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Winning or Losing?

German Pit Closure and the Ambiguities of Memory

Stefan Moitra

Introduction

Herbert Hötzel was born in 1923 in Lower Silesia. After serving as a soldier in the Second World War and following a short term as a prisoner of war, he ended up in the Ruhr valley and, amidst the severe post-war crisis of food and energy supply, became a coal miner in the winter of 1946. “After all those injustices that have happened, now you can do something good for the people”, he remembers what he told himself back then. He started as a haulier at the Friedrich Thyssen Mine in Duisburg and later became an underground train driver. His memories of going underground for the first time are rather bleak:

You cannot actually describe it. I was always used to my freedom – and then down into the hole for the first time. And I was sent to the 9th level: it was 46 degrees hot, and as a non-miner this is damn difficult. But you have to start from somewhere, right? (Interview Hötzel).¹

Notwithstanding such difficulties, Hötzel’s narrative is by and large shaped by a sense of pride in the work and industry he had been involved in. Even his memories of literally closing his very mine in 1976, as a member of the crew in charge of dismantling the underground works, is tinged with motives of pride and nostalgia. However, as a beneficiary of the first early retirement schemes to prevent sudden mass redundancies, Hötzel interprets the end of his working career as a gift. Instead of continuing mine work at a neighbouring pit, he decided to opt for his pension and immediately went on a hiking tour to the Harz Mountains with his wife. “Those were the years I received as a gift.”

Hötzel’s testimony embraces an array of discursive points of reference. There is the image of the miners’ self-sacrifice after 1945, working under severest conditions in order to provide the basis for post-war survival and eventual reconstruction, a trope frequently employed before the backdrop of the “economic miracle”. This is closely connected with a work ethic of endurance, masculine strength and productivity. Most crucially, in narrating the end of his working career, Hötzel combines a sense of crisis awareness regarding the long-term perspective of mine closure with feelings of both sadness and relief. He quotes the social worker who advised those who took early

1 This and all following quotes translated by the author.

retirement as early as 1976: “‘It won’t get any better, it will be even worse for the mining industry.’ – As early as that!” Yet, the possibility to get out of the mine is felt as a liberation.

In this long-term experience, spanning the war and post-war period to the early 21st century, Hötzel’s adult memories are certainly exceptional. However, with regard to his view on deindustrialisation, pit closure and early retirement, he articulates an ambiguity that somehow represents two sides of the same coin, yet is often painted over by an overriding master narrative of successful welfare-state crisis management. The Ruhr region in particular, along with a number of smaller West German coalfields, has been facing a prolonged process of industrial demise that has eventually taken six decades, from the first signs of crisis in 1958 to the closure of the last remaining coal mines in 2018 – the Prosper-Haniel colliery in Bottrop (Böse/Farrenkopf/Weindl 2018) and the Anthrazit Ibbenbüren colliery near Osnabrück (Gawehn 2018; Schürmann 2020). From the late 1950s, when the Ruhr industry alone employed well over half a million miners, both underground and aboveground, this number has shrunk to 3,400 in 2018; between 1970 and 2000, employment was reduced by roughly 50,000 per decade.²

There are two grand narratives connected to this process. Firstly, the Ruhr towns, as well as their counterparts in the Saar region and other coalfields, struggle with the consequences of industrial decline as a long-term structural transformation, forcing the old mass industries of coal and steel to be replaced by more modern patterns of production and work (Goch 2019). With hubs in higher education, research and new industries, parts of the Ruhr seem to be fairly successful in making this shift from the heavy industries of the past to the “knowledge society” of the future. Unemployment figures, however, still rank amongst the highest in Germany (Hüther/Südekum/Voigtländer 2019: 99, 124 ff.). In contrast to this image of mass unemployment as a consequence of deindustrialisation, the second grand narrative is closely tied to the “socially responsible”, “socially compliant” way of handling the downsizing of the mining industry. Social responsibility – *Sozialverträglichkeit* – has been a central element to discursively frame the targets and viability of keeping up as many coal mines as possible while at the same time constantly shrinking the industry but avoiding uncontrolled redundancy. This was mainly set into practice in a system of direct and indirect state subsidies and in a scheme of early retirement that allowed underground workers who had mostly started their professional lives at the age of 14 to 16 to retire once they had reached 49 or 50. In their efforts to find consensual crisis solutions, *Sozialverträglichkeit* became a key semantic denominator for trade unionists, shop stewards, company executives as well as politicians to address an apparently obvious common goal. This was epitomised by a phrase attributed to Adolf Schmidt, the head of the Industrial Union of Mine and Energy Workers (IGBE) from 1969 to 1985, declaring the goal of social responsibility had to be “Niemand fällt ins Bergfreie!” – “Nobody falls into the void!”, i.e. nobody will fall into unemployment.³ Thus, in hindsight, the history of the German coal mining industry in the second half

2 For data see Huske (2006) and <https://www.rag.de/unternehmen/mitarbeiter-und-fuehrung/zentrale-personalsteuerung/> (24.03.2019).

