Narratives in audio testimonies by Jewish witnesses in the
Bielefeld Białystok Trial

by Katrin Stoll

From 23 March 1966 to 14 April 1967 the Westphalian city of Bielefeld became the venue for an important though little heard of trial. Four former members of the Kommandeur der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD für den Bezirk Białystok (KdS), including the head of the KdS, Dr. Wilhelm Altenloh, were accused of having organized the deportations of Jews from areas within the district of Białystok to the death camps of Auschwitz and Treblinka. Moreover, they had to answer to the court for specific murder charges during the ghetto liquidations. The defendants were found guilty as accomplices to murder but acquitted of having personally committed any murders.

The original testimonies from the main hearing were tape recorded. Almost 200 witnesses, including Jewish survivors of the Białystok and Grodno ghettos, testified before the Bielefeld jury court. Before the interrogation of the defendants and the witnesses the presiding judge announced that the tapes were to be used for trial purposes only and to be destroyed upon the legal validity of the judgement. However, for some reason the tapes were not obliterated. They were initially stored away and then transferred to the archive in Detmold. As with the tapes from the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trail, they changed “their status from legal tools to historical sources”. The tapes from the Bielefeld Białystok Trail were analysed in my PhD thesis.

A characteristic feature of the communication before German courtrooms lies in the fact that the interrogation of defendants and witnesses is mostly carried out by the presiding judge. The interaction is conducted through question/answer sequences. With reference to the concept developed by Sandra Harris on legal narrative structures in witness and defendant accounts in the evidential portions of courtroom trials, my paper aims at examining narratives in the testimonies by Jewish witnesses who survived the Białystok ghetto. In order to analyse selected narrative

1 Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen, Abteilung Ostwestfalen-Lippe, D 21 A, 6341 and 6342.
4 Modifying Labov’s model of narrative structure, Harris uses a concept of narrative that is defined as follows: „Orientation – the circumstances which surround the narrative account. Core narrative – the account itself, i.e. what happened, including often what was said and seen as well as what was done. [Elaboration] – [provides further details, clarification, explication, etc. of the core narrative]. Point – significance of the narrative account for the larger trial narrative, i.e. usually the guilt or innocence of the defendant. Addressed explicitly to the jury.” Sandra Harris, Fragmented narratives and multiple tellers: witness and defendant accounts in trials, in: Discourse Studies 3 (2001), pp. 53-74, here p. 60. Even though Harris developed her model, in order to analyse narratives in testimonies given in American court rooms, it can be argued that some elements of her concept may be used for the examination of testimonies delivered in German court cases as well.
structures, the paper makes use of terms such as “core narrative”, “fragmented narrative”, “reported narrative”, “extended narrative” as defined by Harris. Using certain parts of the testimonies given by the Jewish witnesses Dr. Aron Bejlin and Sara Perman, the paper addresses the following questions: What are the characteristic features of the narrative structures in Bejlin’s and Perman’s testimony concerning the deportation of Jews from the Białystok ghetto in February 1943? Why does the form of “extended narrative”, which is very rare in legal testimonies, occur in Bejlin’s account? What function does it fulfil? Which themes appear in the “core narrative”?\"