

## The Referential and the Relational: Victor Klemperer's Diaries 1933-1945

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### I

When extracts from Victor Klemperer's diaries written during the Nazi period were published for the first time in book form in 1995 they were an instant success.<sup>1</sup> Klemperer's editor presented the diaries as documents of the greatest authenticity and Klemperer as the 'chronicler' of his time.<sup>2</sup> Historians who made use of the diaries called him 'der unersetzbare Zeitzeuge'<sup>3</sup> and the 'unermüdliche Chronist der Barbarei'.<sup>4</sup> Klemperer himself called them his testimony and thereby imagined as he

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Klemperer „*Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten.*“ *Tagebücher 1933–1945*, ed. by Walter Nowojski and Hadwig Klemperer, 2 vols (Berlin: Aufbau, 1995). Ralf Geissler gives sales of 350,000 copies by 2011 ('Im Schatten', *Die Zeit*, 22. 9. 2011). To the diaries from the Nazi years were added further volumes in the second half of the nineties: *Curriculum vitae. Erinnerungen 1881-1918*, 2 vols, ed. by Walter Nowojski (Berlin: Aufbau, 1996); *Leben sammeln, nicht fragen, warum und wozu. Tagebücher 1918-1932*, 2 vols, ed. by Walter Nowojski and Christian Löser (Berlin: Aufbau, 1996); *Und so ist alles schwankend. Tagebücher bis Dezember 1945*, ed. by Günter Jäckel and Hadwig Klemperer (Berlin: Aufbau, 1997); *So sitze ich denn zwischen allen Stühlen. Tagebücher 1945-1959*, 2 vols, ed. by Walter Nowojski and Christian Löser (Berlin: Aufbau, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Nowojski, 'Einführung', in Victor Klemperer, *Die Tagebücher 1933–1945*, ed. by Walter Nowojski (Berlin: Directmedia, 2007, p. 23. This is the unabridged CD version of Klemperer's diaries from the Nazi period, and it extends to 5,433 pages, compared with the 1995 version that ran to around 1,500 pages. Subsequent references to the diaries from the Nazi period will be to the unabridged edition and given in brackets in the main text.

<sup>3</sup> Carsten Schreiber, *Elite im Verborgenen: Ideologie und regionale Herrschaftspraxis des Sicherheitsdienstes der SS* (Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2008), p. 280. In his recent major study of the diaries Arvi Sepp correctly argues that they have become part of the canon of diary literature, with Germanists and historians generally taking them to be authentic documents by a truthful subject (Arvi Sepp, *Topographie des Alltags: Eine kulturwissenschaftliche Lektüre von Victor Klemperers Tagebüchern 1933-1945* (Antwerp: Faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte, 2008), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Widera, *Dresden 1945-1948: Politik und Gesellschaft unter sowjetischer Besatzungsherrschaft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), p. 26.

wrote them a time when his tormentors would be called to account (p. 3,526, 8.4.1944). When the Nazis came to power Klemperer was in his early fifties and Professor of Romance Studies at the Technical University in Dresden. He had a Jewish background but had converted to Protestantism and married a non-Jew. His marriage saved him from being transported to a concentration camp and enabled him to live out the Nazi years in Dresden and to record how Jews were subjected to an 'everyday tyranny' that he compared to a 'thousand insect bites' (p. 3,527, 8. 4. 1944).

The unabridged diaries from the Nazi years are striking for their detailed description of how Klemperer first heard about the concentration camps and understood their purpose, of anti-Semitic legislation from the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 to the ever lengthening list of associated regulations, including a ban on Jews buying flowers (p. 1,827, 16. 3. 1942) and owning pets (p. 1,900, 15. 5. 1942). The diaries also record the *Gleichschaltung* of the Technical University in Dresden, with colleagues expected to give the Nazi salute at faculty meetings, Jewish professors 'requested' not to conduct examinations (p. 122, 15. 5. 1933) and eventually being dismissed from their posts (p. 502, 2. 5. 1935).

Klemperer's accounts of everyday life give implicit answers to such questions as how much non-Jewish Germans knew about what was happening to the Jews, as for example when he describes how a transported Jewish neighbour's apartment is sealed, how local tax officers and an art expert draw up an inventory of her possessions (p. 2,325, 14. 10. 1942), and how these are then sold at well attended auctions on the premises (p. 2,442, 11. 12. 1942; pp. 2,559-60, 24. 1. 1943). At this level of personal detail about individuals whom we come to know, Klemperer's work complements more impersonal, statistical forms of institutionalised memory of the Jews in Dresden.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the database produced in 2001 by the *Arbeitskreis Gedenkbuch der Gesellschaft für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit Dresden* which gives the names, dates, addresses and the eventual fate of some six thousand Holocaust victims and survivors from the Dresden area: 'Buch der Erinnerung: zur Erinnerung an die Juden der Stadt Dresden und umliegender Orte, die zwischen 1933 und 1945 ausgewiesen, entwürdigt, verfolgt, deportiert und ermordet wurden'.

[http://resources.ushmm.org/hsv/source\\_view.php?SourceId=32390](http://resources.ushmm.org/hsv/source_view.php?SourceId=32390);

<http://en.stsg.de/cms/names-jewish-victims-dresden-1933-1945>, accessed 15 August 2013.