3 The term “bergfrei” initially refers to land that could potentially be mined but was as yet without concession to do so. In contrast to that, the phrase uses the term in the sense of an underground crevice which a miner might fall into.

of the 20th century can be described as a process from “key sector to decline” (Farrenkopf 2013), but at the same time it is a “success story” of socially responsible politics (Seidel 2013: 513 f.).

This article intends to throw a different light on this success story by considering the memories and oral history narratives of those who were actively part of the mining industry and its slow demise over the last five decades (and more), mainly workers’ representatives on all levels of the industry as well as underground workers who witnessed the growing pressures which coal mining had to face and who themselves experienced early retirement.⁴ In scrutinising these memory collectives, it is possible to identify a wider variety of experiences and narratives than is often assumed under the principle of consensual *Sozialverträglichkeit*. It turns out, rather, that below the semantics of consensus lies a history of constant negotiation to sustain the politics of mutual responsibility, and this ultimately plays out as a history of power relations between the workers, the trade union(s), the employers as well as regional and federal politics. Proclaiming consensus and reciprocity formed part of a moral economy of structural change and deindustrialisation (Phillips 2013; Phillips 2017; Strangleman 2017). And while the idea of *Sozialverträglichkeit* underscored a demand for crisis solutions that would benefit the interests of mine workers and their communities, it also implied a discursive regime of “economic necessity”, of the assumed factuality of market forces that had to be re-balanced with the social responsibilities of both state and companies. For most workers’ representatives and trade unionists this entailed a permanent cycle of re-negotiation which increasingly took on a defensive character. This was especially the case since the 1980s and 1990s, when a government more inclined to market-liberal ideas demanded a stronger willingness from workers and employees to change in order to hold on to the principles of social responsibility. On the shop-floor level, as we shall see, such increased pressure led to stronger ambiguities towards the challenges which had to be stomach.

Struggling for *Sozialverträglichkeit* in Trade Union Memories

Not just pit closure as such but the corporatist measures of finding ways to tackle the crisis have a history going back to the 1950s and 1960s. The primal scene in this context is the establishment of Ruhrkohle AG (RAG) in 1968/69. Starting in 1958, it became increasingly clear that West German hard coal faced severe competition from different sides. With regard to supplying the power industry, German lignite mining had always been a competitor. Since the late 1950s, however, cheaper imported hard coal from overseas, at the time mainly from the US, became a major factor in raising the pressure (Dolata-Kreutzkamp 2006); and so did the introduction of fuel oil for heating and, slightly later on, of nuclear energy. A large part of mines in the Ruhr belonged to steel corporations that facilitated their steel works with their own combined coal reserves and which could now calculate whether or not keeping their mines remained economically feasible. The crisis had a more immediate impact on those companies which relied solely on mining and were among the first to close down pits

4 This article is based on life-story interviews conducted as part of “Menschen im Bergbau”, an oral history project conducted by the Stiftung Geschichte des Ruhrgebiets in collaboration with Deutsches Bergbau-Museum Bochum. Cf. Moitra/Nogueira/Adamski (2019) as well as the project website <http://www.menschen-im-bergbau.de>.

that did not seem productive/competitive any longer. After ten years of relatively passive tarrying, including different kinds of state compensation measures both for miners made redundant and for companies that closed seemingly unprofitable mines, the founding of RAG represented what came to be known as a “concerted action”, a politically coordinated consensus that would see to all interests involved for the sake of planned economic prosperity (Abelshauser 1984; Lauschke 1984; Nonn 2001).

