

Crossing borders in history education

Reflections of students from Prague and St. Gallen on their conceptualizations of a virtual tour based on a Holocaust survivor's transnational life trajectory

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Abstract

The article was written in the aftermath of an international summer school held in Prague and St. Gallen in the context of the research and public history project “Train to Freedom” by St. Gallen University of Teacher Education, Charles University in Prague, and other partners. Students and teacher students from the involved universities developed didactical concepts for a virtual tour, a so-called “iWalk”, covering important chapters of the life of Holocaust survivor Petr Fiala, using excerpts of the testimony he gave to the USC Shoah Foundation in 1997 as well as historical photographs, maps, and archival documents. Fiala was one of the 1200 prisoners who boarded the “Train to Freedom” that brought them to Switzerland in February 1945. The aim of this hands-on student project was to develop an interactive educational tool for high school students and a wider public that conveys an actor-centered transnational migration history. In the article, we would like to give an insight into this experimental teaching project. We are using audio-recordings of discussions among the participants of the summer school reflecting on their own history education and their didactical thoughts when developing the “iWalk” and linking them with research findings and theoretical concepts in history and history didactics.

Keywords

transnational history, history education, biographical approach, digital learning tools, Holocaust Education

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And ... there came a very dramatic moment where we have seen next to the train ... a Swiss flag ... a Swiss flag. Ehm ... We ... eh ... started to understand that we are entering ehm ... the ... Bodamske jezero, how to translate it? The ... Bodam Lake [Lake Constance] which is already at the Swiss-German border. And ... we made a stop in Kreuzlingen. Kreuzlingen is already a, a ... Swiss village, it was a ... it is not a village, it's a small town, it's a small town ... and we stopped. We have seen eeh ... Swiss soldiers ... I cannot explain enough how this was ... unbelievably exciting. (Interview with Petr Fiala, 14.02.1997, Tape 5, 00:00:44–00:02:07)

In his interview with the USC Shoah Foundation in 1997, Petr Fiala recounts the moment when he entered Switzerland on a transport that had departed from Theresienstadt Ghetto on 5 February 1945 and brought 1200 prisoners, most of them elderly people from the German “Reich”, Czechia and the Netherlands, to Switzerland. Born on 4 May 1930 to a Jewish family in Prague, Petr Fiala was deported to Theresienstadt together with his mother and sister in September 1942. After their liberation and the end of the war, Petr Fiala decided to return to Prague where he stayed for 21 years before emigrating illegally to Israel and then moving to Iran for work reasons. After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, he fled to his sister who was living in Hamburg before settling in the United States of America, where he had lived until the moment of the interview. (Interview with Petr Fiala, 14.02.1997)

Petr Fiala's transnational migration biography served as a case study and starting point for an international summer school in Prague and St. Gallen that took place during one week in June 2023. The summer school was part of the research and public history project “Train to Freedom” conducted by the Centre of Democracy Education and Human Rights at St. Gallen University of Teacher Education in collaboration with Charles University Prague, Freie Universität Berlin, and other partners. The project examines the rescue mission of February 1945 and develops educational activities for both formal and informal learning. During the summer school, the participating students from Charles University Prague and student teachers of St. Gallen University of Teacher Education were asked to work in international teams and develop a concept of a virtual tour, a so-called “iWalk”. Students' virtual transnational tours had to cover a few of the most important stops in the life of Peter Fiala. For this, students were able to use the oral history interview from USC Shoah Foundation, as well as other sources such as files from the Swiss Federal Archives, historical newspaper articles, maps, and photographs. The goal was to convey an actor-centered transnational migration history for high school students and the wider public. At the end of the week, the students and student teachers were asked to record their discussions reflecting their didactical decisions during the project work, as well as their experiences in history education in their respective countries.

Introductory Thoughts

This article is based on audio-recordings of the group discussions among the international project teams in which students and student teachers reflected on their didactic approach for the project and shared experiences of their own history education in their country of residence. We analyze these recorded discussions hermeneutically and explore students' opinions and convictions underlying their conceptualization of the developed educational material. We also reflect on how these opinions might have been shaped by their different national and educational contexts.

