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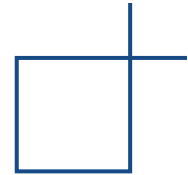
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## Witnessing as political activism: Zeitzeugen in Asia and the Middle East\*

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Annette Wieviorka (2006) identifies our time as the "Era of the Witness", an era in which witness statements appear among the key components of public history and national narratives. It is an era in which individual narratives based on memories of events of social significance began to compete with, challenge, and also shape official histories. It is an era that began in the aftermath of World War II and has been made possible by the technological developments that allowed audio-visual recordings to become increasingly available. It has involved a change in the primary location of giving testimonies (from the courts to the public sphere), in the diversity of witnesses (increasingly coming from marginalised groups), in the mediums used (from written or oral statements saved in archives to Youtube videos or even holograms), and finally in the function of witness accounts (from consolidating singular hegemonic narratives to multiplying historical truths). The witness in Wieviorka's account corresponds to the broad discussion on the concept of the *Zeitzeuge* and the narrative about its rise as a public figure in the German academic debate (for instance: Sabrow 2012; Krämer 2012, for a broader view, see also: Krämer/Weigel 2017).

A person who lived through a specific time, who witnessed an event or a period, can become a *Zeitzeuge*<sup>1</sup>—one who constitutes through her narrative her own "world of happening" (*Geschehenswelt*). The term *Zeitzeuge* in the German language publicly appeared in the 1970s, used to name a person who recounts a past that she had been part of (Sabrow 2012: 17). The emergence

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of the term can be traced back to the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1960, where survivors of concentration camps appeared as witnesses against the Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann, recounting their own personal experiences as victims of fascist violence (Wieviorka 2006: 56-66). With regard to the German discourse about the Holocaust and the crimes of the National Socialist regime, the late 1980s saw a growing presence of *Zeitzeugen* (plural form of *Zeitzeuge*) in German TV and other media (Ernst/Schwarz 2012: 32).

Like Wieviorka, speaking about an era of *Zeitzeuge*, Sabrow observes a *Zeitzeugen* movement accompanied by a commodification and exchange of *Zeitzeugen* within the so-called *Zeitzeugenbörsen* (markets of witnesses). He raises a question about the effects of such commercialization, and asks whether the growing role of *Zeitzeugen* in the public discourse about history is related to a declining role of history writing and professional historical research. However, Sabrow argues against a polarization or simple opposition between the historian and the witness, noting rather a trend towards a "self-historization" and a growing charismatic of historical proximity and immediateness leading to a boom of *Zeitzeugen* as witnesses (Sabrow 2012: 20–21).

*Zeitzeuge* is an exceedingly sharper word than "witness". *Die Zeit* is the time, *der Zeuge* is the witness. By being the time-witness, the witness of a time period, the *Zeitzeuge* points to a specific function, easily leaving out the connotations of testifying as a witness in court as well as religious witnessing as a declaration of faith. A *Zeitzeuge* is by definition a public and political figure, aiming to unearth unknown truths of a shared past, to start or sustain a political debate about who we are as a society. A *Zeitzeuge* is a witness to history, to a particular history that becomes relevant in a particular present. Therefore, the set of questions relating to the present arise when *Zeitzeugen* perform: When and where does the *Zeitzeuge* speak? And, for whom does the *Zeitzeuge* speak?

The notion of *Zeitzeuge* has so far been mostly explored in national contexts, concentrating on European, and in particular German history (Wieviorka 1999, 2006; Assmann 2007; Sabrow/Frei 2012). One reason is that the Second World War and the Holocaust have long been central reference points for the emergence of the

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1 Throughout this paper, we work with the German term *Zeitzeuge* (pl. *Zeitzeugen*) or the widely used English translations "witness to history" or "time-witness". With all forms, we face the challenge of gender inclusive language. While the witness is gender neutral, *Zeitzeuge* is a masculine form. In order to avoid cumbersome ways of writing, including symbols like \* or /, we decided to use these terms as generic forms and, when it comes to pronouns, we give preference to the female form whenever this seems possible. We also use *Zeitzeugenschaft* to denote the act and practice of bearing witness.

Zeitzeuge as a public figure. This figure represented an authentic voice able to speak on the unfathomable violence of the Holocaust, difficult to fully assess through prevalent historical sources. New research by and about Zeitzeugen and Zeitzeugenschaft has shifted to other events and periods of time. These include the break-down of the socialist system, the nuclear catastrophe of Chernobyl, the war in Afghanistan, the violence of the Stalinist system, or the German massacre of the Herero in Namibia (see for instance: Ernst/Schwarz 2012; Aleksievič 1992, 1999; Scherbakova 2003, Hammerstein 2016). This implies a geographical expansion as well as translocal approaches, as witnessing has become part of the political activist repertoire in many non-European settings. Research interest is thus not limited to national boundaries, but also encompasses comparisons and aspects of connectivities and translocal entanglements.

In this paper, our aim is to broaden the discourse on the concept of the Zeitzeuge. We expand the geographical scope and concentrate on societies in Asia and the Middle East, where witness testimonies have been used in post-conflict situations, often under non-democratic, fundamentalist, or authoritarian structures. We present case studies from Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, India, Kashmir, and Sri Lanka. Based on our understanding of the Zeitzeuge as a political figure and Zeitzeugenschaft ("witnesshood") as political activism, we investigate the agency, the political agendas, and the practices these Zeitzeugen develop as political actors. With their testimonies in politically contingent contexts, in societies that face conflicts, crises and transformations, their acts of making statements are often potentially dangerous for them, especially if they challenge established historical narratives. The aim here is, therefore, to explore the wide array of political agendas of Zeitzeugen and the different modalities they assume. After discussing the main debates on the concept of the Zeitzeuge in the first part of the paper under the subtitles of temporalities, medialities and materialities, the second part is organised around practices, which are inevitably shaped and defined by political and social structures and the conditions at the time of their emergence. These structures and conditions may allow proliferation, as well as inhibition. We look at Zeitzeugen in citizen truth commissions, Zeitzeugen in education and citizen history projects, and Zeitzeugen in artistic representations. Unlike studies that foreground aspects of evidence and question how reliable testimonies of Zeitzeugen are and how far they can provide historical truth, our main interest derives from the agency of the Zeitzeugen themselves. Which ideas of justice are behind their activities and what do they use in order to claim authenticity? Zeitzeugen accounts are pleas for justice. They make the unknown knowable and undeniable. They flesh out what is lost in international agencies' reports, statistics, and numbers. They invite the audience to look truth in the eye, to believe it, and to act accordingly. In the contexts discussed in this paper, this often means going against the grain, swimming against strong tides.

## I The Zeitzeuge: A conceptual discussion

Martin Sabrow (2012) introduces the Zeitzeuge as a "wanderer between two worlds" ("Wanderer zwischen zwei Welten") referring to a particular present and a past. Tensions and dialogues between the two worlds can be both a prerequisite and a result of the activities of Zeitzeugen. Such practices imply processes of history in the making, when the past, as a person experienced it, is transformed into history and becomes part of a historical narrative or debate through performance in front of an audience. Witnesses of the past become witnesses to history once they give testimony on their experience in public (de Jong 2018: 38). Thus, wandering between two worlds does not only relate to two time-worlds. We can relate this wandering to at least three frames of travel that have found their way into the international academic debate on Zeitzeugen.

First, there is temporal travel. Zeitzeugen move between a period or an event in the past and a present time which requires an engagement with the past the Zeitzeuge witnessed. Second, being a Zeitzeuge requires mediating between the private and the public. Zeitzeugen move between individual experiences of an event/period and the collective/public memory of them. This movement is structured by the expectations of an audience as well as the role of the media. Finally, objects like images, photographs, buildings, or plants could, through their materiality, mediate between the witness and the audience and become part of the performance of the Zeitzeuge throughout and even beyond the lifetime of the person.