At the core of this consensus lay an idea of concentration, rationalisation and co-operation: Almost all of the Ruhr mining companies transferred their pits and coke plants into the new corporation to facilitate better planning of production – which included the closure of mines deemed uncompetitive. To avoid redundancies at the sites closing, younger miners were transferred to other shafts in the area while company-wide those who had reached their age were able to get into early retirement, co-financed to a large extent by the State and Federal Governments (Seidel 2013: 499 ff., 511). Finally, the role of workers’ representation on the basis of the 1951 Co-Determination Act in the Mining, Iron and Steel Industries (*Montanmitbestimmung*) was underscored. Workers’ representatives were offered co-directorial positions on all management boards of the new company down to all its subdivisions (labour directors) and single collieries (directors for personnel and social issues/PS directors), thus also strengthening the role of works councils, shop stewards and other forms of labour participation in both long-term planning and day-to-day business (Ranft 1988).

The trade union’s role in this key act of restructuring the coal industry is preeminent in all interviews undertaken with workers and workers’ representatives, in particular (unsurprisingly) in the narratives of IGBE officials from the generation that consciously witnessed the founding period of RAG. As the first step towards constructively tackling the economic crisis of mining, the establishment of this unified combine is not just narrated as the starting point for the long-term policy of social responsibility but also as a demonstration of the rational superiority of the trade union over the vested interests and market-liberal competitiveness of the companies. As Klaus Südhofer, a former deputy head of the IGBE, remembers:

[...] rather than being an instrument to secure mining for all eternity, the founding of Ruhrkohle was initially meant to be an instrument to prevent the mining companies and corporations – which were not just active in coal mining but included steel and what have you, chemical industries, real estates and hell knows what – to prevent those from killing each other. Because that’s what had happened before the founding of Ruhrkohle (Interview Südhofer).

Helmut Heith, a former regional division secretary, has a similar view. He points out that of the various emergency plans

none materialised. And then it was the IGBE who made up a plan from scratch for Ruhrkohle to be a unified corporation and tried to push it through. Our luck at the time was that we had a government willing to cooperate with us. [Karl] Schiller was Minister of Economy, [IGBE head] Adolf Schmidt was Helmut Schmidt’s deputy whip in the Bundestag and had some influence, so we could win over some decisive politicians for our plan. And in the end, I always say we have been the main actors in the founding of Ruhrkohle as a unified

combine. Not everyone agrees, but it doesn't really matter. What matters is that it was brought to life in the end (Interview Heith).⁵

This emphasis on rational politics and decision-making is closely linked to the character of RAG as an agent for social security and responsible action. Slightly younger than Südhofer and Heith, Norbert Formanski, a long-term chairman of the works council at the Westerholt colliery in Herten, underlines this:

Shortly after I finished my apprenticeship, the first discussions about closures started. [...] And after the establishment of Ruhrkohle, after 1969, when the trade unions and co-determination played a key role, the whole thing was channelled more effectively. [...] We still had to reduce employment numbers, but Adolf Schmidt, our union chief, [...] coined the term "We won't succeed in bringing a complete hold of mine closures. But we have to succeed in letting not a single miner fall into the void." He coined this term: no miner was to fall into the void, was to be left behind; no one was to be forced to go to the labour office and claim benefits. [...] Those colleagues who have reached the age will go home with a good retirement scheme. And this was the principle which made the miners keep calm – despite the fact that jobs were effectively destroyed and that pits were closed down (Interview Formanski).

Claiming the establishment of RAG as their very achievement while at the same time alleging the incapability of the coal companies to develop a constructive form of crisis management, such trade union testimonies fit well with what Knud Andresen has called "narratives of triumph" (Andresen 2014). In his work on steel and metal workers' trade unionists, he observes that his interviewees often frame their stories as ambiguous victories in which, despite all struggles and potential defeats, they turn out as winners. The IGBE officials' view of RAG is a case in point. However, with regard to later developments of sustaining what had been achieved, particularly in terms of social security measures for mine workers, the tone rather changes from triumph to a mode of tragic heroism.

Especially with the turn from a Social-Democratic/Liberal coalition to Helmut Kohl's Christian/Liberal government, recurring debates about accelerating the shrinkage of production and employment numbers triggered ongoing protests and at the same time forced trade unionists and workers' representatives to use all their skills and tactics of negotiation to keep the status quo as far as possible. Agreements between the government on the one hand and the mining company as well as the IGBE on the other were challenged and declared inefficient on a regular basis. Renegotiation talks were called in by the government every few years – in 1983, 1988, 1991, 1995 and 1997. (Seidel 2013; Farrenkopf et al. 2009: 422 ff.). This constant pressure forced the workers' representatives to actively participate in a politics they were actually opposed to but felt pressed to partake in to ensure as much as possible the commitment to a socially responsible shrinking.