We begin with a discussion of the transnational approaches in the research and public history project “Train to Freedom”, from the perspective of history as well as history education. The research part of the project follows a biographical approach (Gautschi, 2015), examining how the trajectories of the 1200 liberated prisoners were determined: On the one hand, both the forced migration and deportation, and the liberation were the result of international and transnational networks. On the other hand, the trajectories were directed by nation-state restrictions and national migration regimes such as Switzerland's restrictive and antisemitic refugee policy (for this policy see e.g. Picard, 1997; Mächler, 1998; UEK, 2001; Kury, 2003). The transnational approach is also crucial for the public history part of the “Train to Freedom” project, which, apart from the “iWalk”, includes the development of teaching materials, exhibitions, and a website. The dissemination of the research findings into schools and the public can help to differentiate, complement and, where appropriate, counter popular national narratives and strengthen a transnational memory of the Holocaust.

In the second part of the article, we provide an overview of the developed “iWalk” concept, consisting of five stops that were each devised by one group of students. We also present an analysis of the audio recordings of students’ group discussions on their own experiences while being taught about the Holocaust and World War II, as well as their convictions and didactical reflections while creating the “iWalk”, focusing on emotions, empathy and alterity.

Beyond the nation-state: Transnational approaches in research and the project “Train to Freedom”

Nationalism and historiography have been and often still are historically closely intertwined. Consequently, the impact of “nation” as a construct on historical narratives has been and still is big. Transnational approaches, however, have gained much importance since the beginning of the 21st century. They underlie various concepts, such as entangled history, shared history, or *histoire croisée* and are particularly visible in perspectives of postcolonial studies and global history (e.g. Werner & Zimmermann, 2002; Conrad & Eckert, 2007; Patel, 2010) which also influenced Swiss historiography (e.g. Purtschert et al., 2012; Holenstein, 2015; Schär, 2015; Kreis 2023). Following a classical definition by David Thelen, historians with a transnational approach aim to “explore how people and ideas and institutions and cultures moved above, below, through, and around, as well as within, the nation-state, to investigate how well national borders contained or explained how people experienced history.” (Thelen, 1999, p. 967) Transnational history does not deny the relevance of the nation state. The nation state remains very effective. Transnational history, however, widens the perspective and adds important complexity to historical narratives.

The project “Train to Freedom” deals with the transport from Theresienstadt to St. Gallen, one of several successful attempts in the last months of World War II to save a few thousand Jews from systematic murder by Nazi Germany. The project examines the transnational networks that lead to this rescue mission and the transnational trajectories of the 1200 liberated prisoners (for the mission see especially Friedenson & Kranzler, 1984, pp. 124–138; Dieckhoff, 1995; Bauer, 1996; Sebastiani, 2005, pp. 902–937; Krummenacher, 2005, pp. 320–327; Metzger & Gunzenreiner, 2018). Their liberation began as a private initiative of the Swiss Jewish couple Recha and Isaac Sternbuch, who, based in Europe, worked for the North American “Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States of America and Canada” (UOR) and its relief committee “Vaad Ha-Hatzalah”. Especially Recha Sternbuch had been a key figure for Jewish refugee relief in Switzerland since the 1930s (on the role of Recha Sternbuch and the relief committee: Friedenson & Kranzler, 1984; Zuroff, 2000; Krummenacher, 2005, pp. 169–174). In October 1944, the Sternbuchs approached former Swiss Federal Councilor Jean-Marie Musy with their rescue plans. From 1919 to 1934, Musy had represented the Catholic-Conservatives in the Swiss government consisting of seven councilors. Due to his authoritarian and corporative ideas, his proximity to fascism, and his key role in anticommunist networks, Musy became a controversial figure in Switzerland after his retirement (Sebastiani, 2004, pp. 433–878; Sebastiani, 2009). Knowing Heinrich Himmler personally, Musy had access to Nazi circles. These high ranked contacts but also the fact that he had already succeeded in having individuals released from NS-camps made him an interesting go-between for the Sternbuchs. Plans for the rescue of the Jewish prisoners finally took shape when Musy met twice with Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler in Germany to negotiate the liberation. The negotiations also included discussions of a plan to rescue 1,200 Jews from concentration camps each week. However, this extension of the rescue operation failed.