### Temporalities

Questions of temporality lay the foundation for the concept and practice of Zeitzeuge. First is a notion and understanding of time that is comprised of a past, a present, and a future. The relative weight of these three timescapes changes socio-historically from one era to another, and personally within the life-course of an individual. Being stuck in the past, being future-oriented, and living for today are phrases that mark not only individual traits but also certain historical moments.

While exploring the notion of historical time, as distinct from chronological (planetary) time and biological time, Reinhardt Koselleck (2004) untangles the relationship between the past and the future. For him the past is the space of experience, while the future stands for a horizon of expectation. Both are anchored to the present.

Experience is present past, whose events have been incorporated and can be remembered... Similarly with expectation: at once person-specific and interpersonal, expectation also takes place in the today; it is the future made in the present (2004: 259).

These two notions, experience and expectation, respectively pointing to the past and the future, are certainly not symmetrical, but they are mutually dependent. 'No expectation without experience, no experience without expectation' (p. 257), says Koselleck. The first part of the statement is easier to grasp: our expectations rely on our past experiences. Experiences give expect-

tations flesh, friction, and content. Yet our experiences are also mutually dependent on expectations, on two levels. First, because the past itself was once a future, past expectations are the basis of experiences. Second, our expectations, our orientations towards the future, make experiences visible in different shades and forms under different lights.

Sabrow's "wanderer between two worlds", the *Zeitzeuge*, may reside and perform in the present. However, her task is to communicate experiences in sync with the expectations of the future. Emblematic of this temporal dimension is the slogan "never again", used initially referring to Holocaust and later employed by Latin American truth commissions and anti-autocratic movements all around the world. It is a promise to the future, with an explicit reference to the experiences of the past. The role of the *Zeitzeugen* is to make these experiences available in the present, so that they would never be experienced again.

The second important question regarding temporality relates to what is considered to be the past. To quote Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "[t]he past—or, more accurately pastness—is a position" (1995: 15). It is not something out there; the past is not a storage room from which experiences can be retrieved as they are. Rather, the past, or history for that matter, is made at the intersection and through the interaction of present forces. Traces and effects of past times constantly inform and shape societies, whereas processes of "relating the present to absent times" (Landwehr 2016: 142, our translation) are always historically determined. This "chronofence", as Landwehr argues, is the way the present relates to non-present times (p. 28).

*Zeitzeugen* are actors of history. They interact with a time and the happenings of that time; are affected by them and affect them. They are also the subjects of history. By using their voices to set the account straight, they contribute to the making of history, to the writing of the historical narrative. However, they are neither the only actors nor the only subjects. Their voices gain credibility and significance only within certain socio-political constellations. Their past is made *the past* only with the contribution of other voices, other subjects who claim the authority to define what counts as history. *Zeitzeugen* voices are constitutive of the past, but only as much as that past is simultaneously deciphered as *the past* by many other forces. We will consider these social and political forces in more detail in the second part of this paper.

A *Zeitzeuge* relates her present to her past and thereby sometimes overrides chronologies and linearities, which brings us to another significant moment of temporality: understanding the notion of *Zeitzeuge* in the realm of life course and generations. Becoming a *Zeitzeuge*, by definition, happens at a different point in the life course of an individual than the time when the act of witnessing took place. A Holocaust survivor now talks about her childhood in concentration camps as an old woman. We hear how the GDR youth tore down the Berlin wall with their own hands from middle-aged voices. These experiences and narratives are thus not

only affected by the socio-political climate of the time but also by the person's own aging and maturing. Details that bear significance change over time, as do the emotions they convey.

Aging also creates a sense of urgency, not necessarily for the *Zeitzeuge* herself but for the audience. Being a *Zeitzeuge* is a role limited to the lifetime of that person. Her body is the registry upon which the experiences were engraved. Her voice is the medium that makes these engravings at least partially accessible to others. When the body ceases to exist, so does the memory, with its affective, visceral, and material qualities. However, witnessing does not stop there. With testimonies, museum collections, documentaries, sound archives, and oral history collections, these testimonies continue to exist, albeit torn away from the body, which was the pre-condition for their existence in the first place. They are then taken up by the vicarious witnesses (Zeitlin 1998; Hartog 2017), who are witnesses of the witnesses. As interrogators, interviewers, or re-narrators of the primary witnesses' testimony, vicarious witnesses are more than mere vessels—they become personally involved as embodied mediators who are intimately affected and shaped by this second-hand witnessing (Zeitlin 1998; Scherbakowa 2003, 2012).

Marianne Hirsch (2012) explores the intricacies of this intimate and embodied relationship through the notion of "postmemory". For Hirsch, "postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to the experiences they "remember" or embody only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation (Hirsch 2012: 5). *Zeitzeugenschaft* as a practice is then transferred to the generations that follow. However, it is too early to forecast how effective and significant vicarious witnessing will be when the *Zeitzeugen* accounts cease to be considered as *Zeitgeschichte* (contemporary history) (Wieviorka 2006; Ernst/Schwarz 2012).

### Medialities

The *Zeitzeuge* is a person who embodies history, and this embodiment of history is performed in public (Wieviorka 2006: 97). For our argumentation, the relationship between uniqueness and universality is important. Annette Wieviorka states that testimonies,

demonstrate this uniqueness using the language of the time in which they are delivered and in response to questions and expectations motivated by political and ideological concerns. Consequently despite their uniqueness, testimonies come to participate in a collective memory – or collective memories – that vary in their form, function, and in the implicit or explicit aims they set for themselves. (2006: xii)

Wieviorka's historical account of the emergence of the witness as a key figure in the making of collective memory is based on the collective remembrance of the Holocaust. In this context, the first acts of witnessing took place even while the catastrophe was being inflicted upon European Jews (Wieviorka 2006). Those who died or rarely survived in the ghettos and the concentration camps meticulously kept journals and memoirs, collected and hid material that would later prove what they went through. This was a deliberate act in pursuit of survival—not necessarily individual survival, but certainly survival as a people. They sought to leave unquestionable traces that they existed and eventually perished. We, the audiences to these records, have hardly been able to see the authors, the witnesses, themselves. However, their embodied statements have reached us through these accounts of personal agonies that claimed future publicity, as they had absolutely no audience at the time of their bearing witness. The probably most famous *Zeitzeuge* of the Holocaust, Primo Levi, argues in his last book *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986) that it is not those who survived (like him), but those who died in the camps, who are silent, who could never return, who are the real, true witnesses. According to Wieviorka (2006) and Sabrow (2012) Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem opened a new stage for the witness as a social figure. This particular trial was designed not only to prosecute a high-level Nazi officer, but more importantly to exhibit the span and depth of the atrocities committed against the Jews of Europe. Hence the witnesses rarely had any direct accusations against Eichmann. The one hundred and twelve statements collectively presented a huge and detailed panorama of life during the Holocaust. In the chief prosecutor Gideon Hausner's words, these spoken statements "superimpose[d] on a phantom a dimension of reality" (quoted in Wieviorka 2006: 70), by giving victims and survivors the central stage. The journalists who were invited to follow the hearings disseminated this new reality to the globe. This thus created the audience for the *Zeitzeugen*; finally meeting the essential prerequisite of bearing witness. Certainly, the Eichmann trial was not the first occasion on which witnesses met their audience and became *Zeitzeugen* in an interrelational realm. However, it marked the start of an era in which being a witness acquired increasing significance and authenticity, owing much to the carefully designed and framed performance of bearing witness as a globally broadcasted event. The moment the act of bearing witness is witnessed by an audience, it gains its specific social and political value. Acting as a *Zeitzeuge* entails publicness at various levels ranging from family and schools to different media. Performances by *Zeitzeugen* or with *Zeitzeugen* are always complex interactions that take place under particular conditions. Political situations, societal developments, or conflicts lead to debates on history that might require testimonies. In this vein, Krämer and Weigel trenchantly argue that "it is not a single person, nor a single speech act, but an intersubjective situation in a historically specific social world that is condensed

in the act of testifying" (Krämer and Weigel 2017: x). After the Eichman trial, the witnesses of the Holocaust found a social world that allowed for the flourishing of *Zeitzeugen*. As part of global and particularly German atonement, they were invited to make their experiences public, through various media but also in schools and community establishments. They were encouraged to become explicit time-witnesses who speak out publicly. Hence, they aired the direct and indirect memories engraved on them as implicit time-witnesses of the National Socialist regime (Ernst/Schwarz 2012: 44). They were publicly given the authority to speak and the authenticity of their accounts was accepted. Hence they began to function within an interpersonal realm, where their authenticity and the audience's trust in them as the source of epistemic validations were established (Koppelberg 2017).