Aleida Assmann has registered a trend since the 1980s for history and memory to draw closer together, and she sees professional historians coming to hold memory in higher regard as they reach the limits of what she calls 'positivistische Geschichtsschreibung'. Referring specifically to the period after genocide she writes:

Unter solchen Umständen kam es zu einer Aufwertung der gelebten Erfahrung und Erinnerung sowie der Gattung des subjektiven Zeugnisses und insbesondere zu einer Aufwertung der Gestalt des moralischen Zeugen, der am eigenen Leibe zumindest einen Teil von dem erlebt hat, was den ermordeten Opfern widerfahren ist.<sup>6</sup>

Assmann quotes Reinhart Koselleck's description at the start of the 1990s of a move from memory based on personal experience towards an externalised, mediated memory as the generations that directly experienced National Socialism die out.<sup>7</sup> Omer Bartov makes the point in more dramatic terms: 'We are living at the edge of memory. Soon we will be all alone, staring into the darkness of the past without anything to guide us but the written and photographic traces left by those who had been there'.<sup>8</sup> In this respect the diaries are part of a larger body of autobiographical writing that leads Assmann to conclude that there is in fact very little evidence of 'memory' being replaced by 'history'. Instead, she notes the clear political relevance of the Nazi era in Germany today, and she argues that historians are losing their monopoly on its reconstruction, representation and interpretation.<sup>9</sup> These observations help to account for the popularity and success of Klemperer's diaries, and their wider reception was assured when editions were published for use in schools,<sup>10</sup> and they formed the basis for a series of films and documentaries.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2006), pp. 47-8.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, p. 205. *Germany's War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2003), p. 193.

<sup>8</sup> Omer Bartov, *Germany's War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2003), p. 193.

<sup>9</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, p. 193.

<sup>10</sup> Victor Klemperer, *Das Tagebuch 1945 - 1949: Eine Auswahl. Mit Anregungen für den Unterricht*, ed. by Harald Roth (Berlin: Aufbau, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Ullrich Kasten, Wolfgang Kohlhaase, "Mein Leben ist so sündhaft lang": *Victor Klemperer – ein Chronist des Jahrhunderts*, Ostdeutscher Rundfunk Brandenburg, 1998; *Victor Klemperer – ein Leben in Deutschland*, ARD, 1999; Ullrich Kasten und Klaus Wischnewski, "Und so ist alles schwankend": *Victor Klemperer – Leben nach 1945*, Ostdeutscher Rundfunk, 2000.

The first part of this analysis considers the issues that surround Klemperer's diaries when they are put to use by others, when Klemperer himself assesses them, and when academic research investigates their cultural context. The second part of the analysis draws out the main characteristics of the diaries in order to understand what they tell us about the Nazi years that other sources do not.

## II

At the heart of the analysis are the concepts of referentiality and relationality. Philippe Lejeune explains the first concept when he proposes that, unlike all forms of fiction, autobiographical texts are 'referential', meaning that they claim to convey a verifiable truth external to themselves.<sup>12</sup> Klemperer's preoccupation with bearing witness and the eagerness of many writers on the period to quote from those sections of his diaries that are first-hand accounts of his experiences implicitly locate the significance of the diaries in their referentiality. The second concept, taken from life-writing and autobiography theory, draws attention to 'the relational nature of personal narratives'.<sup>13</sup> In recent years the focus of research has switched away from what Culley and Styler refer to as an individualistic tendency in approaches to autobiographical writing that emphasises the autonomous individual and towards the relational. They ask how autobiographies, diaries, letters, and portraits explore 'relational selfhood', how they represent interpersonal as well as personal experience, and what role is played by the relationships between the subject and his or her family, peers, religious and political movements, and intellectual discourses.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Jancke and Ulbrich argue that research on autobiographical writing needs to understand relational selves, that is to say, individuals located in and characterised by social relationships.<sup>15</sup> In the case of Klemperer's diaries their relational quality emerges from his descriptions of encounters with the wide range of people around him and his emotional and sometimes contradictory response to them. As we shall

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<sup>12</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Fulbrook and Ulinka Rublack, 'In Relation: The 'Social Self' and Ego-Documents', *German History* 28, 3 (2010), 263-72 (267-8).

<sup>14</sup> Amy Culley, Rebecca Styler, 'Lives in Relation', *Life Writing*, 8, 3, 2011, 237-40 (237).

<sup>15</sup> Gabriele Jancke and Claudia Ulbrich, 'Vom Individuum zur Person. Neue Konzepte im Spannungsfeld von Autobiographietheorie und Selbstzeugnisforschung', in *Vom Individuum zur Person: Neue Konzepte im Spannungsfeld von Autobiographietheorie und Selbstzeugnisforschung. Querelles. Jahrbuch für Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung* 10, ed. by Gabriele Jancke and Claudia Ulbrich (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005), 7-27 (17-22).

see from the examples to follow, the two concepts are not completely distinct from each other, but rather points on a single spectrum between verifiable fact and subjective response.