⁵ Adolf Schmidt was actually elected as an MP in 1972. His predecessor as IGBE head, Walter Arendt, became Federal Minister of Labour and Social Affairs in 1969, but was still in his trade union capacity when the plans for RAG were drawn up.

As a member of the executive board of Ruhrkohle in the capacity of a workers' representative, Wilhelm Beermann remembers the debates about the employment numbers that had to be cut in 1987:

12,000 employees had to be reduced in a socially responsible way. I mention this as it was my responsibility and I was directly concerned. [...] And then during the meeting of the supervisory board – I still remember the numbers because I was so angry about it – I had to report that out of the planned 12,000 we had reached 11,806. And even that was criticised because we hadn't reached the full number! [...] And I told them to contrast this with the public outcry for the Rheinhausen steel plant [which was closed down that year under heavy protest, S.M.] where 5,500 people were laid off. 5,500 was the average number for us every year – and always socially responsible. And this has to be noted: this was a great achievement of the people involved – a great achievement of the shop stewards and works councils who participated, a great achievement for the IGBE (Interview Beermann I).

The scale of redundancy and the simultaneous insistence on social security measures make this both heroic and tragic at the same time. Giving in to redundancy, here, was a tragic necessity, entwined, however, with an ostensive pride in maintaining the previous consensus of social responsibility against the attacks mainly from the political sphere.

This constellation repeated itself in the following years, often paired with protests and campaigns spreading all over the coalfields. The most prevalent in the majority of interviews are the negotiations in 1997 when the Kohl government planned to reduce state subsidies to such a degree that out of the 85,000 miners still active in the German coalfields 60,000 would have been laid off by 2005. The established system of younger miners moving on to other collieries in case of pit closure and early retirements making way for these transfers would have been sharply overstretched. Threatened by such perspectives, a host of protest forms was enacted all over the Ruhr and the smaller coal regions. Most visibly, in February 1997, when the total scale of cuts was not already clear, 200,000 people formed a human chain spanning 100 kilometres from east to west throughout the Ruhr region. Following news of the full government plans, the protests raised sharper demands and culminated in 30,000 miners from the Ruhr and Saar regions occupying the government quarters in Bonn. The negotiations and protests resulted in an easing of the initial plans, yet seven more mines than had been decided just two years earlier were to close by 2005 (Moitra 2012: 232 ff.). Thus, the old *Sozialverträglichkeit* was rescued but not without increasing the pressure on the colliery workforces and not without leaving huge future gaps for employment in places where pits ceased operation.

Klaus Südhofer, who was part of the negotiation team of the IGBE, remembers the end of the talks after the tense weeks of protest:

And then came the hardest thing: going out and announcing the result. The managers did not do it. We did. But despite all hardship, in the end it was a success, nonetheless, because nobody fell into the void and got unemployed. And everything was set to be downsized in an orderly manner. But it was not

nice. [...] The response was not easy, but we said, "Well this is it. It could have been worse." – And it would have been worse! (Interview Südhofer).

Again, there is a mode of tragic heroism at play, pointing out the trade unionists' role in taking the challenge to announce an outcome not ideal but ascertaining the minimum requirements of social security by avoiding sudden mass unemployment.

The flipside to this is a discourse of pragmatism when talking about the established procedures of managing closure, the transfer of workers and sending people into early retirement. While the memories of struggling for *Sozialverträglichkeit* are highly emotionalised by the trade unionists, their narratives of setting the according measures into motion implicate a thrust of unavoidable necessity vis-a-vis the workers they represented. In contrast to the high times of political negotiation, when trade union officials and workers' representatives acted as vocal mediators for the workers' interests, it was particularly the shop stewards and directors for personnel and social issues (PS directors) on the colliery levels who had to switch their perspective in the everyday business of staff reduction. They acted as the people most visibly responsible for implementing the decided measures. Yet, as far as these were perceived in a manner of 'normalcy', all sides were ready to accept them. As Wilhelm Beermann points out with respect to closures and its consequences: "Such decisions don't fall from the sky, and they are not taken from one minute to the next." Rather, the cooperative practice of all actors involved was supposed to create a certain transparency and trust.