Unlike documents and other evidence that can be materially scrutinised for proof of authenticity, the authenticity of a person's account is profoundly dependent on interpersonal trust. To be seen as acting earnestly and truthfully, the person has to have personal authenticity (Krämer 2012). However, personal credibility is a social construct as much as a personal achievement. Not all witnesses receive the treatment the Holocaust survivors received after much effort post-1960s, certainly not everywhere and not on every occasion. The political and social conditions that establish authenticity are not available to all. In the second part of this paper, we will consider the social and political processes that nurture or limit (even prohibit) *Zeitzeugen* practices in different contexts. Lacking socially validated authenticity (however truthful their accounts may be), but more importantly lacking an audience, some witnesses are forced either into silence—or, even when they do speak, they are simply not heard (see the groundbreaking works of Spivak 1988 and Piterberg 2006).

*Zeitzeugen* do not always appear on stage or in the witness stand. Musealization should also be mentioned here as another, less direct form of public "performance" or public representation of witnesses. Life stories, narrations, and testimonies are made public in museums and exhibitions by being adapted to the audience's modes of perception. As elsewhere, communicative memory becomes part of a collective memory when such narrations are represented in a museum (de Jong 2018). As the question here also involves the creation of objects, or objects embodying testimonies, we need to look more closely at the medium and materiality of the *Zeitzeugen*, which is the topic of the next subsection.

### Materialities

In the case of *Zeitzeugen*, the messenger herself is often the medium (Krämer 2012: 20). Here we find the combination of material and personal authenticity. The witness, therefore, is also "an object" (de Jong 2018), she is even the "document" of a past, because she embodies the past in her experiences. She also possesses personal authenticity because the audience regards her as truthful and credible (Krämer 2012: 24). What hap-



pens then, when the Zeitzeugen cease to exist, when they die? Is it possible to preserve their experiences, the key feature of which is embodiment, in objects that can outlive the witnesses? Is it possible to create (or maybe assume) witness authenticity in buildings, photographs, or ordinary items like shoes or suitcases? What is left by the Zeitzeugen when they complete the course of their lives? Is it possible to approach museums as sites of Zeitzeugen collections/collectives?

To address these questions, we return to the notions of the "vicarious witness" (Zeitlin 1998) and "postmemory" (Hirsch 2012). As stated above, being a Zeitzeuge is a role limited to the lifetime of that person, yet the memory can be transmitted to younger generations. However, it is not only persons who inherit memory and can thus act as vicarious witnesses. Under specific conditions, things, images, and objects can also take on this role. In *Camera Lucida* (1981), Roland Barthes ties his analysis of photography to his own autobiography and directs his gaze to the photographs of his late relatives. He goes through the photographs of his mother and tries to capture what is left of her in these small paper objects. He then concludes, rather decisively:

The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation (1981: 89).

So even if we cannot get to know the people in these photographs, hear their stories, or even learn about their context in full, even if we need to put imaginative energy to work in order to make sense of them, the photographs testify that these people existed. They were there, some time ago, as according to Burke, "images, like texts and oral testimonies, are an important form of historical evidence. They record acts of eyewitnessing" (2001: 14).

This testimonial capacity of photographs, however, is very much debated, given that it is possible to tamper with photographs even with the most basic technologies, let alone today's digital miracles. There is also the question of staging and framing and, certainly, of context. Closely considering second-generation Holocaust memory through her own collection of family photographs, Marianne Hirsch (1997) acknowledges these hazards and situates them within the frame of remembrance:

Photographs in their enduring 'umbilical' connection to life are precisely the medium connecting first- and second-generation remembrance, memory and postmemory. They are leftovers, the fragmentary sources and building blocks, shot through with holes, of the work of postmemory. They affirm the past's existence and, in their flat two-dimensionality, they signal its unbridgeable distance (1997: 23).

But our intention is not to simply regard the object per se as a time-witness to history. Rather we are interested in the connections between objects and persons.

Things as witnesses are objects that bear a connection to a person that had been/is a Zeitzeuge (Malhotra 2019). The object does not stand for itself. It is not about "a" suitcase or "a" shoe, but rather a particular suitcase that belonged or might have belonged to a prisoner in a KZ, or a shoe that was or might have been worn by a person who died in the Holocaust. The object can only speak to the observer through the knowledge the viewer has. Even if one does not know the exact person, one knows the history, and the object then manifests its authenticity. The interplay of imagination and evidence that Marianne Hirsch writes about is again evident here.

## II Zeitzeugen: Modalities of witnessing as a political act in Asia and the Middle East

"The functions of witnesses to history are defined by the settings in which the individual witnesses appear," writes Steffi de Jong (2018: 37). Such "settings" generate the social and political conditions in which people who experienced or lived through a particular period of time become witnesses to history. In the second part of this paper, we will discuss the political agendas and practices of witnesses to history in three such settings: political activism and citizen truth commissions, education and citizen history projects, and artistic representations. The examples we analyse come from different countries in the Middle East and Asia and deal with situations in which bearing witness to history is often an act of resistance or protest. We propose an analytical perspective that situates the statements and acts of Zeitzeugen vis-à-vis the dominant national historical narratives concerning their respective contexts. At the same time, the three settings we consider call for a translocal perspective, as local and national projects are often influenced by international movements. They make use of globally proved models, techniques, or strategies, and refer to political developments worldwide. With these in mind, our perspective foregrounds the agency of the witnesses to history, while not ignoring or exclusively concentrating on their status as victims of persecution. At the centre of our analysis are the ways Zeitzeugen recompose national narratives and challenge them in order to fill their gaps, and how they raise their voices and speak from the margins to undermine and question national narratives.

### *Zeitzeugen in citizen truth commissions*

Truth commissions are one of the major mechanisms of transitional justice, which is defined by the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) as

the ways countries emerging from periods of conflict and repression address large-scale or systematic human rights violations so numerous and so serious that the normal justice system will not be able to provide an adequate response (2020).

As such, transitional justice is extraordinary justice, requiring extraordinary and time-limited tools, which are not limited to criminal prosecutions and punishment. The final goal is reconciliation and to establish the

rule-of-law. Within this framework, truth commissions emerge as key venues where human rights violations could be recognised, acknowledged, and possibly addressed. They act on the premise that forgetfulness might lead to resentment on one side and vengefulness on the other, thus fuelling future conflicts. While accounting for past atrocities, they are essentially future oriented institutions: they aim to create the conditions of peaceful co-existence in a society, yet their success is contingent.

Providing testimonies to truth commissions is often an act of *Zeitzeugenschaft*, as it involves linking the past with the future and mediating between the private and the public. Truth commissions rely on individuals' private memories that are made public through hearings (Ross 2003). The level of publicity and the level of privateness depend on the commission's mandate and method, yet it is still people's recollections that are used to create a public account of truth about past events (Andrews 2003). However, both the selection of these individual stories and the way they are categorised, historicised, and framed is a deliberate task that brings certain narratives to the fore and obscures others. According to Molly Andrews (2003: 46), truth commissions "both produce and are produced by grand national narratives, and must be understood in the particular context(s) in which they emerge and the particular goals, either implicit or explicit, which guide their work." Truth commissions are often "educational enterprises" (Mamdani 2015: 72), crafting the outlines of "new" societies and disseminating them to the public.

