruhr Poles) worked in the local mining industry before the beginning of the First World War (Oltmer 2013: 27). After the re-emergence of the Polish state in 1918, about two-thirds of the “Ruhrpolen” either returned or moved on to the coalfields of France and Belgium. The second migration wave into the Ruhr region started after the end of the Second World War.¹ More than 13 million refugees and expellees left the former eastern territories of Germany, many of whom ended up in the Ruhr region, usually after first settling in rural areas in Bavaria and northern (West) Germany (Kift 2011; Seidel 2019). By 1960, more than one-third of all expellees lived in North Rhine-Westphalia, with the mining and steel industries as typical fields of employment. At this point, the refugees constituted a crucial “part of the solution to the state’s labour market problem”² in the immediate post-war era (Kift 2011: 137). The third and latest wave of labour migration into the Ruhr mining industry, which will be the focus here, started in the 1950s. In the booming post-war economy, the West German government negotiated several recruitment agreements with countries in southern and south-eastern Europe as well as with two North African countries to fill the demand for cheap labour. The first agreement was signed between Germany and Italy in 1955, followed by others with Spain, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia, and Yugoslavia. The recruited labourers were called “Gastarbeiter” (guest workers). Additional and special agreements also led to the (temporary) immigration of a smaller number of workers from South Korea (Pölking 2014) and Japan (Kataoka et al. 2012). This third immigration wave came at a time when the decline of the mining industry was about to start, caused by cheaper

1 A different kind of labour migration regards the forced labour of prisoners of war and, especially, of civilian workers from all over German-occupied Europe during the war. By 1944, more than 40 percent of the Ruhr mining workforce, around 163,000 people, were forced labourers (Seidel 2010).

2 All citations were translated by the author.

sources of energy and strong competition from overseas. Nevertheless, this development led to a new and temporary demand for workers in general and mine workers in particular. About fourteen million people came to the Federal Republic as so-called “guest workers”. What was planned to be a form of temporary labour migration became a permanent relocation for about three million “guest workers” and their families (Seidel 2014: 39). After foreign recruitment officially ceased in 1973, caused by the worldwide economic regression, Turkish “guest workers” became the largest group of migrants in the Ruhr area, most of whom worked in the hard coal industry. Today, there are more than 2.8 million people of Turkish descent living in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt 2015: 128 ff.), still representing one of the largest groups of people with a migration background in the country.

Without immigration, neither the Ruhr region nor its heavy industry would have existed the way both are known to us today. The importance of migration for the mining industry seems beyond question; yet, it might be asked what place the history and experiences of migration occupy in the self-image of the Ruhr today. After the decline of mining and steel, industrial heritage has become essential for the new narration of the region (Berger/Golombek/Wicke 2018: 74). During the 1970s, initiatives “from below” started to advocate both the preservation of the tangible industrial heritage and a stronger appreciation of the lifeworlds, experiences and memory of the region’s working-class communities and their culture. This process led, for instance, to the very first classification of an industrial building as a historical monument, the machine hall of the Zollern Colliery in Dortmund (Parent 2013). Cultural institutions, museums, and even trade unions and companies became key players for the memorialisation of the industrial past and the representation of regional identity. Industrial heritage was and still is a success story (Berger/Golombek/Wicke 2018). However, “an almost ghostly unanimity” characterises the stories that are told in the context of industrial heritage (Berger 2019: 512 f.). This homogenisation of narratives leads to the celebration of certain memories while others remain blind spots. Narrating labour migration as a success story, for instance, tends to neglect its more problematic aspects. One example of this standardisation of narratives can be seen in the accentuation of an all-encompassing camaraderie underground. According to this narrative, everybody was the same underground, notwithstanding where someone came from; miners needed to be able to rely on each other as every mistake, no matter how small, potentially entailed deadly consequences for all. While this narrative underscores the integrative power of the underground workplace, it nonetheless seems to contrast markedly with a public – and historical – discourse that emphasises the alleged difficulties and shortcomings of migration and “integration” in the Ruhr area (Berger 2019: 514).