When analyzing some of these 1200 trajectories we regard – following Damir Skenderovic (2015, pp. 7–12) – the migrating individuals as transnational actors with agency in social and political processes. On the one hand, we focus on the strategies chosen by liberated prisoners to deal with challenges and expand their opportunities to act freely. On the other hand, we examine their subjective perceptions and their coping with identification, attribution, and dissociation. For a long time, this actor-centered perspective has been missing in the writing of histories of migration. Following the metaphor of Bardo Fassbender and Anne Peters, we use the individual biographies as “‘keyholes’ through which we can see an entire ‘room’ or historical space” (2012, p. 14 as cited in Löhr, 2013, p. 14). Coming back to our case study, although Petr Fiala has, undoubtedly, lived a “life beyond borders” (Löhr, 2013), it was not a life without borders. On the contrary, his transnational biography, and especially the cited part of his interview about crossing the Swiss border in 1945, illustrate how borders and national states with their migration

regimes have played a major role: Striking to him was seeing the Swiss flag and Swiss soldiers, indicating that they had crossed the border and were now out of reach from the Nazis. Not only during World War II and its aftermath, but also during his time in communist Czechoslovakia, crossing borders was a key element of his biography. Working for the Czechoslovakian Airlines, Fiala points out he was able to see “the free world” and go on journeys he “loved” and “really enjoyed [...] to the full extent.” (Interview with Petr Fiala, 14.02.1997, Tape 6, 00:14:18–00:14:54)

Following the approach of Mobility Studies and Transit Research, we are particularly interested in the “spacial-temporal in-between”, as Carolin Liebisch-Gümüş (2022, p. 22) describes these migration routes that can lead in many different directions, assuming that migration trajectories are rarely linear, but rather contingent and can change spontaneously. When reconstructing and analyzing such “movement in space respectively its representation and reflection” retrospectively, sources like diaries, letters, postcards, passports etc. can be promising (Liebisch-Gümüş, 2022, p. 23). In the case of our summer school, by leaving the comfort zone of the national container in research (Tanner, 2020, p. 233) thanks to our cooperation with Charles-University in Prague, Freie Universität Berlin and USC Shoah Foundation, we had access to such historical sources on Petr Fiala and not only to his file in the Swiss Federal Archives.

“IWalk” – a tool for transnational history education?

The application “IWalk” allows one to integrate a variety of different historical sources besides the excerpts of the oral history interview, such as documents, photographs, or maps. Connected to Google Maps, users can follow historical (migration) routes of individuals and see where the mentioned sites are located today. The concept of the “IWalk” about Petr Fiala developed by our students during the summer school, contained the following five stops, representing different chapters of his life:

- Stop 1 (His family’s house in Mánesova street in Prague): Life before Terezin Ghetto in Prague
- Stop 2 (Former boys’ school in Terezin, today’s museum): Life in Terezin Ghetto
- Stop 3 (Border between Konstanz, Germany, and Kreuzlingen, Switzerland): Decision to go on the transport and the journey to Switzerland
- Stop 4 (“Disinfection camp” in St. Gallen, today part of the campus of St. Gallen University of Teacher Education): Life in Swiss camps
- Stop 5 (Čáslavská street in Prague where Petr Fiala lived after World War II): Returning to Prague and the decision to emigrate to Israel and further destinations

The chosen stops offer many possibilities for geographical references of familiar places for users from different countries and represent Petr Fiala’s transnational trajectory. Linking these historical places onsite with contextual information and Petr Fiala’s testimony online, the “IWalk” connects the macro-history of forced migration in the context of the Holocaust and Nazi aggression with a personalized micro-history, showing the personal and sometimes very emotional perception of the historical events by “ordinary people”. At the end of each stop, there are one or several questions for reflection and discussion, which users of the “IWalk”, especially high school students, are invited to answer.

To round up the summer school, the students from Prague and St. Gallen were not only asked to reflect on their didactical decisions during the development process of the “IWalk”, but also to discuss how they remember being taught about World War II and the Holocaust in high school in their respective national contexts. By combining these dimensions, students are made aware of different national narratives and are able to compare and challenge them with other national as well as transnational perspectives.

In total, 14 participants attended the summer school. The group from Charles University in Prague consisted of nine students of Area Studies of which six had attended high school in Czechia, and one in Czechia and Germany. There were two international students – one from Poland and one from the U.S. – who had attended high school in their home countries. The five student teachers that participated from St. Gallen University of Teacher Education had all spent their school years in Switzerland. One of them could not participate in the discussion as she had to

leave the summer school earlier. The following questions structured the discussion:

- How was World War II and the Holocaust taught at your high school (or “Gymnasium”)? What narrative of your own countries’ role was depicted?
- In your opinion, how should this topic be taught? In what way might a tool like “iWalk” be beneficial for it? In what way not?
- What were the general ideas behind the concept of your stop, e. g.
 - Why did you choose the [video] clip(s)?
 - How did you create the question you are asking the participants?
 - Were there any ideas in the beginning that you didn’t realize in the end?