However, as Paul Silverstein and Ussama Makdisi (2006: 12) remind us, "[b]ecause reconciliation by definition depends on compromise, all processes of reconciliation depend on a partial 'forgetting'". Therefore, it is important to remember that the grand narrative a truth commission produces is only one truth among many others (Bakiner 2015; Mamdani 2000). The value of this singular truth is dependent on how large and inclusive it is of the truths of the individuals who came to testify and who make up the society (Mamdani 2000). It is contingent upon how much the testimonial narrative produced by the commission is loyal, respectful, and encompassing of what individuals witnessed, experienced, and finally narrated. The narration itself, however, is very much shaped by what is asked—the questions determined by the mandate of the commission and the focus of inspection. For the famous South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission that functioned between 1995–1998 and collected more than 21,000 testimonies, the mandate was limited to individual extra-legal human rights violations. It failed to account for the perfectly legal structures of racialised dispossession and disenfranchisement the Apartheid regime had been built upon (Mamdani 2000; 2015; on the relation on law and testimony see Sander 2007). Hence, the truth of the TRC covered the experiences of anti-Apartheid activists, but not of those for whom the activists had fought. This serious limitation, despite the tremendous achievements, led some to criticise the TRC for legitimizing Apartheid (see for example, Wilson 2001).

While official truth and reconciliation commissions act on a high political level, often installed and controlled by the respective state, and thus aim at changing or correcting a national narrative to create, consolidate, or regain national identity, there exist various means to challenge existing national narratives from other perspectives. Among them are also "unofficial truth projects" (Bickford 2007), based on the efforts of non-state actors or civil society, in which witnesses to history act as mediums for challenging homogeneous and singular national narratives by offering alternatives and multiplying historical truths. Struggling under contingent or violent conditions, citizens' truth commissions or associations aim for minority voices to be publicly heard, recognised and integrated into larger processes of reconciliation and national consolidation, hence making the truth more encompassing.

Unofficial truth projects resemble official truth commissions not only in their endeavour to champion acknowledgment of past atrocities as the first step towards societal peace-building, but also in their methods: collecting documents, conducting forensic research, and most importantly recruiting *Zeitzeugen* to give testimonies about a period or event. Most of them are smaller in scale, yet when it is not possible to establish a truth commission, or when official initiatives would be politically compromised, they perform vital functions. These range from therapeutic (both for individuals and society as a whole) to deeply political, as they create venues for stories that were once unknown to the general public. Unofficial truth projects are visible in many forms around the globe. Mock trials are one of them, as in the case of the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery held in Tokyo in 2000 (Henry 2011). Other times, they mimic and act as replacements for truth commissions, as in the case of the *Nunca Mais* initiative in Brazil, which has collected classified military documents and witness statements in order to document torture and human rights abuses under the military dictatorship between 1964–1985 (Dassin 1998). Yet, as in the case of the *My Story* initiative in Bosnia Herzegovina, these unofficial projects may keep their scope deliberately small. Rather than collecting as much as possible, they often focus on outreach to create mutual understanding, empathy, and finally true reconciliation between hostile groups (Oberpfalzerova/Ullrich/Jeřábek 2019). Despite the specifics of each context, all these projects are translocally entangled, because they learn from each other, form alliances, establish networks, and create benchmarks for future projects to flourish. In this section we will focus on two unofficial truth projects, from Iraq and Sri Lanka, to discuss their political premises and imperatives and how *Zeitzeugen* played a crucial role within them.

In 2003, The United States-led invasion of Iraq ended the notorious Ba'ath regime. Yet the transition brought neither peace nor reconciliation. Amidst violence that has erupted sporadically ever since, there have been many calls and attempts to establish a truth and reconciliation commission (Sarkin/Sensibaugh 2008; Hidary 2009; Sterling 2009; Emerson 2013). However, it has

never been realised, mostly—although not exclusively—due to fears about acknowledging the torture and violence American troops and administrators committed during the invasion. Therefore, the Supreme Iraqi Tribunal of 2005, which ended with the hasty execution of Saddam Hussein and a few of his accomplices, has been the only transitional tool used to investigate the crimes of the Ba'ath party to date. According to Mlodoch (2012), while the trial finally created some space for the Kurdish victims, it fell far short of providing them justice, acknowledgement, and reparations. Moreover, because there was no outreach programme, the witness statements have remained buried in the 963-page concluding trial judgment (Trahan 2009), never reaching the audience they were intended for.

Yet the desire to establish the truth about the Ba'ath regime's atrocities has not died down since the trial. Several informal initiatives that in different ways, qualify as unofficial truth projects flourished. An early and significant example is the Iraq History Project led by the International Human Rights Law Institute of De Paul University, between 2005–2009. The researchers gathered 8900 testimonies, that amounted to more 55,000 pages,<sup>2</sup> and produced a book with a small selection of them (Iraq History Project 2007). The testimonies were collected from across Iraq and the project was hoped to be a precursor to official transitional justice efforts. However, the project neither produced this outcome nor satisfied the particular recognition needs of minorities, such as the Kurds of Northern Iraq, who survived the large-scale and coordinated Anfal operations of the Ba'ath Party. Below, we focus on an unofficial truth project that was initiated by Kurdish women who survived the Anfal, and which was studied in depth by Karin Mlodoch.

The Ba'ath Party's Anfal operations against the Kurdish population of Iraq took place in 1988. Over a period of several months, the regime under Saddam Hussein conducted a violent campaign against the Kurdish minority in Northern Iraq, including chemical attacks. Villages were destroyed, tens of thousands of people were killed, and thousands disappeared (Kelly 2007). Only after 2003 could public demand for truth and evidence about the Anfal operations be raised. Anfal women, a name given to the female relatives of the dead and disappeared also began their search for justice and truth at that point. When Kurdistan-Iraq gained autonomous status in 2005, the regional government made Anfal into an integral part of their claims to national identity and for regional autonomy (Mlodoch 2012). In the meanwhile, they had also acknowledged the suffering of the victims, and the public status of the women had gradually changed. However, neither this recognition nor the monument erected by the government were satisfactory enough to meet their demands and desire to self-represent (Mlodoch 2012: 83). They were utterly unhappy being presented as shepherds stuck in a frozen past. Finally, in 2008, the "Anfal Women Memorial Forum Project" was launched with the aim of es-

tablishing a memorial site as a public space for commemoration in a way true to the survivors' perspective. This coincided with other memorialization efforts. Most importantly, the comprehensive Kurdistan Memory Programme ([kurdistanmemoryprogramme.com](http://kurdistanmemoryprogramme.com)) was launched in the same year. It continued to collect and broadcast Zeitzeugen statements from survivors to create a broad and encompassing picture of the atrocities. Every year on 14 April, the victims of the massacres (which have been recognised as a genocide by the tribunal) are officially commemorated. Various channels use video testimonies for this purpose (see for example, Anfal files in Rudaw 2020).

However, the Anfal women's initiative to create their own monument has achieved more than memorialization. As Karin Mlodoch (2011, 2012, 2017) aptly illustrates, women's motivations and expressions of agency have changed significantly over time. Mlodoch documents how the narratives of the Anfal women transformed, from first searching for their missing relatives to focusing on their own experiences, thus showing "their long and painful path from victims to survivors" (2011: 19). She also illustrates how narration and mourning turned into protest and demands: the creation of an Anfal memorial, the demand for the prosecution of the Kurdish collaborators with the Ba'ath regime, and the demand to open the mass graves. Although the voices and testimonies of the Anfal women did not initially reach the national level, the women moved from being the suffering innocents to persons with a loss, yet also with a future and a voice (Mlodoch 2012: 83). Hence, in this particular example, given the lack of an official truth commission and the patriarchal blindness of the Kurdish elite to the women's plight, women achieved solidarity and healing by creating their own space and thinking about how to represent themselves. And, most importantly within the scope of this paper, they established themselves as sovereign, credible, and legitimate Zeitzeugen.