Oral History, or rather: various forms of using oral testimonies and memory narrations, have been an integral part of recovering and representing the Ruhr’s industrial history. As both historical movement and method, oral history initially emerged as a tool of counterhistory, a politicised form of historiography from the bottom up. In the Ruhr region as elsewhere, the “history from below” movement sought to reset the focus on new historical subjects (e.g. women, workers, and migrants) and perspectives (e.g. everyday life). After the decline of the mining industry, local history workshops, academic historians, filmmakers, and museum practitioners began to construe miners and mining communities as historical subjects. Accordingly, personal narrations played an increasingly important role, not only as a source of research but also as an instrument

for public historical representation. Prominent academic projects, such as LUSIR (Niethammer 1983a; Niethammer 1983b; Niethammer/Plato 1985), about the life stories and social culture in the Ruhr region between 1930 and 1960, helped both develop methodical tools and establish them into academic historical practice. So what started as a movement from the bottom up became part of academic historiography and historical methodology. Today, personal narrations seem to be essential for public historical representations (Sabrow/Frei 2012) about the regional past, and “oral history”, the use of the “Zeitzeuge”³, developed into a term that includes different concepts, functions, and methodological approaches – in academia and museums as well as in documentaries, television, websites, or bottom-up initiatives. Using the case of the Ruhr area, this article deals with the functions of public oral history narrations about the region’s mining past by particularly addressing the question of how the work and life stories of Turkish “guest workers” have been represented in the wider regional historical culture. To what extent did they become narrative agents in the region’s historiography, from a democratic and participatory “history from below” to an increasingly institutionalised approach in public history? Four selected case studies will serve as examples to discuss the varied functions of personal narrations and oral history in this context.

Blind Spots in Historiography

The surge in histories of the everyday in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which set a new focus on the everyday life of mine workers and their families, also brought about experimental forms in counter-historiography. New projects used interviews and personal testimonies as a source to approach the personal and collective experiences of ordinary people. This applies, for instance, to the field of documentary literature, as the following example will show. In 1975, the German Academic Exchange Programme (DAAD) invited the Turkish novelist and author Füzuzan Selçuk to stay and work in West Berlin for two years. Having been active as a writer since 1956 and usually only using her first name, it was Füzuzan’s first time visiting the Federal Republic. As an author interested in contemporary issues of the family and the working class, she decided to research the experiences of Turkish migrant workers in Germany. After conducting interviews with teachers and their German and Turkish pupils in West Berlin, she went to the Ruhr where she visited the local mining towns and workers’ estates to record interviews with the Turkish “guest workers”. The lives and problems of the “Almancılar”⁴ was a popular topic in Turkey in the 1970s, but letting them speak for themselves was a new approach. The first results of Füzuzan’s interview project were published in Turkish newspapers such as *Milliyet*, followed by a book published in Turkish in 1977. With this documentation Füzuzan wanted to show “how her countrymen really do live here” (Kuper 1985: 1). Her project was also connected to the goal of creating an alternative and more realistic image of Germany, a counter-narrative to the idealised image predominant in Turkey since the 19th century (Kuper 1985: 151). In this context,

3 The concept of the *Zeitzeuge* (witness of contemporary history) implicates a delimitation from academic oral history. The *Zeitzeuge* of the mining era is a public figure and part of (historical) representations predominantly in museums and the media.

4 “Almancılar” is a Turkish, slightly disparaging term for Turks living in Germany also used by many interviewees.

Turkish mine workers could describe "a completely new nature, a completely new character of Germany than hitherto assumed". But more crucially, it was also meant to be a "commitment to the workers and the working class" (Kuper 1985: 152) in general. The project initially aimed at a Turkish audience. Eight years later, in 1985, a much shorter and recomposed German translation was published with a focus on those original chapters, which "would be particularly instructive for exploring the German image" within the stories told (Kuper 1985: 153). The idea for this reissue came from Turkish students in Istanbul who rediscovered the book during their German studies class with the editor, Rosemarie Kuper:

The majority of the students agreed that the book should be translated [into German] to break the isolation between Germans and Turks. In Germany, they [the students] suffered from the fact that nobody knows anything about the other. Füzuran's book seemed to be particularly suited to counteract this deficiency (Kuper 1985: 155).

