

# Old Tales and New Stories

Working with Oral History at LWL-Industrial Museum  
Henrichshütte Hattingen

Olaf Schmidt-Rutsch

In 1989, only two years after blowing out the blast furnaces, Henrichshütte Ironworks was incorporated into the LWL-Industrial Museum, Westphalian State Museum of Industrial Heritage. Since that time, oral history has been formative in developing the site into a museum of life and work in the shadows of the blast furnaces. Interviews did not only have an important impact on the permanent exhibition from the beginning, they also offered a wide range of perspectives for future research. Apart from covering the stories of work, they also addressed the individual and collective ways of coming to terms with the story of industrial decline and structural change, from the point in time when the loss of work was a fresh experience to a more distanced, post-industrial narrative. From this perspective, the oral history material related to the Henrichshütte – and the general interview archive of all sites at the decentralised LWL-Industrial Museum – might offer a wide field of further future interdisciplinary and transnational research.

## **The LWL-Industrial Museum**

The deep structural transformation in Western European heavy industries after 1945 gave rise to a new idea of industrial heritage. Exploring the remains of the industrial age, with its forgotten mills, closed mines and cold ironworks, was no longer restricted to a classic history of technology as a narrative of engineers, innovation and company history. Rather, the story of the common worker and daily work and life did not only come into researchers' focus, but established a new kind of museums, which paid attention to the objects of the industrial era. The history of the LWL-Industriemuseum, Westphalian State Museum of Industrial Heritage, reflects this development and exemplifies the importance of oral history for the museum's approach to social history.

In the Ruhr area, the increasingly severe coal crisis of the 1960s resulted in a deep regional change. The widespread demolition of mines in the industrial heartland of Western Germany became a major economic issue and social challenge. Vanishing pitheads left open spaces not only in the urban landscape. It became rather obvious that these mere technical constructions had an enormous significance as social reference points for the people, their work, biography and identity. The same effect could be recognised in the whole state of North Rhine-Westphalia. The Westphalia-Lippe regional authority (Landschaftsverband Westfalen-Lippe/LWL) responded to this

issue in 1979. A new industrial museum, the first of its kind in Germany, was established to preserve outstanding buildings as authentic places within their historical and social contexts. The political decision resulted in a decentralised museum with currently eight sites, covering six industrial branches.<sup>1</sup> One important stipulation of the political appointment was the order to document the everyday life and work of people in the industrial age (LWL 1979: 36). Following the classic task of museums to collect, preserve, interpret, and display items of cultural and historic value, it became obvious that oral history offered a significant approach to this task. Without doubt, this approach was certainly influenced by a popular research focus on local and working-class history which was very vivid in the Ruhr area at the time and was to a certain extent organised by non-professionals.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, one characteristic of the approach taken by the museum was that the interviews of the formative period were strongly connected with a special place. Thus, the interests of local history groups were combined with the professional perspectives of the founding generation of the museum staff, which was largely unfamiliar with the formative parameters of industrial work, not to speak of social differences between the researchers and the subjects of research. Nevertheless, the approach turns out to be successful: Former workers explained the function not only of artefacts but of the future heritage sites. Interviews often explained and illustrated daily work in authentic spaces and offered a key stimulus to sketch the future use of the now derelict industrial site. In addition, the shared memories provided the researchers with an idea of life and work in a fading branch of industrial work. Consequently, the stories did not only have an important influence on the concept employed by the museum, but formed a solid foundation for an oral history archive of work in the industrial age, which today consists of approximately 1,600 interviews (Kift/Schmidt-Rutsch 2015: 291).

### **From Decline to Museum: Henrichshütte Ironworks**

In 1987, Henrichshütte Ironworks in Hattingen, part of the Thyssen company, faced an existential blow. Founded in 1854, the plant had developed a highly specialised integrated production that combined iron and steel making, casting, rolling and forging – producing, amongst other items, components for nuclear power plants and space exploration. The decision to close the rolling mill and blow out the blast furnaces caused the loss of almost 3,000 jobs and took away the former advantage of the combined production process, making clear that the remaining parts of the works could hardly be operated profitably in the future. Understandably, the decision to abandon major parts of the Henrichshütte caused ambitious protests not only among workers and their families but also among great parts of the Hattingen community who feared that the closure of the works would bring the general prosperity and future of the city to a near end. The widespread protests culminated in 5,000 people forming a human

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1 Besides Henrichshütte Ironworks, the LWL-Industriemuseum consists of three former coal mines: the Nachtigall mine in Witten, Hannover colliery in Bochum and Zollern colliery in Dortmund; the Henrichenburg ship-lift in Waltrop, the Gernheim Glassworks in Petershagen, the Brickworks in Lage and the Bocholt Textile Factory.