Our second example comes from Sri Lanka, where, after the civil war (1983–2009), in addition to official commissions of inquiry (COIs), a number of initiatives have been established, including truth telling projects to investigate the past. The country had to cope with the disruption, separation, and loss resulting from more than thirty years of hatred and violence. While the commissions of inquiry (COIs) had "the mandate to investigate and inquire into past incidents", they often acted with limited powers and under pressure from outside (Fonseka 2017: 204). There were, however, attempts to develop a unique "'Sri Lankan approach' to truth, memory and justice" (Gunatilleke 2015: 89), which in a context of continuing religious violence (Aliff 2019; Yusoff/Sarjoon 2019) did not yield success. This has led to a proliferation of truth telling and justice projects that were initiated semi-officially or unofficially in order to "provide a platform for diverse and multiple actors to come forward and contribute their lived narratives" (Fonseka 2017: 200). Taken together, they point to the plurality and complexity of perspectives, needs, and interests (Guruparan 2017).

2 <https://law.depaul.edu/about/centers-and-institutes/international-human-rights-law-institute/projects/Pages/iraq.aspx>



Among the many violent acts and processes that marked the Sri Lankan civil war between 1983-2009, one significant incident was the expulsion of 75,000 Muslims from northern Sri Lanka by the militant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1990. Many Muslims who had been expelled in 1990 and wanted to return after 2009 were seen by the authorities as "better off" victims who were not in desperate financial need compared to other groups. Thus, Muslims had to fight against a "hierarchization of victimhood" (Haniffa 2015: 11) during the transition period following the end of the war during which they were expected to return to their former areas of settlement.

Many of them narrated their stories after 2009, in a period of increased anti-Muslim sentiment in the country (Gunatilleke 2015: 16–17). These Muslims who had become witnesses to history are at the centre of Farzana Haniffa's paper about a "community-based 'truth telling' transitional justice project" (2015: 2). The Citizens' Commission of Investigation founded within this project supported the struggle of expelled Muslims from Northern Sri Lanka for official recognition of their status as victims. According to Haniffa, who coordinated the work of this commission, it was founded "precisely in order to address the insufficient attention paid in narratives of the Sri Lankan conflict to the story of northern Muslims" (2015:2). Within this context, the Citizens' Commission of Investigation mobilised narratives of victimhood to influence national policy. Haniffa states:

... persons affected by conflict may mobilize their stories of victimhood for political purposes, towards memorialization or healing, to access aid and to seek justice for atrocities. Such mobilization may be understood in terms of different forms of subjectivization in response to different modes of governmentality (2015: 10).

The commission, which had been initiated by the Law and Society Trust, worked for two years and collected approximately 390 statements, submitting its final report "Quest for Redemption" (QFR) in 2011.<sup>3</sup> Its major concern was truth seeking and establishing visibility (Haniffa 2011).

One reason for the lack of attention paid to the concerns of northern Sri Lankan Muslims was that both organizations like UNHCR and local actors worked with different definitions of victimhood. These had consequences for decisions on compensation and the right of the Muslims to return. Haniffa argues that "victim" was a technical term for UNHCR and a political term for the commission, as outlined in the report "Quest for Redemption" (QFR) (Haniffa 2011). When Muslims were allowed to come back to their former areas of settlement after 2009, they were not given the victim status through UNHCR. While the Sri Lankan state had registered them as IDPs (internally displaced persons), UNHCR did not. Haniffa sees here a conflict between the work of humanitarian actors like UNHCR and local transitional justice actors like the QFR commission. With the installation of the Sri Lankan Lessons Learnt

and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) by President Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2010, there finally was a "state mechanism that acknowledged their [the northern Muslims', HL, HA] experiences" (Haniffa 2015: 12).

Unlike the case of the Anfal women in Kurdistan-Iraq, who through their organised struggle to establish a site of commemoration developed from mere "victims" to active "survivors" (Mlodoch 2011), Haniffa shows that through the citizen project in Sri Lanka, Muslim witnesses testified about their losses and thus claimed the politically and economically crucial status of victimhood. In both cases, *Zeitzeugen* took part in political struggles for official recognition of their suffering and losses, and in doing so contributed to reconciliation processes that, in the end, were intended to ensure dignity and justice for them.

### *Zeitzeugen in education and citizen history projects*

Witnesses to history are, on some occasions, invited to narrate their stories in history classes or oral history projects as "authentic sources". Manuals for teachers explain how to prepare and conduct interviews and how to use and interpret them. Pupils search for *Zeitzeugen* to be interviewed in classes, history competitions, or for school projects. Utilising digital media, testimonies of *Zeitzeugen* have been collected, stored, and performed not only in educational settings but also in large-scale citizen history initiatives. Through such oral history projects, which aim to provide orientation and produce historical knowledge, representatives of different generations, political orientations, and religious or social origins speak and listen to each other. Despite their differences, they engage through this encounter with collective memories and multiple perspectives on history. As a consequence, witnesses to history can contribute not only to a growing awareness of particular historical events and developments, but also to processes of peace making and justice.

In Lebanon, where the state had practiced a policy of "dismemory" (Nikro 2012, 2019) with regard to historicising and commemorating the civil war of 1975–1990, cultural and educational projects began to emerge after the war and played a decisive role in processes of "ReMemory" (Nikro 2017, 2019). Such "memory practices" can, according to Saadi Nikro "initiate alternative modalities of social exchange to the predominating parceling of political communities and advocacy according to confessional allegiance" (Nikro 2019: 5).

Among such alternative memory initiatives was The Atlas Group led by the Lebanese artist and photographer Walid Raad between 1989 and 2004. Its aim was to document and research the civil war by collecting and exploring stories of individual experience and memories. The Atlas Group Archive consists of diaries, notebooks, photographs, stories related to material objects or to historical events and experiences which had been preserved in minds and houses before they were shared publicly. These stories were directly submitted by first-hand witnesses or indirectly through vicarious witnesses, some of them anonymously.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.lstlanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/The-Quest-for-Redemption-Book-English.pdf> (accessed 9 January 2021).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theatlasgroup1989.org/> (accessed 31 December 2020).

Other projects have pursued an educational agenda, like the one initiated by the Permanent Peace Movement (PPM), an organization founded by a group of Lebanese university students in 1986. Between 2009 and 2014, PPM worked in collaboration with the German Zivik/IFA Institute for Foreign Relations and invited high-school students to engage with the history and consequences of the war through a range of activities, including meetings and conversations with Zeitzeugen. The activities took place at symbolic places and on symbolic dates, like the 13 April, the civil war commemoration day. Theatre performances, walks through towns, and film screenings, among them of the Zivik-funded student film "War Stories", took place under the slogan "Remember – Forgive – Change".<sup>5</sup>

In the following, we take a closer look at another memory and educational project in Lebanon which became subject of academic analysis (Nikro 2017). In February 2011, the high-school project *Badna Naaref* (We want to know) began in several schools in Beirut.<sup>6</sup> High-school students interviewed representatives of a generation who had been children or teenagers during the civil war. The people interviewed told their stories as adults, for another generation who were now teenagers and high-school pupils who wanted to "gain and record knowledge" (Nikro 2017: 196). Students approached the interviewees with their questions in a given political context, social frame, and location (a school). This educational project was carried out under the direction of the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) Beirut. Interviews were conducted in and around Beirut. In his analysis of the project, Nikro raises the question of the expectations of the audience, in this case the high-school students. What answers did they expect? What answers they might have wanted to get? While the testimonies of the narrators depended to a great extent on the questions posed by the interviewer, the whole process of listening was "not a passive undertaking" (Nikro 2017: 204). The students prepared photographs to show their interviewees and asked them whether they carried a particular image with(in) themselves that they would associate with their civil war memories. These photos became material symbols of visualised remembrance (Nikro 2017: 196), "image-texts" as Mitchell (1995) calls them, which attest to a past that is now to be communicated to future generations.

Interestingly, Nikro does not speak about different times connected by the narrators and the students' act of listening. Rather, he observes that in this particular situation there was no past; there were two now-times in the performance of the witnesses to history during the interviews. This "chronofence" (Landwehr 2016) is expressed through the Arabic word "halla", which, according to the author "entertains two temporalities – the now-time of the experience of enduring violence, and the now-time of the interview" (Nikro 2017: 201).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ppm-lebanon.org/> (accessed 1 January 2021).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ictj.org/news/badna-naaref-lebanon%E2%80%99s-online-wartime-diary> (accessed 21 December 2020).