The book, entitled *Lodging in the Land of the Rich – How a Turkish Writer Sees the Life of Her Countrymen in Germany*, implies three perspectives: in the first place, the perspective of the Turkish miners in the Ruhr. The literal quotations from the interviews Füzuran conducted with them are juxtaposed with the author's observations, thoughts and reactions. The text is permeated by her reflections about the discrepancy "between the ideas [of Germany] she brought with her and what she found instead" (Kuper 1985: 153). In the end, the recompilation of the original book is, of course, also influenced by the students' intentions and choices. Unfortunately, there is a lack of information about the extent to which the interviews were shortened or adjusted, both for the original book and the subsequent German version. Here, the stories of the Turkish miners concentrate on the experienced contradictions between "the almost blind veneration for Germany [...] [and] the actual living and working conditions" (Kuper 1985: 1). The Turkish miners are talking about their motives for migration and the experiences they made in the new country. But the interviews are almost continuously dealing with stories of struggle, of cultural difference, exclusion, social and economic disadvantages as well as of anxiety about the future while also discussing the economic and social problems back in Turkey. These narratives are furthermore interlinked with articulations of gratitude for finally being heard. During Füzuran's visit of a group of Turkish miners in a workers' hostel, one of them says: "Come on friends, tell her what you have experienced! Let us hear what troubles you! Someone came here who will listen to you! No radio, you shouldn't listen to the radio. This time, the radio is listening to you for once!" (Kuper 1985: 118). Another interviewee says: "We are happy that you came to us. So far, nobody asked how we are [...]. It is good for all of us to be able to speak out" (Kuper 1985: 66). Füzuran describes the same aspect in the chapter *The Almancilar in Germany*, reflecting the difficulties of approaching the interviewees: "It is no surprise that they initially couldn't believe that someone would be interested in them" (Kuper 1985: 66). Even though her work was not conceptualised as an outright oral history as such, her project is most akin to later oral history projects from below in terms of content, objectives, and partly also in methodology. At the same time, it is an example of early projects trying to write history from below by pointing the spotlight of historiography on new actors and topics.

Almost ten years after Füzuzan's interviews, the first major – though non-academic – oral history project was initiated from inside the Ruhr: the so-called *Hochlarmarker Lesebuch*, funded by the municipality of Recklinghausen, on the northern fringe of the Ruhr region. An increased budget for the local culture department in Hochlarmark, a mining district of Recklinghausen, opened up the opportunity to start a course at an adult education center on the local history of Hochlarmark, which eventually led to an exhibition and the according publication, the *Lesebuch*. The course entitled “Do You Remember? People from Hochlarmark Narrate the Past” ran from 1978 to 1981. A group of Hochlarmarkers met once a week to discuss their common past, have conversations about their lives, conduct interviews and group talks as well as to share pictures and historical documents about the history of Hochlarmark. What seems to be a common approach today was new to the participants in 1978. This resulted in thorough discussions about the roles of the participants as both historical actors and at the same time as authors of their history. The eight men and eight women, between 44 and 78 years old, had never perceived themselves as historical subjects nor as people whose personal stories would matter. Instead, they expected someone else to tell them the story of their hometown during their very first meeting. The project managers described this situation as follows: “According to their ideas, history was represented in the local buildings, city squares, and streets. Besides, it was represented by the dignitaries of Hochlarmark, by the pastor, the teacher, the mine inspector, and long-established families” (Hochlarmarker Geschichts-Arbeitskreis 1981: 317 f.). Seeing the first part of the interview-documentary “The Life Story of the Miner Alphons S.” (Goldmann 1980) during the beginning of the project helped them to understand the historicity of (their own) life stories and that “different personal experiences [can express] common living conditions” (Hochlarmarker Geschichts-Arbeitskreis 1981: 317 f.). With the working title “It Wasn't All about Coal” the project aimed to document and recover regional and local history from a distinct “from below” perspective by collecting memories, stories and other kinds of source material to weave together a collective history of Hochlarmark. The results were used in schools, in the field of trade union education as well as in adult education and cultural work. In 1979, the participants also worked on an exhibition that was shown in the local community centre, the *Fritz-Husemann-Haus*, and in part also at the 90th anniversary celebrations of the Industrial Union of Mine and Energy Workers (IGBE) in Dortmund.