Saul Friedländer is the best-known historian for showing how diaries and memoirs can be put to use in writing the history of Nazi Germany and the Jews. His starting point is his criticism of a tendency among historians to objectify the Jews: 'In many works the implicit assumptions regarding the victims' generalized hopelessness and passivity, or their inability to change the course of events leading to their extermination, have turned them into a static and abstract element of the historical background'.<sup>16</sup> To counter this tendency Friedländer gives prominence to 'the fate, the attitudes, and sometimes the initiatives of the victims',<sup>17</sup> and he singles out the individual voices of Jewish diarists, including Klemperer, for their ability to 'tear through seamless interpretation and pierce the (mostly involuntary) smugness of scholarly detachment and "objectivity"'.<sup>18</sup> Friedländer uses Klemperer's diaries extensively to show what he knew about what was happening to Jews in Germany as a whole and to illustrate behaviour of non-Jews that was not in line with Nazi anti-Semitic laws, for example circumventing the ban on shopping in local Jewish stores by travelling to Jewish stores in other towns.<sup>19</sup> Friedländer describes his history of the Jews under National Socialism as the integrated narration of individual fates,<sup>20</sup> and he insists from the start of his project that 'Jewish diarists—their chronicles, their reflections, their witnessing—will take center stage'.<sup>21</sup>

The significance of Friedländer's approach, whereby diary sources lead the narrative and convey a complex and often contradictory reality, becomes apparent when compared with the methods used by Walter Kempowski in *Echolot*, his best-selling ten-volume 'collective diary' of the Second World War that provides an uncomfortable home for extracts from Klemperer's diaries. Whereas many of the early volumes of *Echolot* had quoted Klemperer's accounts of ever more restrictive

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<sup>16</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: Vol. 1, The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination : Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), p. xxvi.

<sup>19</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: Vol. 1, The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939*, p. 126.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, p. 63.

anti-Semitic laws,<sup>22</sup> *Abgesang '45*, the final volume that covers the last months of the war, quotes passages from Klemperer's diaries that read like many other passages in *Abgesang '45* written by non-Jewish German civilians describing their plight, and the reader is not given the context that marks Klemperer off from them.<sup>23</sup> Kempowski's method of using short extracts from a vast array of contemporary sources fragments and decontextualises the suffering they describe, and his purpose is to incorporate Klemperer into a community of German suffering as the Russians advance from the East. Although Klemperer can see himself sharing in this suffering, the clear and more significant context of his diary as a whole is his everyday experience of isolation, humiliation, intimidation, and a fear of imminent death that follow from being labelled a Jew in Nazi Germany: 'Immer wieder bewegt mich die doppelte Gefahr. Die Gefahr der Bomben u. der Russen teile ich mit allen andern; die der stella stella ist meine eigene u die weitaus größere' (p. 4,751, 19. 2. 1945). In the final months of the war Klemperer and his wife flee from the air raids on Dresden to Bavaria where local officials help them find lodgings as refugees, yet this help is forthcoming after Klemperer has removed the yellow star from his coat (pp. 5, 116-26, 11-12. 4. 1945).<sup>24</sup> He knows that with it he could be singled out and killed (p. 4,751, 14. 2. 1945).

The poor fit of Klemperer's reflections into Kempowski's project reflects the very different purposes of the two sets of diaries. Looking beyond the passages by Klemperer that are actually quoted by Kempowski, the diaries are at odds with each other when it comes to assessing the level of popular support for Hitler. Kempowski gives precedence to ordinary Germans criticising Hitler and the Nazi elite. Goebbels's speech, broadcast in celebration of Hitler's birthday on 20 April 1945, in which he predicts that Germany would blossom as never before within a few years of the war ending, bringing order, peace, and prosperity,<sup>25</sup> and his declaration of loyalty to

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<sup>22</sup> See for example Walter Kempowski, *Das Echolot. Barbarossa '41*, 5th edn (Munich: btb, 2004), pp. 568-9.

<sup>23</sup> See for example Walter Kempowski, *Das Echolot. Abgesang '45. Ein kollektives Tagebuch*, 3rd edn (Munich: btb, 2007), p. 266. For a detailed analysis of Kempowski's use of autobiographical sources see Roger Woods, 'Walter Kempowski's *Das Echolot. Abgesang '45* from Archive to Print', *German Life and Letters*, 66, 4, 2013, pp. 416-31.

<sup>24</sup> Friedländer also relates Klemperer's account of fleeing to Bavaria with his wife, but unlike Kempowski, he points out that the Klemperers are saved because their identity is not discovered (*The Years of Extermination*, p. 662).

<sup>25</sup> Walter Kempowski, *Das Echolot. Abgesang '45*, p. 10.

Hitler in the name of the entire German nation<sup>26</sup> thus meet with disbelief<sup>27</sup> and mockery among those who hear it.<sup>28</sup> Goebbels is described as ‘der oberste Märchenerzähler’,<sup>29</sup> and Hitler himself as either insane or the Devil incarnate.<sup>30</sup> Klemperer, however, records a very different response to the same speech from Germans he meets, despite the military communiqués reporting major German losses:

Aber gestern Abend hat “Goebbel” (sic) gesprochen, u. ganz offenbar hat er Eindruck gemacht. “Wundervoll!”, wir sollen die Wiederholung hören. Wir hielten durch, im neuen Europa werden unsere Städte wieder aufblühen. Er hat zwar nicht gesagt, wie der Sieg noch gewonnen werden soll – aber es herrscht hier doch offenbar eine mutigere Stimmung als vorher: Ingolstadt sei starke Festung, u. Berlin könne sich Monate lang halten! (p. 5,127, 20. 4. 1945)

Whereas Kempowski includes a report by a Danish journalist on how the Berliners now hate the man they once revered, and describes a banner that had been strung up across the ruins of a building in the night with the slogan, ‘Das danken wir dem Führer!’ (Abg, p. 18), Klemperer quotes a hostile reaction from a soldier to this kind of mocking of the slogan used by Goebbels:

Der Mann, in Typus u. Wesen rabiät, bestimmt kein Heuchler, war vollkommen überzeugt von der Hitlersache u. ihrem endgiltigen [sic] Sieg. Wie die Wende kommen werde, das wisse er nicht, aber er wisse, daß sie kommen werde. ‘Adolf Hitler’ habe es noch immer geschafft, man müsse ihm ‘blind glauben’, man glaube an so vieles blind, das sich viel weniger bewährt habe als der Führer. Neulich habe ihm eine Ausgebombte gesagt, ‘das danken wir dem Führer!’ Er habe sie zusammengeschimpft: ‘ohne IHN wären Sie nicht ausgebombt, sondern längst Hackfleisch!’ Mit dem ‘Rechenstab’ u. mit dem ‘gesunden Menschenverstand’ sei es nicht zu erfassen, damit sei überhaupt nichts anzufangen – man müsse nur an den Führer u. den Sieg glauben! Ich war doch recht bedrückt von diesen Reden.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 15, 369.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

Wenn dieser Glaube verbreitet ist, u. es scheint doch fast so ... (p. 5,143, 21. 4. 1945)

These extracts from the two diaries both claim to convey a verifiable truth external to themselves about Germans' attitudes towards the Nazis. Taken together, they cancel each other out.

Klemperer is clearly intent on ensuring that his diaries have referential value, seeing them as the basis for a cultural history of the catastrophe he was living through (pp. 1,753-4, 17. 1. 1942), stressing that he needs to name names if they are to have documentary value (p. 4,141, 27. 9. 1944) and expecting future generations of students to read them (p. 2,274, 18. 9. 1942).<sup>31</sup> He wants his 'testimony' to be precise (p. 1,925, 27. 5. 1942), and he often notes down exact figures he has been given by Jewish acquaintances.<sup>32</sup> Yet he knows that his statistics are based on rumours and second-hand information that cannot be checked (p. 4,619, 18.1.1945), a point underlined by the editor of the diaries who gives different statistics, for example on the number of people who were killed in air raids on Dresden.<sup>33</sup> Faced with his own doubts, Klemperer can switch to argue that the precise statistics he hears and records may well be too high, as in the case of the number being executed every day in Dresden for black marketeering, but the important fact is that people are prepared to believe the government is carrying out summary executions on this scale (p. 2,341-2, 23. 10. 1942).

Klemperer also points out that the regulations forbidding contact with Jews have left him and his wife completely isolated (p. 631, 28. 4. 1936). He wonders what he knows about the lives of 'Aryan Germans' (p. 1,815, 8. 3. 1942), and he reminds

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<sup>31</sup> See also Klemperer's review of Arnold Zweig's *Tagebücher aus dem Ghetto* in which he argues that documentary sources such as eyewitness reports or diaries are the only valid form in which to talk about the Holocaust, and that they are the 'unverfälschte Aussage des namenlosen Leids' ('Inferno und Nazihölle. Bemerkungen zu den Tagebüchern aus dem Ghetto', *Neue Deutsche Literatur*, 7.9/10, 1959, 245-252, (246)).

<sup>32</sup> Klemperer passes on what he has heard about the number of Jews who have committed suicide in Berlin since the start of the transportations to the concentration camps (p. 2,079, 10. 7. 1942). He also repeats statistics from Kurt Hirschel, the head of the Jewish community in Dresden, about the number of Jews deported from Germany in one month (p. 2,761, 13. 4. 1943).

<sup>33</sup> Klemperer gives the total number of deaths by February 1945 at 200,000 (p. 4,771, 21. 2. 1945) whereas the editor draws on sources that became available at a later date and puts the figure at around 25,000 by the end of the war (p. 7,003).



himself to concentrate on writing about what he directly experiences: 'Von den Schand- u. Wahnsinnstaten der NS. notiere ich bloß, was mich irgendwie persönlich tangiert. Alles andere ist ja in den Zeitungen nachzulesen' (p. 124, 15. 5. 1933). For this reason he says he will leave it to others to describe the concentration camps: 'Buchenwald wird von andern geschildert werden; ich will mich an meine Erlebnisse halten' (p. 2,554, 18. 1. 1943). At one point he can argue that what he calls the 'vox populi' – essentially the attitudes he gleans from conversations with people he meets – has great value as evidence (p. 2,486, 28. 12. 1942), yet he remarks on the anniversary of the Nazis coming to power: 'Für Morgen 30. Januar, den Tag der "Machtübernahme", sind Versammlungen angekündigt unter der Parole: "Dem deutschen Sieg entgegen!" Das ist nun wirklich ein starkes Stück. Aber wer sagt mir, ob es nicht wirklich von 70, 80, vielleicht 90 % der Bevölkerung geglaubt wird? Wer sagt mir die wahre Stimmung des Volkes?' (p. 3,363, 29. 1. 1944).<sup>34</sup> Most fundamentally, Klemperer worries that nobody can give a reliable account of the present or the future:

entweder der Historiker ist nicht persönlich dabei gewesen, dann muss er sich auf Dokumente stützen und weiss also nichts absolut genau, muss subjektiv auslegen. Oder er ist dabei gewesen, dann weiss er erst recht nichts vom objektiven Sachverhalt... Was weiss ich von selbst erlebter Geschichte? Ich war im Kriege, ich habe die Revolution und das dritte Reich aus allernächster Nähe erlebt – que sais-je? (pp. 1037-8, 31. 1. 1938)<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Similarly: 'Mein ewiges Problem: Vox populi? Voces populi? Welche der vielen entscheidet...' (p. 3,134, 13. 9. 1943). Although Arvi Sepp is aware of the contradictions in the diaries he builds Klemperer's recording of the vox populi into 'ein Korpus des Gemurmels seiner Zeit [...], aus dem die Disposition der Mentalitäten seiner Zeit hervorgeht'. Sepp concludes: 'In diesem Archiv bringt die Sprache der Zeitgenossen ihre Einstellungen zur Wirklichkeit zum Ausdruck, und sie ist somit eine wichtige Quelle zur Rekonstruktion der Mentalität der Bevölkerung' (*Topographie des Alltags*, pp. 274-5).