If I close down a colliery or announce the closure at a time when it's not clear for the employees affected what the future will bring [...], then fear and unease and "what will the family say?" will lead to a fiercer opposition than if it's done [...] at a time when you already have an effective social and political instrument at hand (Interview Beermann II).

It was the routines such instruments engendered which provided a structure for all sides involved to go along. For Peter Ermlich, former PS director at two collieries on the western fringe of the Ruhr, this was a factor in building up trust between the workers and those in charge of the transfer or retraining programmes.

If there is no trust, then no one will believe that I'm really sincere, I as the company, I as trade union, I as shop steward, I as member of the management board, as underground supervisor, I as a colleague. The whole thing is built on trust. I don't mean to say it was all sunshine and roses, but trying to convince people didn't exactly mean to pressure them either (Interview Ermlich).

Thus, the trade unionists' and workers' representatives' pride in establishing the basic conditions for social responsibility from the start and struggling to keep them alive over five decades is closely interlinked with the converse memories of "convincing" workers, as Peter Ermlich phrases it, of the necessity of the related staff reduction programmes. The underlying tension this implies is stated openly by Faruk Özdemir, a shop steward from the Saar region, who had to co-organise the (comparatively ex-

ceptional) transfer of Saar miners to the Ibbenbüren colliery, 450 kilometres to the north:

You had to take responsibility for things basically not your fault. But in this moment, your colleague can't go see the PS director all the time to discuss his problems, but he could come see you every day. [...] And basically, you were always reminded of what was happening around you, all the destitution and pain. Sadly (Interview Özdemir).

“Nobody falls into the void” – Miners Coping with Staff Reduction and Early Retirement

While for the actors of co-determination the grand narrative of mining decline seems to be shaped by articulations of pride in keeping up *Sozialverträglichkeit*, there are considerable undercurrents, too, about the problems with executing staff reduction and dealing with pressures that early retirement and retraining programmes meant for many. Such moments of ambiguity become even more apparent when listening to the corresponding memory collectives of miners who were subjected to such measures. The ambivalence about retiring early is already present in Herbert Hötzel's narrative, quoted in the beginning, who experienced the process as early as the 1970s. Before and after Ruhrkohle was being established, with the first retirement schemes set into practice, many coal miners also sought employment elsewhere voluntarily, as Reinhold Adam, a former electrician and shop steward at the Nordstern mine in Gelsenkirchen, remembers:

Many left the mines, particularly the skilled craftsmen, to go to Leverkusen, to the Bayer plants, or to the Opel car factory that had been opened at a former mining site in Bochum in the early sixties. So there was a lack of skilled workers, particularly electricians – which is why I retrained, and after two years, in 1966, I became a mine electrician (Interview Adam).

Paradoxically, at this stage, the crisis of the industry led to a new demand in labour which was even mirrored in the recruitment of migrant workers from southern Europe and further afield (Rieker 2003; Hunn 2005: 218 ff.; Seidel 2014: 39).

As many testimonies indicate, the pressure on workers and employees increased in the 1980s and 1990s. Even as a head supervisor, Manfred Reis from the town of Kamp-Lintfort remembers anxieties shared by colleagues across the colliery hierarchy:

Such existential fears were certainly present on all levels. It was not just the ordinary underground workers who were scared but everyone – supervisors, head supervisors, production managers, they were all afraid. Maybe they didn't or they were not supposed to show it openly, but they all had the same problems. And of course, you start talking to your family, like in our case, when you have to pay up your house, and you think: What happens when the pit closes? What happens next? Will you get a job with the kind of training you have? (Interview Reis).

Worries such as these were grounded in the everyday experience most miners faced. Part of this, for instance, was the constant cycle of being forced to move to a new colliery once a pit was closed down. This was, on the one hand, a constructive manner of crisis management to avoid unemployment. On the other hand, however, the adjusting to new working environments every few years proved to be difficult for many. As a colliery director in Kamp-Lintfort, Karl-Heinz Stenmans had to organise several mergers between neighbouring pits while also integrating staff from other collieries from farther away. He remembers the changing mood when a “family pit” such as his, shaped by close-knit work communities, had to adjust to the new situation:

All this changed after merging with the Rheinland colliery. The teams were completely reshuffled, people did not know who they were supposed to know when they had to deal with each other – maybe this was reduced to just phoning or e-mail correspondence. [...] The atmosphere changed, and it was difficult to catch up with it. In hindsight, it took three, four, five years. [...] But then, in the meantime, the Hugo colliery, or Ewald/Hugo, in Gelsenkirchen was closed down and we got staff from Ewald/Hugo. Then we got personnel from Walsum. So, the reshuffling continued. [...] In 2001, when we merged with the Niederberg colliery, 800 men entered our workforce at one go (Interview Stenmans).