The students discussed these questions in the same groups of two to three that they had worked in for the development of the “iWalk” and recorded the discussions with their mobile phones. The discussions were held in absence of the lecturers.

“... so this all like gets more real”: Analysis of students’ discussions

Transnational approaches are reflected not only in history, but also in history education (e.g. Fenske & Kuhn, 2015; Grewe, 2017; Marti, 2021; Metzger, 2023). Didactical advantages are usually seen in changing perspectives and in multiperspectivity, in the development of a differentiated understanding of space and historical actors, and in fostering the awareness of power structures. However, until today history classes often do not intend “to make students, in the first place, learn something about society and their changes, but to become the proud citizens of their respective nation.” (Fink et al., 2020, p. 50) Rooting back to the 19th century, this way of teaching history that provides “identification offers which promote the social cohesion” (Fink et al., 2020, p.50) has also been experienced by our students. This is the first main finding of the analysis of the recordings. They reported of well-established narratives centered around the national state. All of the interviewed Swiss students remember being taught about the neutral role, the non-involvement of Switzerland in World War II, the narrative of being surrounded by the Third Reich or having to prevent attacks (e.g. Recording group 1: 00:00:36; Recording group 4: 00:05:35). One student also reports that the “Réduit”, the Swiss National Redoubt as a measure to defend Switzerland against foreign attacks, was mentioned in their history class (Recording group 2, 00:06:19).

In Czechia, students recalled their teachers sticking to the narratives of the Munich Agreement as a treason from the other states, as a historical account of how these states “sold Czechoslovakia to the hands of Hitler” (e.g. Recording group 2, 00:03:44) and the narrative of Czechs being victims (e.g. Recording group 2, 00:04:08). Another student mentioned the narrative of Czechs fighting back Nazis during occupation as prevalent (Recording group 4, 00:01:39).

The Polish student from Charles University remembered how the topic of responsibility was important and that he was taught that Poland, despite being the place where the Holocaust happened, was not an independent state at that time. It was seen as harmful for Poland if that fact was not emphasized. However, he found that in his school, the history of antisemitism and ignorance in Poland was lacking (Recording group 3, 00:03:40). The other international student in the group from Prague, an American, stressed that the Holocaust and World War II had been taught in a non-European context. Although her teachers tried to show different aspects of the topic, in her opinion it is “very distant from the U.S.” and Americans don’t understand it as well as they should. (Recording group 3, 00:01:15) She recounted that her history classes were rather about the liberation of Europe and D-Day than Holocaust-related (Recording group 3, 00:03:18).

A second frequently made observation by the students was – although there were some exceptions, for example a Czech student that went to a High School in Germany – having been taught mainly the facts. They missed discussions and critical reflections on the topic, as well as talking about individual life stories of the victims. (Recording group 2, 00:01:05; Recording group 5, 00:01:32) One Czech student mentioned that they had always spoken about “the Jews” in a very generalized way and never about the emotions of individuals (Recording group 5, 00:02:19; 00:01:01). Most of the groups agreed that the “iWalk” had potential in these aspects – showing the perspective of the victims, depicting them as “people like all of us” (Recording group 1, 00:05:28)

or “people like our grandmothers, grandfathers” (Recording group 1, 00:07:14) that “were just made ... to look like they were different”. (Recording group 1, 00:05:33) They felt that through the biographical approach, “everyone can like ... relate to [the topic]” (Recording group 1, 00:07:50) and that through the open questions being asked at the end of each stop, critical thinking could be fostered. One student also found it important to locate history, stating that “history becomes more real” (Recording group 3, 00:08:00) and is “easier to imagine” (Recording group 3, 00:08:25) when it is in our everyday surroundings or as this student pointed out:

And also these interviews, I think when we were walking in Prague and we watched the videos, that was also like impressive for me that ... that ... this video was recorded somewhere and I could somehow distance myself to this person but then I realized that this person, was living, for instance, in the house where I’m standing now in front of so this all like becomes [sic!] more real [...]. (Recording group 3, 00:09:30)

Besides concerns about the length and complexity of the “IWalk” for high school students, as well as a potential lack of supervision by the teacher, emotional aspects were also mentioned as potential disadvantages. One student, for example, highlighted the feeling of over-exposure:

But what I am experiencing right now is kind of ... like an ... over-exposure to Holocaust ... So for me, now ..., it’s basically ... It’s kinda losing the meaning in how tragic ... and ... grasping how tragic it actually was. (Recording group 1, 00:09:26–00:09:41)

Another group was concerned about a possible over-identification with victims which could cause trauma. (Recording group 5, 00:04:16) On the other hand, one group felt that watching videos of survivors was not as good as meeting them in real life (Recording group 2, 00:10:16) – not considering that a real-life encounter could be even more overwhelming and thus make it more difficult to analyze the testimonies critically (Bertram, 2017, p. 144).