<sup>35</sup> In his study of post-war Dresden Thomas Widera gives an example of contemporaries not understanding their own situation when he quotes Klemperer's diary note on the widespread view in late 1944 that the war is still not lost (*Dresden 1945-1948*, p. 31). Widera comments that people who held this view were unaware that plans to defend Dresden were being drawn up in secret in order to prevent the population becoming demoralised at the prospect of Allied troops reaching the centre of the German Reich (*ibid*). Widera also notes that Klemperer at one point tends to believe the talk of a German miracle that will win the war, but at another he

The list of reasons for doubting the referential value of Klemperer's diaries has been lengthened by Arvi Sepp who takes a cultural studies approach to them, arguing that any diarist's perceptions are determined, among other things, by his or her political, philosophical and religious perspective. In Klemperer's case, Sepp argues, the values and attitudes that shape his diaries derive from the economic, cultural and social capital of the 'deutsch-jüdisches Bildungsbürgertum',<sup>36</sup> and this explains his portrayal of Germans, Jews and anti-Semitism. According to Sepp, Klemperer is a biased observer for seeing Hitler as the Pied Piper of Hamelin who leads the German people against their will into disaster. Sepp also comments that much research on Klemperer takes this view of the innocent Germans as the truth of the matter. By contrast, Sepp argues that Klemperer's thinking on anti-Semitism in Germany is 'einem kontrafaktischen deutsch-jüdischen Wunschdenken verhaftet',<sup>37</sup> meaning that Klemperer's blind love of Germany and his dogged adherence to his own Germanness make him glorify ordinary Germans as having been led astray by un-German Nazi leaders.<sup>38</sup> Sepp's assessment amounts to a significant downgrading of the referential value of Klemperer's diaries, leaving them in their portrayal of the innocent Germans not that far removed from Kempowski's collective diary in which his countrymen are largely portrayed as victims of the Nazis.<sup>39</sup> It is also inadequate since it fails to take account of their inconsistency, a feature of the diaries rooted in their relationality.

### III

Let us now turn to this relational quality of Klemperer's diaries. Despite complaining that, as a Jew, he is ever more isolated, Klemperer regularly reports on his contact with others. Apart from his wife Eva, his contacts include his fellow tenants in the 'Jewish house' where he is sent to live from 1940 onwards, the head of the Jewish community in Dresden and the SA official stationed there, his former colleagues at Dresden Technical University, Nazis who supervise him when he is ordered to join a

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concludes that such talk means the actual situation at the front line must be desperate (ibid). Peter Jacobs points out that Klemperer's claim in June 1934 to see ever more signs of the impending collapse of National Socialism could not have been further from the truth (*Victor Klemperer: Im Kern ein deutsches Gewächs*, 3rd edn, (Berlin: Aufbau, 2010), pp. 182-3).

<sup>36</sup> Arvi Sepp, *Topographie des Alltags*, p. 461.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 313n.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 314.

<sup>39</sup> Sepp also notes that the diaries were popular because they formed a welcome contrast with *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, Daniel Goldhagen's 1996 study of widespread anti-Semitism in Germany (p. 494).

Winter work detail clearing the streets of snow, his fellow workers and foremen at the factories where he is sent to work, his dentist, his doctor, his lawyer, Germans on the street, tax inspectors and other city officials, and Gestapo officers who search his apartment. His interest in gathering examples of the vox populi leads him to list the people he sees regularly: 'Wen sehe, wen höre ich? Natcheff, den Krämer Berger, den Cigarrenhändler in der Chemnitzerstr. der [F]reimaurer ist, die Aufwartefrau, deren 40jähriger Sohn im Westen steht und eben Urlaub hat, die Kohlenträger' (p. 1,323, 17. 3. 1940).

The first feature of the diaries that has its roots in their relational quality is their lack of consistency. For example, Klemperer's opinions about levels of anti-Semitism and support for National Socialism in Germany vary widely. His views on what should be done with the Germans can change dramatically in the course of a single day, and they change according to his interactions with those around him: he notes a conversation with Elias Seliksohn, a Jewish neighbour, who wants all Germans to be wiped out. Klemperer protests that not all Germans approve of the atrocities against the Jews, but after reading a pronouncement by Hitler about needing to be hard and merciless he returns in his mind to the conversation and wonders if Seliksohn is not right. (pp. 2,132-4, 27. 7. 1942).

Assmann sees contradiction as a consequence of embracing the subjective experience of history and as a challenge to the writing of history. Taking Friedländer's work as an example, she argues that it undermines the illusion of a coherent historical construction and draws attention to the irreducible multiplicity of voices and to the contradictory nature of people's experiences.<sup>40</sup> Here contradiction is acknowledged as a virtue rather than a weakness of the subjective experience of history, but one can take the point further. Whereas Assmann highlights the differences between individuals' experiences and their interpretations of those experiences, Klemperer's diaries present differences within one individual. In their contradictory nature Klemperer's diaries resist being simplified down to a fixed set of beliefs.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, p. 49.