Based on this joint preparatory work, a book was published in 1981, the *Hochlarmarker Lesebuch*. Just as the exhibition, the publication deals with the history of Recklinghausen-Hochlarmark since the creation of the city district in the course of industrialisation up to the closure of the Recklinghausen colliery in 1974, including the years that followed this incisive moment. Throughout these almost one hundred years of local history, coal mining had been the most determining economic and power factor in the region and had also been decisive for the rapid growth of the city district (Hochlarmarker Geschichts-Arbeitskreis 1981: 13). While in 1880 the population of Hochlarmark was still around 320 inhabitants, it increased to 2,755 by 1900 and up to 6,530 by 1914. This development would not have been possible without immigration, especially from the surrounding areas as well as from Silesia or East Prussia, an aspect also reflected in the book. It is, for instance, mentioned in a short collage-like compilation of memory-snippets entitled “Where Did the Mining Families Come From? People from

Hochlarmark Remember the Origins of their Parents and Grandparents” (Hochlarmarker Geschichts-Arbeitskreis 1981: 21 ff.). On the following pages, the book keeps devoting itself to this topic. In the last chapter, arriving in the 1980s, the problems Hochlarmark is facing after the decline of the mining industry are discussed, such as mine decommissioning, the privatisation of company housing, or the long-term environmental problems stemming from the industry. But the chapter *Hochlarmark Today* also addresses “guest workers”. In an interview, a works-council chairman and member of the town council talks about the problems Hochlarmark is facing in the 1980s:

Our problems are not small in terms of population composition because we have a lot of foreigners here – most of them are Turkish people –, mainly living in “Neue Heimat” [miners’ settlement]. People live together in a small space; and this means that life there isn’t always very peaceful. This is not so much because of the existing tolerance or intolerance of the different population groups themselves. To a large extent, it is simply due to the difference in generation between the residents. Those who moved to “Neue Heimat” in the 1950s have now reached an age where they want to have some peace and quiet. And now younger Turkish families with many children are moving in. Of course, that annoys the elderly enormously (Hochlarmarker Geschichts-Arbeitskreis 1981: 284).

He further explains that due to these problems, German residents would feel the need to leave their homes. As a consequence, new Turkish families move into the vacant apartments, which are, anyway, too small for “families with so many children”. Attempts to have younger German families unrelated to mining move in – as “young people are not that sensitive to child noise” – have failed so far (Hochlarmarker Geschichts-Arbeitskreis 1981: 284). Later in the interview, he discusses the problems of integration, going beyond his argument that these problems would mainly be caused by the difference in generation. Instead, they also imply factors such as culture, language, or the peculiarities of the social structures within the community:

The Turkish people are not the first population group to come to Hochlarmark [...]. Because of the war and what happened after the war, a large number of people came to us [...]. But they were people who spoke our language and who, in terms of denomination, had the same ties as the people from here originally. It’s different for the Turkish people (Hochlarmarker Geschichts-Arbeitskreis 1981: 288 f.).

Following this somewhat official, distanced, and supposedly objective view on current migration, the book features four excerpts of interviews with Turkish people, two miners, and two housewives to provide a perspective from the other side of things. Just as in the preceding chapters, the problems in everyday life dominate in the narratives. “We are different from the Germans and the Germans are different from us”, declares a Turkish miner, describing his difficulties in connecting to the Germans (Hochlarmarker Geschichts-Arbeitskreis 1981: 302). The interview excerpts are furthermore dealing with prejudices on the part of the Germans, with exclusions and disputes as well as with the hardships related to making a living while trying to save money to send back home. Even though their Turkish interviewees represent an important change of perspective,

their mode of narrating mirrors the “German” view in predominantly problematising the difficulties of living together on both sides. Here, neither the need for the recruitment of workers from abroad nor any kind of positive aspects are further discussed. A Turkish woman describes this situation as follows: “The Turks did the cheap and difficult work that the Germans no longer wanted to do. But anyway, now they simply say: ‘Turks out!’ I cannot understand that” (Hochlarmarker Geschichts-Arbeitskreis 1981: 303).