2 However, oral history also took root academically in the Ruhr region around 1980, particularly with the LUSIR project (*Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet, 1930–1960*), conducted at the University of Essen and the FernUniversität in Hagen.

chain around the iron works to symbolically protect the jobs under threat. Nevertheless, on 18 December 1987, blast furnace No. 3 was tapped the last time. This marked both the end of 134 years of iron smelting in the Ruhr valley and the beginning of the phase-out of the Henrichshütte which lasted until 2004, when the forge, the last operational part of the former integrated iron and steel works, was finally closed.

The unstoppable decline of Hattingen's main employer caused wide-felt resignation. Hence, the idea to integrate a part of the works into the LWL-Industriemuseum found few positive reactions with the people who just unsuccessfully had struggled for their jobs. Nevertheless, in 1989 the LWL parliament decided to take over blast furnace No. 3, its surrounding buildings and equipment as a future museum of iron and steel, closing a large gap in the documentation of work in the heavy industries. As the other parts of the works were demolished and vanished, blast furnace No. 3, dating back to 1939, became a museum landmark. The adjacent blast furnace No. 2 was deconstructed and transported to China at just the same time. In the end, the plot of the new museum covered just 2 percent of the space that had been covered by the original works (Laube 2017: 111 f.).

What was left turned out to be a large but cold and silent technical aggregate with its immense mass of steel and puzzling structures of railways, pipes and rope-belts, an industrial ensemble that was by no means self-explanatory. Pure documentation, limited to function and production numbers, seemed insufficient to make the old works an interesting place for future visitors. Nor did it become an attractive site for the people of Hattingen, many of whom had lost their jobs just a few months earlier. The first step to create a more acceptable, participatory space was to open the former "forbidden city" to a wide range of activities – from jumble sale to concert. These activities brought workers back to the site who had sworn never to enter the ironworks again after they had lost their jobs. Talking with these women and men about their lives and work developed a growing understanding on both sides. Whereas the workers began to accept the approach followed by the museum, which intended to take their stories seriously as an important part of the future narrative, the museum staff in turn developed an understanding of what operating a blast furnace meant and what impact this work had had on the workers and their families. After a more or less difficult and sometimes painful process of returning to their past place of employment, former workers supported the new museum with their experience and knowledge and formed a reliable nucleus for further development. When they started to give guided tours, this marked an important step towards a participative museum.

Early interview projects were closely linked to practical endeavours, first and foremost discussing and understanding work at the blast furnace. The interviews were mainly conducted by the two-person museum team and a number of student volunteers who tape-recorded and transcribed the oral testimonies, from single interviews and field recordings at former work stations explaining the technology and processes to recordings of larger group meetings. Within a short time, the group of interviewees was extended to persons who had worked at other parts of the ironworks, such as the steel plant, rolling mill, foundry and forge, covering the basic processes of the pro-

duction on the one hand, discovering the several layers of the complex connection between people and their work on the other.<sup>3</sup>

The next step was to implement these stories into a more permanent construction. In 2000, the museum opened on a regular scheme. Visitors could discover the works on three trails with different approaches to the story of iron and steel. Each of the trails can be discovered independently or on guided tours. Apart from a children's trail and an ecological trail, the "path of iron" opens the major path to the blast furnace and its story. It starts with the sampling of the ore and follows the material to the transportation belts and railway tracks, down through the bunkers and up to the furnace top ball, then following the smelting process down to the tapping spout. Taking this tour, the guests encounter the faces and stories of people who worked at the several stations involved in this process of iron smelting. In doing so, the exhibition connects the impressive and very dominant large-scale industrial equipment with the individual narrations of work, thus giving the process of iron making a "human face" (cf. Minner/Molkenthin 2000). After nearly 20 years in operation, it is obvious that these individual stories about every day's work, heat and sweat, danger and fascination stuck in the memories of the visitors much more strongly than the recollection of production numbers. The importance of blast furnace No. 3 as an 80-year-old industrial monument seems to be diminished in the workers' stories about their daily experience of working in front of the tap hole or of the darkness of the bunkers, making the material flow and keeping the whole thing running. As a positive result, the message of the site hopefully turns from a narration of technological progress into a narration of daily work, from a success story of raising production numbers to a story of a permanent change in working conditions and, finally, individual expectations.