<sup>41</sup> In this respect Klemperer's diaries align themselves with other autobiographical writing on the Nazi period. Ruth Klüger's autobiography, *Weiter leben* (1992), tells of her childhood as a Jew in Vienna and her deportation to Theresienstadt, then Auschwitz and Christianstadt. She makes connections between Nazism and Germans of the 1980s that, as she also points out, are more to do with her emotions than her

Klemperer's comments on his conversations with those around him and on their attitudes often provide a graphic illustration of the pressures within close relationships: when his non-Jewish wife displays her name card on the door to their building Klemperer comments that although she places it away from the Jewish star on the door, she does not do as their upstairs neighbour does: Frau Kreidl, whose Jewish husband is in a concentration camp, adds to her name card 'Arierin', followed by an exclamation mark (p. 1,895, 11. 5. 1942). By July 1942 Klemperer, who hardly dares venture out of their apartment for fear of being questioned or worse on the street, reports that his wife blames him for the state of her nerves and for chasing her off into town in search of food (p. 2,104, 20. 7. 1942). Similarly, his biographer quotes an exchange between Klemperer and his sister Grete about his stubborn adherence to a German identity that leaves him isolated within his wider family. Grete tells him she can no longer convince herself that she is German, and Klemperer comments that this attitude is a relapse into the gruesome oppression of the ghetto and a victory for the Nazis: 'Im ganzen also: entdeutscht, innerlich entwürdigt und ganz resigniert'.<sup>42</sup> Klemperer's comment on an exchange with a non-Jewish co-worker in a Dresden paper-processing plant where he is directed to work shows the significance of relationality beyond the personal and the interpersonal: when the woman asks him if he has a German wife, he comments in his diary: 'Mich erschüttert das mehr als das Fremdwort "arisch". Es zeigt, wie sehr die "totale Abschnürung" der Juden im Volksbewußtsein geglückt ist' (p. 3,581, 3. 5. 1944).

Another encounter illustrates the capacity of individuals to live with contradictions and create convenient fictions. Klemperer comments on a conversation with his neighbour, Else Kreidl, about a new lodger who works for the Nazi Governor of Saxony, Martin Mutschmann:

Am Abend erzählte Elsa Kreidl, sehr begeistert von diesem neuen Mieter, [...]: Der Herr Forstmeister habe erzählt, er sei mit Beförderung nach Dresden versetzt, er habe in seiner neuen Stellung mit dem Statthalter Mutschmann unmittelbar zusammenzuarbeiten, eine nicht ganz leichte Aufgabe – immerhin, der Statthalter 'berge unter der rauhen Schale ein ganz gutmütiges Herz'. Nun ist es ausgeschlossen, daß jemand heute in ein

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reason, but she claims the right to make such connections since they are the result of her experience. For the detail of the contradictory structure at the heart of Klüger's work see Roger Woods, 'Ruth Klüger, Autobiography, and Remembering the Holocaust', *German Life and Letters*, 66, 2, 2013, pp. 173-186.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted by Peter Jacobs, *Victor Klemperer: Im Kern ein deutsches Gewächs*, p. 220.

oberstes Amt befördert wird, der seiner Partei nicht für absolut sicher gilt, und es ist erst recht ausgeschlossen, daß irgend jemand in Sachsen nicht wissen sollte, mit wieviel Blut (Hohnstein!) die zu diesem gutmütigen Herzen gehörige Hand besudelt ist. – Der Forstmeister will nicht sehen, was ihm peinlich wäre, darin liegt seine Mitschuld, und darin ist er typisch und repräsentativ für eine ungeheure Schicht [...]. Diese Schicht ist mitschuldig und muß mitbüßen. (pp. 2,161-2, 10. 8. 1942, underlinings in original).

As the non-Jewish wife of a Jew who has by this time been murdered in Buchenwald, described by Klemperer as bitter for having been drawn into the 'Jewish mess' (p. 1,369, 6. 7. 1940), Frau Kreidl seems motivated by her need to survive when she expresses her apparent satisfaction with the new lodger. In his turn, the new lodger trivialises his superior's crimes, and his motives for this self-deception seem to be connected with the promotion that goes with his new job.<sup>43</sup> Underlying Klemperer's account of a single conversation and his commentary on it are multiple complex relationships, including Klemperer's own attitude towards Frau Kreidl. He contrasts her wish to distance herself from the Jewish community with his own wife's solidarity and refers to her with a hint of mockery before her husband is killed as 'die Arierin'. Klemperer's wife takes Frau Kreidl to task for being so relaxed about a police official working for the Gestapo moving into the block after her husband has been murdered (p. 2,125, 26. 7. 1942).

An example of relationality that shows the dense background to an apparently simple communication is contained in Klemperer's diary entries connected to a statement he wrote in February 1946 in support of the former mayor of Dölzschen, Gerhard Christmann. Klemperer explains in this statement (which is not included in the diaries) that in his negotiations with the mayor in the early 1940s he had refused to sell the house that he had built for himself and his wife in Dölzschen, and Christmann had not contacted the Gestapo to force him to sell. Klemperer concludes of the mayor: 'Sein Verhalten war also durchaus menschlich und stand im Gegensatz zu dem, was damals von ihm erwartet wurde'.<sup>44</sup> The background to this assessment

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<sup>43</sup> From 1933 Burg Hohnstein in Saxony was run as a prison for opponents of the Nazi regime, with active support from Mutschmann for its brutal methods.