Problems arising from such fusions did not just concern potential individual problems, for instance, commuting longer distances, but “certainly the defending of positions” on all levels (Interview Stenmans). Thus, merging collieries and integrating personnel from closed pits into existing workforces also led to a heightened competition between old and new employees regarding the allocation of authority and responsibilities.

From the point of view of someone who was subjected to this process of merging collieries as a system of staff reduction, Stefan Ferdinand from Herten describes it as an experience of constant readjustment. He started training as a mine mechanic at the Schlägel & Eisen mine in 1980. Ten years on, his colliery merged with the Ewald mine to form Ewald/Schlägel & Eisen, just to merge again in 1997 into Ewald/Hugo. Two years later, one year before Ewald/Hugo was set to close down, Ferdinand was moved to the Prosper/Haniel shafts in Bottrop (and eventually left the mining industry). For him,

every merger was a catastrophe, mentally. The idea to change yet again and again. When you are used to your working life and you don't know what's going to happen, right? That's the problem. [...] It was as if you lost your second home. It really felt good being at Schlägel, at Ewald a little less so, at Ewald/Hugo even lesser. But your original pit was, as I said, it was a piece of home, right, you grew up there (Interview Ferdinand).

Prosper/Haniel, in contrast, was perceived as a “completely different pit” with “a completely different mentality”:

I didn't really get friendly with anyone there. The camaraderie as I knew it didn't exist there. [...] You didn't know anyone. You were there for a year, but somehow you couldn't warm up to anybody, you hardly spoke to the guys. They didn't seem to want it – which was totally incomprehensible for me. So it was a completely different mentality (Interview Ferdinand).

Besides these experiences of adjusting to new working environments as a consequence of closure and of the subsequent moving of workforces, since the mid-1990s, miners also faced a greater pressure from their company to retrain and find employment outside the mining sector. For RAG, this was an outcome of the recent political negotiations and the government's unwillingness to keep up the previous levels of subsidising the industry. Qualified foremen and supervisors in particular were actively encouraged to look for jobs elsewhere, either in the form of official letters from the management "not enforcing but proposing" a change (Interview Ferdinand), or in formal interviews in which head supervisors informed their staff of the support programmes to be expected when they attempted to find a suitable position – half-jokingly called "get-lost-interviews" (Interview Kellermann). A key element was the so-called "trades' initiative" (*Handwerkerinitiative*) which gave miners the opportunity to undergo a trial phase of six months with a new employer, during which time RAG continued to pay the bulk of the wages. The ambiguity of such an endeavour, both in practice and in the ways in which it is remembered, might be taken as an indicator for the mode of urgency in which the coal industry sought to reduce employment numbers while at the same time avoiding actual unemployment. Firstly, and this is something anecdotally narrated by a number of interviewees, many potential employers seemed to take advantage of the situation and used the miners as cheap temporary employees.

I had two friends who went through this. One worked at a rail manufacturer – or they did fittings for rail carriages. And it was exactly like that. Work, work, work, even doing overtime, and this and that. And then on the last day, the day of days: "No, Christian, you don't really match." And it was like, three days later the next man from the colliery turned up. This was often the case (Interview Kellermann).

According to Frank Taubert, a miner from Ahlen, the majority of those who tried it returned from the trades' initiative. However, even if the move to the new job did work out, fears of uncertainty abounded. One of Taubert's colleagues

started with a manufacturer for window profiles, and he is there to this day. And he made it through the trades' initiative. But many didn't. Many people I know of were unemployed for years, just kept their head above the water and struggled to exist. [...] It's not easy starting in a new firm. Yes, a miner is a miner – he can do anything. But in the end, if the company is in trouble, say, if there is a lack of customer demand, then the best firm has to lay off people. And the one who came in last has to go first. That's the way it is (Interview Taubert).

For the daily practice underground, in any case, the drain of experienced and skilled personnel, resulting from both the stronger incentives to leave and the ongoing early retirement policy, led to a loss of practical knowledge. As Reinhold Adam remembers:

The older ones go into early retirement and the younger ones go to the next mine. So what's the result? You get some sort of Olympic team underground – 32 years on average and all healthy and fit. And what's the consequence? At some point they realised there was a lack of experience. What are they doing differently? What are they doing wrong? Decades of experience were gone. And I sometimes have to think of [Minister] von der Leyen who once said, [...] "The young run faster, but the old know a short cut." And that's just the way it was (Interview Adam).