Becoming Part of a Success Story

While the narratives in the two previous examples, Füzuzan’s documentary and the grassroots project in Recklinghausen-Hochlarmark, focused predominantly on the existing problems between German and Turkish miners from different points of view, more recent interview projects following a bottom-up approach display a slight change in perspective. “Glückauf in Deutschland” is an oral history project that started in 2012 at the Verein für Internationale Freundschaften Dortmund e.V. (Association for International Friendships), founded by immigrants in Dortmund. A central part of the association’s activities concerns story-telling and reflecting the past. Small groups of former “guest workers” started to tell each other about their experiences. Soon a group of nine Turkish miners began to collect documents, photographs and each other’s life stories. They all came to Germany in 1964 as part of a larger group of 76 young boys scheduled to start their training in the coal mines of the Ruhr area and to escape the lack of prospects in Turkey. In 2015, their work and research resulted in a traveling exhibition and a book, both developed by the interviewees themselves. Projects like this still show traces of historiography from below comparable to the interview practices of the 1960s and 1970s. Similar to these earlier projects, “Glückauf in Deutschland” tries to make the migrant workers subjects of historiography by letting them speak for themselves. In the book, this results in a compilation of informative texts about the history of German immigration accompanied by brief biographical texts about the interviewees and short quotes from their life story interviews. Yet, in contrast to the time of Füzuzan’s documentary book, the history and contemporary repercussions of labour migration was a much-discussed topic in 2015, even though in public discourse it was frequently framed as one of social/cultural difference and a supposed unwillingness to “integrate”. Thus, “Glückauf in Deutschland” neither put a new topic on the agenda as such nor was the addressing of problematic aspects of migration particularly new; however, the personal experiences and perspectives which the individual testimonies conveyed give the book a different angle, as the editors point out:

The history and the personal stories of labour migration in the wake of the economic upswing in West Germany have already been told from different perspectives [...]. But the immigrants have mostly been seen as a problem. In those stories, those who immigrated for work and those who followed hardly appear as individuals [...]. They are rarely presented as individual personalities who have contributed to the development of German society. Again and again, there is a lack of differentiation and a lack of appreciation (Waltz 2015: 8).

Even though the stories also deal with the difficulties of the interviewees' lives in Germany, their stories are rather addressing their power of endurance while "not giving up" as well as "seizing the opportunity" to build a life (Waltz 2015: 43). This motif of personal success, based on overcoming difficulties and struggle, runs through almost all narrations presented in the book. Recep Çirkoğlu for instance always dreamed of becoming an engineer: "Recep accepted this challenge of standing on his own two feet, of not giving up. His motto was: Do not rest, fight instead and follow God's will. Studying became his greatest challenge." Even later in his life "the challenges didn't end" (Waltz 2015: 43). Recep Çirkoğlu, who was born in Kastamonu in 1949, started his work career at the *Zeche Erin* in Castrop-Rauxel. In 1974, he finally became an engineer. And indeed, all life stories presented here are life stories of successful careers in mining: "All those portrayed here found their roadway to success. They all became technicians, engineers, or foremen. They all fought for respect and dignity at work" (Waltz 2015: 8). In essence, it is about receiving "public recognition within the framework of urban memory culture" (Waltz 2015: 10). It is about becoming part of the industrial heritage's grand narrative. The editors describe their motives for the project as follows:

The project "Glückauf in Deutschland" wants to bear witness to the strength and potential of migrants, to their contribution to the social development of the Federal Republic since the 1960s and to the recognition they experienced since the beginning of their departure from home and their immigration to Germany (Waltz 2015: 6).

But not all of those who came in 1964 were successful. Some dropped out of the training programmes, others went back to Turkey or simply couldn't work their way up in the mines like the interviewees who were part of this project. Nevertheless, their life stories are intended to also represent "the stories of the 1,000 young people that came to the Ruhr area between 1964 and 1973" (Waltz 2015: 9). Of course, these Turkish miners, whose specific stories are not told here, also contributed to the German economy and society. Without any doubt, their stories are worth to be told as well. But experience shows that it is easier to speak about struggles already overcome than to talk publicly about problems that might still be part of one's life, stories that might not fit into such dominant and identity-creating regional narratives. In this respect, there still remains a lot to do in making the struggles of migrant workers visible and allowing them to become part and parcel of public representation and industrial heritage.

Blind Spots of Industrial Heritage Narratives?

There are still some blind spots with regard to the Ruhr's migration history; and there are (public) history projects trying to make them visible. Not all of these are stories of adjustment and eventual success. There are, for instance, still problematic and difficult aspects of regional migration history that remain largely blocked out from dominant regional narratives. During the process of German reunification, debates about democracy and power arose. It was also a time of controversial debates about immigration to Germany, highly dominated by xenophobia and serious assaults on the living quarters

of immigrants and asylum seekers. For many immigrants, racism, in all its forms, was part of a daily reality too often neglected, though it is still present today.