<sup>44</sup> Statement of 28. 2. 1946, held in Dresden City Archive, quoted by Widera, *Dresden 1945-1948*, p. 158. Klemperer's post-war diaries refer to Christmann coming to see him and Klemperer writing the statement (*So sitze ich denn zwischen allen Stühlen*, vol 1, p. 204, 2. 3. 1946).

of the mayor's character and behaviour is set out in some detail in Klemperer's diaries. He writes of his worry about having to obtain permission from the Gestapo to travel to Dölzschen to meet him (p. 2,528, 8. 1. 1943), of being described as der 'Jude Kl' on the form giving him permission to travel, of the certainty with which the Deputy Leader of the Jewish Community in Dresden tells Klemperer that the mayor will demand that he sell his house, and refusal would result in him being sent to a concentration camp (p. 2,541, 14. 1. 1943). Klemperer's wife tells him, however, that he should not agree to any demands the mayor might make since it would be easier for the Gestapo to murder him if he did sell, and she hints that the previous Deputy Leader of the Jewish Community tried to persuade another Jew to sell her house in order to gain favour with the Gestapo and possibly to profit from the deal (p. 2,542, 14. 1. 1943).

Whereas Klemperer's supportive statement on the mayor after the war is a simple document, his diaries from the time tell of the circumstances surrounding his dealings with the mayor. The meeting itself was preceded by Klemperer's irritation at the mayor's failure to realise that he would need to obtain permission to travel from Dresden to Dölzschen, by Klemperer dreading contact with the Gestapo, by the humiliation that he had to endure to obtain this permission, by his fear that the meeting could cost him his life, and by doubts being cast on the motives of members of the Jewish community. The diaries are of value for showing the complexity of relationships and the prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty, dread and conflict that lay behind the archive document.

Relationality features also in Klemperer's post-war diaries where he explains that he does not wish to be openly hostile to the man who moved into his house after Klemperer had been forced out of it in 1940 because he does not wish to appear as a 'jüdischer Rachegeist und Triumphator'.<sup>45</sup> Klemperer's use of an anti-Semitic taunt indicates his concern about how others will see him, his uncertainty about his personal position even after National Socialism has been defeated and his sense that anti-Semitism is still lurking beneath the surface in Germany.<sup>46</sup> When Campbell and Harbord argue that autobiographical writing is never about the self as an isolated project, but about a self known through and embedded within the network of social

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<sup>45</sup> *So sitze ich denn zwischen allen Stühlen*, vol 1, p. 12, 20. 6. 1945.

<sup>46</sup> Klemperer's response to a lecture on the radio in July 1945 condemning German militarism is to point out that people are starting to say the 'Jews are back' (ibid., p. 50, 20. 7. 1945).

relations that confer identity and meaning,<sup>47</sup> they are describing a key feature of Klemperer's diaries.

Klemperer's generalisations in the diaries are often undermined by specific relational experience. His conclusion after five years of Nazi rule that Hitler's mentality is also deeply rooted in the German people themselves (p. 1,050, 5. 4. 1938) gives way just over a month later to a very different reflection after Klemperer meets a librarian who shakes his hand. Klemperer observes that although the man is no Nazi he is wearing the Party badge, and he concludes that there must be millions of such Party members (p. 1,072, 10. 5. 1938). When Klemperer tells his lawyer how he is being treated the lawyer is outraged but tells Klemperer that he (the lawyer) will still have to keep his distance from him. Klemperer reassures him: 'Gewiß, Herr Richter, Sie haben Frau und Kind, Sie sind ganz unschuldig'. Now it is the lawyer's turn to put the opposite argument: "'Unschuldig ist niemand in Deutschland. Warum hat man dies Régime so lange geduldet?'" (p. 2,261, 11. 9. 1942). One might conclude that Klemperer is here keeping his true thoughts to himself, but it is striking that at times when he has more contact with non-Jewish Germans he stresses the ambiguity in their minds towards National Socialism. In his account of a conversation with Meister Hartwig, the foreman at the paper processing plant, Klemperer recognises the anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda in the foreman's words but stresses that Hartwig is no Nazi. Here again Klemperer returns to the idea that the Germans are somehow victims of Nazi propaganda: 'In der Kriegführung mögen sich die Nat.soc. verrechnet haben, in der Propaganda bestimmt nicht' (p. 3,480-81, 19. 3. 1944).

In the last days of the war in Europe Klemperer records Germans' versions of life under the Nazis: 'Jetzt ist jeder hier immer Feind der Partei gewesen' (p. 5,208, 1. 5. 1945), and he wonders where the truth of the matter is to be found (p. 5,239, 5. 5. 1945). Even at the personal relational level, Klemperer is at a loss to know the truth. In his post-war diaries he is torn between thinking the Germans around him are being genuinely kind to him and thinking they are guilty.<sup>48</sup> Berger, the man who had moved into their house after Klemperer and his wife had been forced out of it, turns up on their doorstep asking for help. Klemperer has heard that Berger had profited from his connections with the Nazis, tricked people, and spread false rumours about the Klemperers, including the claim that they were dead. Berger tells Klemperer and his wife that he had protected them, provided them with food, and lined up a

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<sup>47</sup> Jan Campbell, Janet Harbord, eds., *Temporalities, Autobiography and Everyday Life* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2002), p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> *So sitze ich denn zwischen allen Stühlen*, vol 1, p. 8.

mortgage for them, but Klemperer knows that none of this is true.<sup>49</sup> The relational dimension of the diaries shows Klemperer instantly surrounded by other people's versions of their lives and even of his own life.