Thus, even though the accelerated process of shrinking the mining industry continued to follow the principle of social responsibility, the pressures resulting from it had an impact on the organisation of the shop floor as well as on the ways in which workers and employees perceived their changing work environments. In contrast to the semantic persuasiveness of *Sozialverträglichkeit*, which had to be struggled for time and again on the political level and engendered a unifying force among employees and their representatives, the practical enactment of workforce reduction, though framed as following social responsibility, entailed constant uncertainties for many miners with regard to their role, function and future in constantly transforming workplaces.

The call for mutual trust, as articulated by company officials and trade unionists, was somewhat discredited under these circumstances. Rather than trust, feelings of abandonment and being treated inappropriately took hold. This is illustrated in Jörg-Uwe Trappmann's description of going into early retirement. Having started his working life at the Minister Stein colliery in Dortmund in 1975, Trappmann ended his career at Prosper/Haniel in Bottrop in 2009. Contrary to his own feelings of the last shift as a decisive moment, he still seems disappointed with the way the pit management handled the occasion. While in the past even every work jubilee was appropriately "celebrated from high above", the reception now was "without emotion, even really cold, if you ask me".

At Prosper they brought some sandwiches and drinks, and after a quarter of an hour they said: "Well, it's nice you've been here – and now you better get going!" At least that is how I perceived it. I don't know whether it was meant like this, but it wasn't nice. It was shite (Interview Trappmann).

Notwithstanding this official part, the closer circle of colleagues from his underground unit had a "proper farewell" for everyone retiring that year, which, in contrast, was "lovely, really great and emotional, to be honest". The established ties among colleagues and co-workers had remained intact, apparently, while there were visible ruptures in the relationship between the management, including the PS directors as workers' representatives, and the lower ranks of the colliery. The feeling of neglect and lacking recognition implied here corresponds with the reaction to measures of workforce reduction more generally, such as the policy of the "get-lost-interviews".

Rather than celebrating work and working lives, as Trappman mentions in the work jubilees, the current company strategy seemed to be solely concerned with getting rid of workers. The older principles of production and underground work, which had determined all relations in colliery life before, appeared to be obsolete.

Nonetheless, even beyond this crucial date of the last shift, the self-images of those retiring largely continued to be shaped by the experiences and moral economies of their working lives in the pit. There were certainly ambiguities as to the interpretation of retirement, between liberation and nostalgia as in Herbert Hötzel's memories; and more generally, such ambivalences are not unique to the mining industry (McIvor 2013: 266 ff.). But the particular values of underground work, such as efficiency, productivity, and a sense of camaraderie and solidarity, could be felt as a burden if there was too much time at hand in the new phase of life:

Well, I got myself a dog. And then you walk the dog. And then, you see, I was 52 [...]. And then, on my way I ran into road workers or builders. And they are even older than yourself. And you're having a walk with your dog, you're having a walk while they have to sweat. So I felt ashamed. I feel ashamed. I really felt ashamed. As a young guy, at 52. Today they work at the age of 65, some even 70. But I was 52, right? [...] Mostly I tried to hide when I encountered a group of fellows who were working while I was walking the dog. Somehow, somehow, I couldn't cope with this situation (Interview Volmerig).

Reinhold Adam narrates this clashing between internalised work ethics and the apparent loss of a meaningful role in two steps, first humorously, as a clash between traditional gender roles:

Many wives said: "When my husband stays at home, I'll divorce him." So what was the problem? The old man had been working at the colliery for the last 35, 40 years. Now he's at home, and he starts to rationalise everything and tell his wife how thick she has to cut the cheese, how she has to do the shopping. And she used to be the boss before. So this was difficult (Interview Adam).

This is followed by the bleaker observation that

many couldn't cope with the situation, psychologically. I know many who turned to alcohol or to gambling or suchlike things because they had nothing to kill their time with. Or they just kept looking out of the window (Interview Adam).