The Zeitzeuge and the student somehow merged the times to build a specific "chronofence", which Achim Landwehr defines as the relationality (*Relationierung*) which can connect present and absent times, i.e. pasts and futures with presents (Landwehr 2016: 28).

The narratives recorded within the *Badna Naaref* project were kept in a larger database maintained since 2005 by the Lebanese non-governmental organization UMAM Documentation and Research. UMAM started as a "citizen resource centre"<sup>7</sup> with the main goal of collecting and preserving narratives that would not otherwise be preserved in official state archives, and thus aimed at "resisting societal amnesia and to foster public discourse about the civil war" (Hegasy 2019: 257).

Documentation and preservation are crucial requirements to oral history and education projects. Such archives of testimonies help to challenge official political narratives and to undermine state politics of forgetting and silencing. As Sonja Hegasy has shown for Morocco, Egypt, and Lebanon, such acts of "archive activism" can be a conscious political strategy on the part of "archive partisans" to break with state controlled and monopolised representations of the past and thus provide the ground for new debates about past atrocities and violence (Hegasy 2019; see also Hegasy 2017). Sadly, and quite tellingly, one of the founders of UMAM, the activist, publisher, and filmmaker Lokman Slim was assassinated in southern Lebanon on 4 February 2021, while this paper was under review.<sup>8</sup>

Considering South Asia, the 1947 partition of India represents a traumatic historical event, which, decades later, became the topic of intensive public and academic debates. New approaches, including oral history, have given voice to diverse individual stories and the history of material objects (for example: Butalia 2000; Bajpai/Framke 2018a/b, Mahn /Murphy 2018, Malhotra 2019). In *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Urvashi Butalia (2000) foregrounds experiences of female witnesses and argues that by paying respect to their voices, oral history provides a way to understand what history means for them, how they embodied the past, and how they carry the past in their present lives and to the next generations. Aanchal Malhotra (2019) has also collected stories about the partition told through the trajectories of objects that had encapsulated memories about times their owners could hardly speak about. Biographical objects here, as we argued earlier, speak to the observer through the story of the relationship between the object and the person it had belonged to. They become tools for activating and narrating memories (Malhotra 2019).

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.umam-dr.org//about/> (accessed 9 September 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Lokman Slim was a long-time partner of the ZMO in the research project *Transforming Memories* ([https://archiv.zmo.de/forschung/projekte\\_2008\\_2013/Transforming\\_Memories\\_e\\_2008\\_2013.html](https://archiv.zmo.de/forschung/projekte_2008_2013/Transforming_Memories_e_2008_2013.html)). Sonja Hegasy writes about him: "With him, we and the nation of Lebanon loose an exemplar, courageous, open, generous and loveable intellectual with quite a dark humor. He had a vision for his region. This vision stems from a universal 'Never again!'" See: <https://www.zmo.de/personen/lokman-slim> (accessed 24 April 2021).

In recent decades, we have also witnessed the emergence of large-scale internet-based citizen history projects developed to collect, store, and educate. Such projects often provide archives with enormous numbers of documents, objects, and witness voices. The above-mentioned Kurdistan Memory Programme is one such example. Another is the *1947 Partition Archive*, founded in 2010, which became a translocal undertaking. Volunteers in India and elsewhere, trained as "citizen historians", were invited by the founders of the project to conduct interviews with survivors of the partition of India in South Asia and among the South Asian diaspora in other parts of the world.<sup>9</sup> The initiators of the 1947 Partition Archive, based in Berkeley, US, describe their initiative as a non-profit, non-governmental organization consisting of "concerned global citizens committed to preserving this chapter of our collective history".<sup>10</sup> Their aim is to collect life stories shaped by the partition of India in 1947. So far, nearly 9500 oral history stories from witnesses of the partition have been collected. They are based on interviews conducted in 12 countries and 36 languages.<sup>11</sup> Some of the narrations have been anonymised, while some are told in the third person. Interviews were mostly conducted with video-cameras, although not all of them are displayed publicly. A large number of volunteers, citizen historians, scholars, and writers from various countries are supporting the initiative. The initiators claim that "[t]he 1947 Partition Archive has democratised historical documentation, bringing forth voices from communities previously underrepresented and histories previously unknown."<sup>12</sup> However, there are also critical voices expressing scepticism against an exclusive concentration on the human or personal dimension, making it impossible to adequately show the complexity of politics before, during, and after partition. Ravinder Kaur, the author of *Since 1947: Partition Narratives among the Punjabi Migrants of Delhi* (2007), in an online article argues for a systematic connection of the partition events to larger historical contexts and warns that

[t]he subject of memorialisation we increasingly meet is mostly a passive victim of circumstances and almost

9 Dr. Guneeta Singh Bhalla, a natural scientist, was the initiator, supported by colleagues from Berkeley and Stanford University. The organisers teach their citizen historians in workshops and they then conduct interviews where they are located. Inspired by the Hiroshima Peace Memorial and other Holocaust memorials working with oral history, the founders of 1947 Partition Archive want to make stories of witnesses publicly heard and with these personal accounts give legitimacy and importance to an event that, according to Bhalla, is often forgotten or told via numbers or politicians' statements. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j\\_QYPCDuFPk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_QYPCDuFPk) (accessed 13 December 2020)

10 <https://www.1947partitionarchive.org/about> (accessed 13 December 2020).

11 <https://www.1947partitionarchive.org/> (accessed 13 December 2020).

12 <https://www.1947partitionarchive.org/> (accessed 18 September 2020); see also: <https://thewire.in/history/1947-partition-archive> (accessed 18.09. 2020)

never a willing participant in the events that unfolded. In other words, the space for complexities and contradictions is steadily erased once the affective project of memorialisation begins overshadowing the project of critical history (Kaur 2016).

While historiography and official national history have foregrounded political aspects of the history of partition, subjective experiences and multiple popular memories have only recently become widely discussed (Butalia 2000; Mahn/Murphy 2018; Bajpai/Framke 2018a). The "interplay of memory, testimony and history helps craft alternative narratives", argues Nonica Datta (2017: 61). By making such fragmented histories across class, caste, and geographical origin visible and archiving them, the Partition Project and its like make further investigation and historical research possible. Furthermore, the initiators' claim challenges the notion of the "archive" as an intended and systematically planned and controlled collection of documents (Datta 2017; Chakravarty 2018; Hegasy 2019).

### *Zeitzeugen in artistic representations*

In this section, our focus will be on art projects that foreground *Zeitzeugen* voices. Artistic representations and curatorial practices bring forth the questions of medialities and materialities discussed above. They often provide solutions to the problem of what happens when the *Zeitzeugen* have died. In their own ways, they conserve *Zeitzeugen*'s voices and make them accessible beyond their lifetimes. They also have yet another, more immediate function. The use of *Zeitzeugen*'s accounts in art often has the aim of creating new vicarious witnesses; people who can act as witnesses when the original *Zeitzeugen* cannot be heard, either because they are dead or because they have been silenced. Hence, through art, *Zeitzeugen*'s voices are amplified and reach far beyond their initial audience, turning them into significant devices of political activism. This activism can serve different aims, though—some more conservative than the others.

29 October 1998 was the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Turkey, which replaced centuries of Ottoman rule in Anatolia and Thrace. In order to take a retrospective and sociologically informed look at the 75 years of the republic, the prominent History Foundation (Tarih Vakfı) organized a large exhibition in Istanbul. The curator recruited seven academics to conduct research and produce the visual, audio, and written material, on different scenes, or fragments, of the republic ranging from labour relations to gender, from urban architecture to technological developments. *Zeitzeugen* accounts specifically gathered for the exhibition were prominent in all of the sections. Several books devoted to the sections accompanied the exhibition, bringing together the exhibition material with articles accessible to the public. Nükhet Sirman, who curated the gender section, later wrote an essay on the *Zeitzeugenschaft* of the women interviewed during the preparation phase.