### Remembering the Decline

Without doubt, the story of the struggle for jobs in 1987 is and will continue to be one of the major narratives of the Henrichshütte Ironworks. Ten years after the struggle for the mill, the museum published the book *Ende der Stahlzeit* (The End of the Steel Age), which contained written statements of people who were involved in these events on opposite sides (König et al. 1997: 6 f.). The book still offers an amazing spectrum of perspectives and memories, juxtaposing for instance the stories of a blast furnace worker or of a woman who was active in the local support group with the statements of managers and of Walter Scheel, the former German Federal President, who acted as the neutral member of Thyssen Steel's supervisory board at the time and whose vote was decisive in the closure of the Henrichshütte.

In 2010, the temporary exhibition *Helden – Von der Sehnsucht nach dem Besonderen* (Heroes – The Longing for the Extraordinary) dedicated one section to the workers' struggle (cf. Hubert 2010), which was mainly based on film interviews and included a worker, a woman of the local support group, a photographer, a trade union official, a works council chairman and a manager. The connection of the still vivid narrative of 1987 with a strong popular motif of heroism was discussed at length, not least because the interviewees involved had never assumed a heroic role for them-

3 A good example for interviews that derived from artistic practice within the former working compound is the use of the Hattingen forge by artist Richard Serra. Several interviews covered the employees' perspective on working in that kind of art projects.

selves. While the exhibition questioned such attributions, it constituted a first experimental step to introduce the struggle to save the ironworks as a museum topic in its own right.

The 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of blowing out the blast furnaces in 2009 somewhat presented a “back to the roots” moment. On the one hand, the Henrichshütte as a museum seemed to be a success story. It acts as the main agent of the plant’s history with a wide range of exhibitions and events, attracting up to 100,000 visitors each year. On the other hand, the limited personnel resources and tight schedules had a negative impact on long-term projects like the oral history archive. At the same time, the group of potential interviewees keeps shrinking. Facing this fact and following the anniversary, the *Förderverein Industriemuseum Henrichshütte*, which was formed as an association of the museum’s supporters in 1990 (Senger 2013: 38), launched a special project to highlight further the perspectives of those who were the actual subjects of the Henrichshütte social milieu when the plant was active. In cooperation with photographer Astrid Kirsche, the supporters intended to recreate the human chain of 1987, using large-scale photographs. The project was accompanied by open interviews, carried out by members of the supporter group (Böhm et al. 2017: 10 f.). While the questionnaire was developed in cooperation with museum staff, the implementation was solely in the hands of volunteers. Within two years, 100 persons, who had worked in various capacities and workshops in the Henrichshütte, were interviewed and filmed. These interviews show the complexity and hierarchy of an industrial plant with the exception of top management but spanning all occupation groups from engineers, supervisors or union activists to the cleaners or the apprentices, who lost their job just after finishing their training. Without doubt, the fact that the interviewers belonged to the same peer group created a special interview situation. For the participants, the questionnaire offered a red thread to hold things together. Major points of interest were family background, career development up to the relevant position, work and leisure time, etc. Confronted with the reasons for closure, interviewees still had problems with accepting the rationale behind it, often paired with pride in the job and a belief in the former efficiency of the works. Nevertheless, 30 years on, most of the edge and anger has disappeared.

The project of *100 Hüttenleben* (100 Steelworks Lives) proved to be very successful. In combination with the exhibition – portraits of the interviewees form a human chain at the entry of the museum – it developed an enormous effect not only in the perception of the museum or the commemoration of the 1987 events. It also shaped the work and position of the supporters’ association which had established a quarterly meeting of the former workers and is still recruiting future interview partners, developing these interviews into broader field research. This certainly needs some professional back-office work from the museum staff, but it expands the knowledge about life and work at the Henrichshütte enormously. Consequently, the persisting engagement of volunteers will be an important contribution to the *Erinnerungsarchiv Industriearbeit* (Memory Archive of Industrial Work), the archive of industrial memories of the LWL-Industriemuseum.