Aleida Assmann argues that memory complements history writing in three ways: it brings with it emotion and the individual experience, it has a memorial function, and it has an ethical orientation.<sup>50</sup> We have seen that Klemperer's diaries map onto the first two of these characteristics through their preoccupation with what he experienced at first hand and how he responded to this experience, and through his commitment to the diary as his form of testimony. Assmann describes the effect of the ethical dimension of memory as a 'Moralisierung von Geschichte'.<sup>51</sup> This is also in evidence in Klemperer's diaries at the relational level where he passes moral judgement on the behaviour of individuals and of Germany as a whole in decidedly personal terms: Germans are sinful (p. 5,018, 28. 3. 1945), Germany has brought 'disgrace' upon itself (p. 1,916, 23. 5. 1942), and a whole stratum of society is guilty and must do penance if Germany is not to lose its soul (p. 1,916, 23. 5. 1942). Given Klemperer's background and circumstances this is not particularly surprising, but the significance of this personalised morality becomes clear when contrasted with the tone in Walter Kempowski's *Abgesang '45*. Here, extracts from soldiers' and civilians' letters and diaries are notable for their impersonal facticity, i.e. their preoccupation with the facts of the authors' experiences and an absence of reflection about them.

#### IV

Klemperer's diaries are without doubt valuable sources for anyone wishing to gain a better understanding of how Jews lived and died in the Nazi years. Leaving aside the statistics and stories based on hearsay and rumour, the diaries still contain a mass of concrete and significant information. In addition to this referential significance, however, Klemperer's diaries have a rich relational quality that reflects his subjective experience of history and a reassertion of the subject. The contradictions in the diaries - including his oscillations between a German and a Jewish identity, between condemning all Germans for having found an appropriate leader in Hitler and recognising the decency of many non-Jewish Germans - are of value in their own right, not least because they present a complex processing of experience. The diaries have their own internal structure and dynamic that must be understood and acknowledged by those who would make use of them. Alongside Kempowski's

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp.11- 12.

<sup>50</sup> *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, p. 50.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.



appropriation of the diaries are many examples of readers doing the opposite by reducing Klemperer's testimony to a simple set of messages.<sup>52</sup> That complexity and contradiction must have their place in historical accounts is acknowledged by one historian who concludes from his reading of Klemperer's accounts of non-Jews' attitudes towards him that 'monolithic interpretations of mood and history are *post hoc* over-simplifications, indeed falsifications'.<sup>53</sup>

In his speech in honour of Klemperer, who was posthumously awarded the Geschwister Scholl Prize in 1995, Martin Walser captures the contradictory nature of the diaries and concludes: 'Ich kenne keine Mitteilungsart, die uns die Wirklichkeit

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<sup>52</sup> For example, Klaus-Dietmar Henke reads in the diaries a simple progression from the view that National Socialism is un-German to the view that it is deeply rooted in German culture and in the German people ('Mutmassungen über Victor Klemperers Leben in zwei Diktaturen', in Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, *Leben in zwei Diktaturen: Victor Klemperers Leben in der NS-Zeit und in der DDR* (Dresden, 1997), pp. 15-19 (16). In fact, Klemperer's views on this point continue to change right up to and after the end of the war. See, for example, his reflections in May 1945 on Germans claiming never to have been Nazis. Although Klemperer is sceptical he allows for the possibility that this is true (p. 5,208, 1. 5. 1945). Arvi Sepp quotes the particularly crass and politically motivated example of Konrad Löw in the pages of the New Right newspaper *Junge Freiheit* on Klemperer: 'Wer Klemperer liest und sein Leben betrachtet, wird stutzig und fragt sich, wer das deutsche Volk der NS-Ära zutreffender beurteilt – amerikanische Nachkriegskinder wie Goldhagen und Gellately, oder Leute wie Victor Klemperer, die, im deutschen Volk lebend, das NS-Regime vom ersten bis zum letzten Tag erlitten haben. Sein Urteil: "Fraglos empfindet das Volk die Judenverfolgung als Sünde"'. *Topographie des Alltags*, p. 502. Löw's article, 'Die Deutschen und die Judenpolitik 1933-1945: Die Angst vor dem einen Prozent', *Junge Freiheit*, 4 January 2008, refers to accounts by those who suffered racial persecution as 'Dokumente von unschätzbarem Wert, da sie jedes andere Beweismittel an Authentizität übertreffen'. He regards Klemperer's diaries as the most significant of all such documents and goes on to list extracts that illustrate the friendliness of Germans towards Klemperer and their hostility towards National Socialism. Sepp points out that elsewhere in the diaries Klemperer says that National Socialism and anti-Semitism are a German tumour (*Topographie des Alltags*, p. 502n.) Omer Bartov concludes that the vacillations in Klemperer's diaries make them useless for tendentious historians (*Germany's War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories*, pp. 199-200).

<sup>53</sup> Bill Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 140.

der NS-Diktatur faßbarer machen kann, als es die Prosa Klemperers tut'.<sup>54</sup>A reading that acknowledges the strengths and limitations of the referentiality of the diaries and also takes account of their relationality can provide significant insights into Klemperer's reality and into the reality of those with whom he interacted, and it points the way for further research.

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<sup>54</sup> Martin Walser, *Das Prinzip Genauigkeit: Laudatio auf Victor Klemperer* (Frankfurt aM: suhrkamp, 1996), p. 52.