In her essay, Sirman diagnoses in these women's accounts the current crisis of the republic—to be more

precise, the crisis of republican values, which seem increasingly inadequate to meet the challenges posed by the social composition of the country, the changes in the political arena, and the increasing economic neoliberalism (Sirman 2006: 32). These women, who were invited to be Zeitzeugen to the birth and the early years of the republic, seem to suffer under this crisis and respond to it by interweaving the official national narrative with their own life-stories. During their interviews, they speak very timidly, yet become more articulate at moments when their own lives become testaments to the successes of the republic, their own bodies the proofs of the worth of its values and principles. "They all had the sense of being the vanguards of the state" (p. 36), Sirman notes. Their stories relate a sense of panic over an anticipated loss, not only of social positions, but also of a coherent story which cosily frames their lives and makes them meaningful. They identify their achievements in life with republican modernization and feel an embodied threat in the changing global and national context. Their present and their expectations about the future reshape their past experiences, or at least their narrations of that past.

These "daughters of the Turkish Republic" (Bora 2011) "stand as witness to a mythic time of homogeneity and solidarity" (Sirman 2006: 45) at a time when both homogeneity and solidarity are questioned with the flourishing of challenging memories. This challenge comes with the sea change of the memory boom of the last decades of the 20th century, which globally submitted the "governing myths" (Bell 2003) of the nations to scrutiny in different contexts and with different rationales. It also comes at a postcolonial moment when the hegemony of dominant groups over narrations of the past and historiography is being questioned at various levels. Yet, as the example above illustrates, the flourishing of Zeitzeugen does not always mean diversity, polyvocality, and deconstruction.

During the 2000s, Turkey's shrinking Christian and Jewish minorities became the subject of many scholarly and popular publications, films, and exhibitions. Armenians occupy a particularly significant place among them. In Turkey, the Armenian genocide of 1915 is subject to staunch official, and largely societal, denial. While the deportation of Anatolian Armenians is mentioned in the official narrative, even in schoolbooks, calling it a genocide or ethnic cleansing, despite the overwhelming evidence from Ottoman archives (Dündar 2008), is still a taboo. However, since the 1990s, a new "Post-Nationalist Critical Narrative" (Göçek 2006) has emerged among critical historians (see, for example, Akçam 2006, 2013; Öktem 2008; Dündar 2008). This new scholarly endeavour stands against the "Republican Defensive Narrative" (Göçek 2006) and official pressure to suppress the knowledge of the events of 1915 and to silence their remembrance. Alongside the academic output, the (post)memories of Armenians and their offspring have also become increasingly available in other formats, particularly exhibitions, as discussed below, talking not only about 1915 but also its never-ending aftermath.

A particular breakthrough was the memoir of a human rights lawyer, Fethiye Çetin, who found out as an adult that her grandmother was a survivor of the genocide and an Islamised Armenian. Her widely translated book, *My Grandmother* (2008), was first published in Turkish in 2004 and was followed by many volumes that detail the experiences of the survivors, their children, and their grandchildren. Unsurprisingly, the overall theme of all these books is the silence and secrecy the authors and their loved ones had to endure for more than 90 years (Altınay 2014). These voices, especially of the grandchildren, attest to shame, fear, and confusion, as well as compassion and grief for those who had to keep their identities hidden. As vicarious witnesses (Zeitlin 1998; Hartog 2017) or carriers of post-memory (Hirsch 2012), these children and grandchildren of survivors, by the acts of remembering and talking, actively work on their memories and explore how their ancestors' wounds express themselves in their own bodies, as pain, anxiety and in their dreams (see especially the collection by Altınay/Çetin 2014). They trace the slightly unusual taste of their grandparents, the extraordinary days they seem to celebrate inconspicuously and the non-Turkish words they use to make sense of who these grandparents were, and eventually who they, themselves, are. For some of these narrators, like Fethiye Çetin, the grandparents were the Zeitzeugen who told their children and grandchildren what they witnessed and lived through, albeit often sparingly. However, the narrators themselves are not only vicarious witnesses, carrying the memories of others forwards. They are also the Zeitzeugen themselves: the witnesses of a time period defined by silence, denial, suppression and ignorance. Other Zeitzeugen and vicarious witnesses of the plight of the Armenians of Anatolia have also emerged since 2000. A Turkish-Armenian collaboration supported by the German Foreign Ministry, the *Speaking to One Another Project*, employed an oral history methodology to foster understanding and reconciliation between Turkish and Armenian publics, especially youth. During the project from 2009–2013, young people from Turkey and Armenia came together on many occasions, visited each other's cities and together received training on oral history from Turkish and Armenian scholars. Similar to the Lebanese example described above, they interviewed elderly people from Turkey and Armenia about the events of 1915 and their aftermath. The project produced a book (Neyzi/Kharatyan-Araqelyan 2010) and, more importantly, an exhibition that travelled to many cities in Turkey and Armenia, as well as Tbilisi, Berlin, and Paris. Some of the participating youths then continued to conduct their own oral history research or created documentaries. Through this lengthy embodied experience, they themselves become vicarious witnesses who feel obliged to make what they lived and experienced widely heard.

Finally, we briefly explore an emerging genre that has become a significant medium in representing memories, testimonies, and remembrances of violence, displacement, and oppression. The 2000s came with a graphic novels boom that moved comics increasingly away



from fiction and fantasy towards journalism, memoirs, and history. Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (1993, 1996), *Safe Area Gorazde* (2000), *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), *Paying the Land* (2020); Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003); Hamid Sulaiman's *Freedom Hospital* (2017); Zerocalcare's *Kobane Calling* (2017); and Kate Evans's *Threads* (2017), all inventively follow the footsteps of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986). In it Spiegelman told the story of his father, a survivor of Auschwitz, and his own complicated relationship to Jewish identity and Holocaust memory through illustrated panels and speech bubbles from the mouths of mice, pigs, and cats. The book is a testament of a vicarious witness to the plight and survival of his father, expressed in a narrative form upheld both by writing and illustrations.

Graphic novels have unique capacities to act as advantageous mediums for communicating Zeitzeugens' accounts. The panels fracture both time and space (McCloud 1993: 45) in a similar fashion to the workings of memory. Memory's fragmentedness, partiality, and unevenly distributed attention to detail can be effectively grasped and mediated by the fractured language of the graphic novel. Moreover, being able to speak two languages—illustration and speech—at once, graphic novels can blend present and past into single panels (Beatens/Frey 2014: 220) by employing the present voice over the graphic depiction of past events. Hence, the author, and the reader alongside, very effectively travel between two time-worlds within less than a second. Finally, fractured into panels, shifting perspectives and focus all the time, graphic novels demand from readers an intimate engagement and mental labour. The reader has to fill in the gaps and connect the fragments to grasp the narrative. Through this dense and sharpened attention and the sensory experience of being exposed to images, the readers can be pulled deep into the accounts of the Zeitzeugen. Hence, graphic novels prove to be an exceptionally good fit as a medium for time-witnessing.

The books mentioned above are either the memoirs of the authors' themselves, or they heavily employ Zeitzeugens' voices to tell the story. This is especially the case in Sacco's groundbreaking comic journalism. Sacco's Bosnian, Palestinian, and Native American interlocutors speak with a direct voice, only mediated by Sacco's artful depiction of their bodies, over many panels, even pages. They directly look the reader in the eye and speak of their experiences. Sacco is a witness to/ the guarantor of their existence, while we the audience become witnesses to their pain, loss, and sometimes cruelty. Hence, analysing *Footnotes in Gaza*, Nawal Musleh-Motut states that

much like photographs, comic images are more than passive entities that simply assist in documenting evidence of suffering. Rather, they are active agents able to performatively facilitate the act of bearing witness, both to traumatic events and the testimonies of their survivors (2019: 68).