### **“Erinnerungsarchiv Industriearbeit” – Chances and Perspectives**

Although oral history was formative for the development of the LWL-Industriemuseum in general, it always has been only one aspect of day-to-day business. Preservation and revitalisation of the sites and their establishment as locations for exhibitions, education and events always required the majority of resources.

Since 1979, the interviews have mostly been used within the narrow limitations of developing the museum's sites and exhibitions. Rethinking the value of these sources began when it became obvious that the chosen media of the formative years, compact cassettes and MiniDiscs, reached the end of their technical life span. At that point, the danger of a loss of data – and an important part of the museum's identity – was becoming imminent. Transferring the interviews into the digital age in the first step meant collecting them from the eight sites and centralising the archive in Dortmund. The next step was the use of a digitalisation program to transfer the material to broadcast wave-archive files and MP3 working copies and develop a durable archive storage. During this process, every interview receives a permanent shelf mark and documentation in the interview database, containing core information about interviewer and interviewee, branch, date, etc. Whereas a solid ground for data security has been established, the reworking of content and form of approximately 1,600 interviews will be a challenge for years to come. The wide regional coverage of different industrial branches supports a widespread narrative of the coming and going of work in the industrial ages with a focus on the individual experiences and emotions of the people involved. For example, the archive offers a wide variety of information on searching and finding work, moving homes, losing jobs, of protest, resignation and hope.

To come back to the museum's original task to document the history of people in the industrial age, it is evident that its work is not only limited to the history of the place. It acts also as a forum for social and cultural discussion and thus has to be open to recent developments. This orientation will change the narrative of the museum and the use of interviews in the future. Without doubt, the combination of historic interviews with new presentation media like apps or augmented reality has to be discussed from the museum's point of view, striking a balance between historic source and modern edutainment. Oral history as a museum media should not be trapped in retrospective, lest an authentic place of work is turned into a place for folkloristic events (Schmidt-Rutsch 2018: 143). To be a valuable part of social discussion, the museum has to focus on structural and global change, ecology and innovation, using transnational and global perspectives on changes in labour. This orientation is closer to visitors' daily experiences than the pure re-creation of an industrial past long gone.

Obviously, the interview archive contains so much more. It can be supportive to research questions far beyond the original context. Interviews of Dortmund miners, for instance, were recently used for research on regional dialects. Since the archive as a whole, not just at Henrichshütte, has a history of nearly forty years, linguists ask for the extent to which idioms and dictions have changed over this period. Thus, the oral history archive can be developed into a wide variety of directions, from linguistics to documenting the process of de-industrialisation. With respect to the post-industrial conscience, this has most recently happened with the 2018 exhibition *RevierGestalten* which has used inter-generational interviews to trace the meanings and concepts of industrial heritage for different generations of the region (cf. Flieshart/Golombek

2018). This setting possibly shows a distinguishing feature of the *Erinnerungsarchiv Industriearbeit* (Memory Archive of Industrial Work): It is constantly evolving through both research interests and a special kind of valuation. It is not the worst idea to check and rethink the museum's narratives from time to time to keep in touch with visitors' interests and experiences. Undoubtedly, it will be an important task to prepare and open the *Erinnerungsarchiv Industriearbeit* to a wider research community in the future. In light of its origins, it will certainly differ from research-generated projects in many respects, but it is important in its variety.

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## Abstract

From the beginning, oral history was formative for developing the former Henrichshütte Ironworks in Hattingen into a museum. Part of the LWL-Industriemuseum/ Westphalian State Museum of Industrial Heritage, the Henrichshütte's museal practice always aimed at people's life and work experience rather than aspects of pure technology. Taking the example of Henrichshütte, this article describes several aspects of work with oral history within the LWL-Industriemuseum as a whole, from

exhibition concepts to volunteer work, and discusses the development towards an archive of work in the industrial age, covering six branches and around 1,600 interviews.