Adam relinks this to the broader issue of defining *Sozialverträglichkeit* and social responsibility. With early retirement as a key instrument of the coal industry's long-term crisis management, he makes the crucial distinction that "it was not social security" that the miners benefited from, but "people were financially secured". This more critical view is echoed in many miners' narratives. In a broader perspective, however, the *Sozialverträglichkeit* model is absolved when compared with structural change and deindustrialisation elsewhere. Jörg-Uwe Trappmann – who himself sums up the

ambiguity of early retirement pointedly in remarking, “pension at 50 sounds great, but it was total crap” – brings in such a more comprehensive perspective:

In any case, this slow transformation was, in my opinion, better than the abrupt change as it happened in England. Everything would be dead here, there'd be nothing new then. Everything would be in ruins, I guess. You've seen it too in America, in the various steel towns. Whole cities have been destroyed. I think this socially coherent, responsible shrinking in the last 30, 40 years was a good thing. Whether it was financially okay, I don't know. But we have paid money for so much crap – I thought it was a justified investment into the Ruhr region. I think we have deserved it. [...] I don't think everything would be still intact here had they acted otherwise (Interview Trappmann).

Conclusion

Trappmann's remark about the ultimate social value of financing structural change over five decades addresses the heart of the tripartite attempt to manage the gradual contraction of the mining industry. In the thrust for consensus, the coal miners and their trade union, the RAG as the major remaining company as well as the regional and federal governments, all had to participate in and agree to the long-term politics of pit closure and staff reduction. In this context, the idea of *Sozialverträglichkeit* constituted a powerful discursive framework for all to set this shrinkage into practice as “a just investment”. The stability of this constellation of interests, however, had to be re-strengthened in the course of changing political environments. The moral appeal which social responsibility entailed was put under threat once market-driven ideas took hold with the Christian-Liberal government in the 1980s and 90s. In the memory narratives of the mining trade unionists this is reflected as a change from triumph to tragic heroism. The establishment of Ruhrkohle/RAG is remembered as a monument to the constructive will of the trade union to come to an accord between economic forces and the workers' interests, an ability to solve an economic crisis against the seemingly irrational actions of the big coal and steel corporations. Yet in view of the faltering political will to further subsidise the industry, despite a pace of shrinking that was mutually agreed before, workers' participation and co-determination (*Mitbestimmung*), the legal recognition of which had been a major achievement of the post-war West German labour movement (Milert/Tschirbs 2012), effectively became instruments of accelerating industrial contraction. Securing a downsizing of collieries “in an orderly manner” while accepting heightened pressures on their workforces became a tragic burden for workers' representatives to carry.

Those carrying the consequences of such developments, the miners at the colliery level, show ambiguous reactions towards these forms of crisis management. Practical problems in adjusting to new work environments when they were moved to new pits but also feelings of being treated wrongly and unjustly neglected by the company – rather than by politics or the trade union – disclose different understandings of what was acceptable as socially responsible and fair. Here, as in the recollections of struggling with the imposition of early retirement, mine workers' memories reveal what Raymond Williams has called a “residual structure of feeling” within a lifeworld transforming (Williams 1977: 121 ff.). Notwithstanding the apparent inevitability of

the coal industry's shrinkage, the miners' self-positioning continued to be shaped by values and work ethics adopted in the old industrial framework. In this set of relations, however, they were increasingly marginalised, as both their industry and the work they were doing were in the process of becoming obsolete. In spite of such disruptions, Trappmann's last quote indicates a further moment of understanding the end of the mining industry. The dominant pillar of hegemonic memory, "Nobody falls into the void", remains intact even though it is interlinked with other, more negative narratives of collective experience. Or, using Klaus Sühofers words: had it not been for the politics of *Sozialverträglichkeit*, it "could have been worse – and it would have been worse".

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Abstract

The history of the West German coal mining industry since the late 1950s can be seen as a story of industrial decline and at the same time as a success story for a corporatist politics of “social responsibility”. The mining trade union together with the state and the companies all participated in sustaining a mode of shrinkage that allowed to avoid sudden mass unemployment and keep up a slow fading of the industry over six decades. This process, however, was a matter of constant re-negotiation. Calling on the principle of social responsibility constituted a crucial element in the moral economy of industrial decline. Yet the state’s structural and financial support for the mining communities went along with changing work environments and increased pressures for the mine workers. This article juxtaposes the memories of shop stewards, trade union officials and other workers’ representatives who had to negotiate such terms of industrial change with the narratives of mine workers and employees subjected to these measures. It asks for the extent to which the narratives and interpretations of mine closure overlap or differ for these two memory collectives.