A very recent group that uses research, networking, and interviews as a tool to “fight to ensure that the perspective of those affected by racist violence is incorporated into the collective memory” (Interkultur Ruhr 2019), the “Initiative Duisburg 1984” was founded in 2018.⁵ It aims to bring the long-forgotten case of an arson attack on a residential building in Duisburg on 26th August 1984 back into the public consciousness. Seven members of a steel worker’s family, who hailed from Adana in Turkey, died in the fire.⁶ Twenty-three other people present in the house were injured. The case was closed in 1996 when an alleged pyromaniac woman was identified as the perpetrator. Any contextualisation with the atmosphere of xenophobia that was already prevalent in the Ruhr in the 1980s, at the height of the deindustrial crisis, was neglected. Despite existing evidence, a racist and right-wing motivation for the attack was not pursued. Rather, the incident, as well as the victims’ names, were forgotten until rediscovered accidentally by the “Documentation Center and Museum on Migration in Germany” (Domid e.V.) in Cologne. Since its foundation, the “Initiative Duisburg 1984” is striving for a “dignified form of recognition and memory culture”. Therefore, they create “places of listening” and public events for discussion, like the event “‘Racism was not mentioned’. Racism, Right-Wing Violence, and Self-Organised Recognition”, which took place in June 2019 in cooperation with local actors and networks (“Initiative Duisburg 1984” 2019). In August 2019, a commemoration ceremony took place in Duisburg. One result of this event was a podcast that focuses on the voices and perspectives of the “survivors and victims of the arson attack who have not been listened to so far” (“Initiative Duisburg 1984” 2019). By public organisations like these, by doing research and interviews as well as by connecting with family members and neighbours, the initiative does not only aim to bring this incident back into the public memory but also “to investigate racism as a motive” (“Initiative Duisburg 1984” 2019). On their website they say:

We write our own history! Violence, racism and exclusion are part of this history. We finally want to talk about racism and migrant life in the 1980s. There is no language and visibility for this dark field (“Initiative Duisburg 1984” 2019).

Tragic blind spots like this are also part of the Ruhr region’s industrial history. Nonetheless, narrations about racism and right-wing attacks seldom appear in industrial heritage narratives. By writing their own history and by creating room for listening, the initiative introduces narratives of regional (industrial) history that run contrary to common and dominant narrations of the Ruhr region’s industrial past as represented in the established forms of industrial heritage. Examples like this show us that (industrial)

5 The initiative is funded by VBRG e.V., the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation NRW, the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, the NRW State Office for the Performing Arts, the GLS Treuhand, the NRW Kultursekretariat, the Amadeu Antonio Foundation as well as the city of Duisburg.

6 Their names: Döndü Satır (40), Zeliha Turhan (18), Rasim Turhan (15) as well as their newborn baby Tarık, Çiğdem Satır (7), Ümit Satır (5), and Songül Satır (4).

heritage can also be difficult, dissonant and uncomfortable, serving rather as a “Mahnmal” (memorial as a warning) than a “Denkmal” (memorial as commemoration). Over the past decades, former “guest workers” have increasingly become agents of their own stories, initiating projects to make themselves visible. While initiatives like the “Hochlarmarker Lesebuch” rather reduced them to being part of a problem, Füruzan’s project “Logis im Land der Reichen” put their stories and struggles into the centre of attention. This way of challenging dominant narratives changed with “Glückauf in Deutschland”, where problems and struggles of the past are narrated as part of the collective success stories in the present. The “Initiative Duisburg 1984”, finally, shows that implementing difficult or dark heritage into industrial heritage narratives can scrutinise common memory collectives and diversify heritage meanings towards multivocal and controversial representations.

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Abstract

Over the past five to six decades, oral history has become a complex and diverse tool, not only for uncovering and analysing individual and collective patterns of memory but also to inscribe them into public historical narratives. In the wake of the decline of the mining industry in the Ruhr region, local history workshops, academic historians, filmmakers, and museum practitioners began to construe miners and mining communities as historical subjects from the bottom up. Throughout this time, personal narrations played an increasingly important role as both a source of research and a tool for public historical representations. Using the case study of the Ruhr area, this article deals with the functions of public oral history narrations about the region’s mining past. It will particularly address the question of how the work and life stories of Turkish immigrant labourers, officially labelled as “guest workers”, have been represented in regional historical culture. To what extent did they become narrative agents in the Ruhr’s historiography, from a democratic and participatory “history from below” to an increasingly institutionalised approach in public history?