One recent example serves the same purpose of recruiting more witnesses, yet here we hear the voice of the Zeitzeuge himself, only mediated by his own artistic rep-

resentation in the graphic novel. In *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*, the readers are invited to become witnesses to Malik Sajad's coming-of-age in conflict ridden Kashmir in the 1990s. Sajad (2015) represents himself and all Kashmiri characters with the image of a stag deer, the endangered *Hangul* of Kashmir. While this anthropomorphic use of animals is a eulogy to Spiegelman's *Maus*—a translocal engagement that brings together horrors of different times and places—the unique texture of his drawings makes an explicit reference to his father's profession: woodcarving. Using deer that look like woodcuts, Sajad tells his own story of growing up in the midst of the Indian military presence, the great uprisings of the 2010s, a strict (and sometime violent) education system, attempts at assimilation, and youth stuck between fighting political factions and an occupying nuclear power. With lucidity and incredible self-reflexivity, Sajad tells how he became the artist he is amidst this turbulence, insecurity, and threats to his life. As a Zeitzeuge equipped with more than human voice and words, Sajad relates his experience with a combination of writing and drawing. His Zeitzeugenschaft is made to endure and outlive him. The materiality of his witness account ties it to a future to come, in which Kashmir may have a different story. At the same time, his references to Spiegelman and Sacco tie him to other places where the meaning of survival went beyond the individual outliving the oppression and pointed to the survival of a people in the memories of others—a question of existence.

## Conclusion

In this programmatic paper we aimed to broaden the concept of the Zeitzeuge /witness to history by expanding its geographical and conceptual scope. We have explored practices of bearing witness to the past as acts of political activism in countries in Asia and the Middle East, where they often take place in view of an ongoing crisis or in a post-conflict moment with demands for justice, peace-making, and reconciliation. With a focus on citizen truth commissions, public history and educational initiatives, as well as artistic projects, we have looked into practices of giving testimonies about the past in order to cope with present tasks in various social and political fields. Several conceptual debates we introduced in the first part of the paper can be rethought with the examples presented above.

The Zeitzeugen practices we have discussed can be divided into two analytical categories. First, direct Zeitzeugenschaft involves those who experienced a certain event or lived through a period in the past. The second are vicarious witnesses who hear from the Zeitzeugen and take on the task of testifying for their sake. First-hand witnesses are the actors of history—they took part in the story they tell. By acting as Zeitzeugen, however, they also become the subjects of history—they claim their right to define what counts as history, what should be included in the historical narrative. All of the Zeitzeugen mentioned above can be used to illustrate this point, yet the most striking are the Anfal women. By defying the national narratives, insisting on telling their



own truth and refusing to accept silent victimhood, they rewrite the recent history of Iraq and Kurdistan from a different perspective—the perspective of women who survived not only a genocide but also patriarchal oppression in its aftermath.

While citizen truth commissions exclusively rely on the first-hand testimonies of witnesses, educational enterprises and artistic representations that build on Zeitzeugen accounts deliberately aim to create vicarious witnesses by mediating between the two. This mediation requires a public that is ready and open to hearing an unsettling account of the past. It brings together active listening and asking questions on hard topics with the imaginative work of filling in the gaps and painting the background. Hence, vicarious witnessing, whether done by school children interviewing the elderly in Lebanon, or by the visitors to the exhibition on Islamised Armenians, requires creative work as much as attentiveness. Oral history and, in particular, art projects, can create and mobilise new vicarious witnesses via a stimulating example that makes one curious to inquire into one's own family or town history, as in the case of the Partition Archive or the grandchildren of Armenian genocide survivors. Or, they can create historical immediateness through a level of abstraction as in the case of Malik Sajad's *Munnu*, the graphic novel about Kashmir that disseminates historical knowledge by activating emotions and sensibilities about justice.

It is hard not to remember here one of the most famous Zeitzeugen and Holocaust survivor, the Romanian-American writer Elie Wiesel, whose accounts made the Holocaust widely known for what it was. At the end of 2020, in an open letter published in the *Guardian*, UK Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis cited his well-known words, "Whoever listens to a witness becomes a witness" (Mirvis 2020), this time not reminding us of the Holocaust. Mirvis transposed Wiesel's statement all the way from the Holocaust to the Chinese persecution of Uighurs in Xinjiang. Listening to Uighurs' experiences, he explained, he found himself in a position of responsibility to give his own witness statement, to be the Zeitzeuge to their plight.

Although epistemologically different, these two types of witnessing function via the same temporal interplay. As "wanderers between worlds" (Sabrow 2012), witnesses with their testimonies make a claim to authenticity and their right to speak about, acknowledge, and interpret the past in order to do justice to all those for whom they speak. These practices invoke the past as it has not been invoked before, to craft a future that excludes the possibility of the recurrence of the same events. Informed by the motto "never again", they build on the experiences of individuals to formulate new societal or communal expectations of the days to come. They collect and mobilise marginalised, forgotten, or unheard voices, often—as in the cases explored here—under authoritarian regimes and in contested and violent circumstances. Hence Zeitzeugen practices can provide a basis for processes of reconciliation, peace-making, and understanding in particular societal circumstances. The immediate results of these struggles might include the recognition of a legal or political status, as

in the case of the Muslims in Northern Sri Lanka, or, as the example of the Anfal women in Kurdistan-Iraq suggests, a space in national public memory materialised by a memorial complex. The long-term results of the work of citizen truth commissions or citizen history projects include collections of testimonies, pooled together in alternative textual, audio, or visual archives that can serve as the basis for further investigations or research. Art projects leave behind audio-visual material, booklets, and objects which then become resources for critical engagement and inquiry, just like Nükhet Sirman's (2006) critical reading of the Zeitzeugen accounts of the women who witnessed the early years of the Turkish Republic. Another temporal interplay in Zeitzeugen practices is that between generations. While this aspect is evident in almost all of the examples we have discussed, the project involving school children in Lebanon, the young "citizen historians" working for the 1947 Partition Archive, and the exhibition that promoted inter-generational interaction in Armenia and Turkey particularly showcase the importance of intergenerational communication in bearing witness to history. The Zeitzeugen want to be heard, especially by younger generations who can carry their stories into the future. As interviewers, representatives of the younger generation can change their perspectives and reflect on their place in history. They have a chance to put themselves into the shoes of the Zeitzeugen, by asking (themselves) the question "what would I have done in the situation they faced?". No matter whether these intergenerational acts of remembrance take place within a family or beyond, they open ways of actively living with a past that is never over, or completely frozen, but constantly informing the present.

We have also illustrated that visual, audio, or other material objects are not only supportive in mediating and fortifying such practices of witnessing but—through their own trajectories—can bear characteristics of vicarious witnesses within themselves. The voice of a witness preserved in a Zeitzeugen archive, the material object of day-to-day life that had accompanied a person through dramatic periods, or the photograph she had always carried with her embody memories that can go beyond spoken or written words.

Furthermore, the ambivalent role of new media must be mentioned. Providing platforms for documenting practices of *Zeitzeugenschaft*, they, on the one hand, make the results accessible to a wider public and thus attract people who would not have access to a "real" archive to read the witness testimonies. Alternative archives provide documents that would often not make it into state archives, and thus make a claim for authenticity and justice and against state politics of forgetting or biased commemoration. They are publicly effective through new media. On the other hand, their liberal way of functioning and the unlimited dimensions bear the danger of losing orientation, de-contextualization, or over-emotionalization. New media provide openness; however, one can also observe a certain kind of confinement due to the specific forms of presentation digital tools require. While new media represent an in-

crease in speed, number, and entanglements, their use might at the same time lead to a lack of depth and analytical systematization. Finally, it has to be emphasised that acts of *Zeitzeugenschaft* are never ends in themselves, but rather pursue specific goals that depend on the circumstances, the actors, and the media involved in such practices. While there might be differences in stories of heroism or testimonies of suffering, (implicit or explicit) claims to authenticity are always made. The effects these claims achieve, however, differ according to the intentions and interests of the direct or vicarious witnesses as well as the audiences. Whether the first-hand witness becomes and remains an authentic and charismatic authority or a mere decoration depends on the interplay of intersubjective constellations, the position, the straightforwardness, and the capabilities and opportunities of both the initiators and audience.

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