When students reflected on their own projects, meaning the stops of the “IWalk” they developed, emotional aspects were mentioned in all five groups. In the following statement, students describe why their group chose a certain video clip where Petr Fiala talks about his arrival in Switzerland:

It is also a very powerful clip //Yeah// I feel like, because ... he is talking about how overwhelmed he was when ... they, like, treated him like normal people. //Mhm// And he also starts crying as a testimony to how moved he was //yeah// or is still moved by this ge ... generosity // Yeah//. It is not exactly generosity, it is just like //Yeah, he was, he was, yeah ...// treating the person like the person they are and not treating like animals like the Nazis did. (Recording group 4, 00:11:50–00:12:18)

In this part of her reasoning, the student first regards Petr Fiala’s crying in the interview in 1998 as proof of his emotions during the actual situation in 1945 he is recalling. She then goes on to specify that it is rather the emotion evoked retrospectively. Thus, she points out the different time layers of the interview. However, she puts the time of the interview and present time on the same level. This is a tendency that happened to other students as well and could be an indication that the “aura of authenticity” (Sabrow, 2012, p. 27) of survivors’ testimonies make it difficult even for history students to analyze them as historical sources. However, she distinguishes between what Petr Fiala depicts as “generosity” and what, from her present perspective as a historian, is nothing more than a humane way of interaction.

In the discussion of the group that dealt with stop 3 (“decision to go on the transport and journey to St. Gallen”), a student distinguished between “facts” on one, and “personal story” and “emotions” on the other side, describing the process of choosing the clips as follows:

So for the clips, I think it was important to get his personal story that follows the facts ... during this week we talked about how sometimes memories can be altered or changed a little bit with age ... and so these are the clips that ... what he’s saying did happen but at the same time in these clips you get some of the emotions he’s experiencing ... and the first clip features his home and his family agreeing to go ... to Switzerland ... and you see this decision-making process where they don’t know if the train is going ... but they are taking that risk and taking that opportunity. And the second ... clip focuses on the border which I think was one of the most emotionally impactful moments from his testimony that we saw ... So I think it is important to include that as well and you really get the idea of transition ... and this like choice to go to Switzerland in that clip ... (Recording group 3, 00:10:34–00:11:26)

She legitimately emphasizes the retrospective construction of historical events in testimonies, but at the same time ignores that history itself is a construct. Although in the first paragraph, it seems that she views emotions critically and in opposition to the “facts”, she later points out that she still thinks that the “emotionally impactful moments” of the testimony were worth including in the “iWalk”.

For each stop, the responsible group of students developed open questions to stimulate reflection and discussion among users of the “iWalk”, matching the overarching concepts of their stop, for example:

- How do you think he felt being deported while being labeled a Jew?
- You learned about Terezin being a Ghetto during World War II. Today, it is a town where people live again. At the same time, Terezin is memorial site. What do you think is it like to live there nowadays? Would you participate in memorial events if you were an inhabitant yourself?
- What would you do if you had the opportunity to be released, but it could also lead to your death?
- The Musy-transport was also called the “Train to Freedom”. Petr Fiala also reflects on this “freedom”, but do you think the refugees were actually free when they arrived in Switzerland?
- What do you think home meant to him [Petr Fiala]? How can the concept of home change due to circumstances?

The group that dealt with the part about the decision-making process mentioned above, developed the question “What would you do if you had the opportunity to be released, but it could also lead to your death?” Asking this question shows that they put emphasize on the agency of the persecuted individuals and, at the same time, tried to foster empathy for this difficult decision. However, the struggle of this student explaining why they chose this question shows how there are limits to possible empathy for historical individuals that lived in completely different circumstances than we do (on alterity “Alteritätserfahrung”, see: Sauer, 2021, p. 76–79).

And I think that because of these rumors [about death camps in Eastern Europe] or ... just like information that was ehh ... hmm ... eeh ... hmm ... ehhh ... eeeh ... known by these people ... Ehhh...They ... they ... had reasons to be scared and it was extremely rational to be scared and not to trust. And ... errr ... that I think ... that's why this question ... we started with this question about the choice ... And err ... I think that's like very meaningful for ... eeh ... for the students [high school students using the iWalk], that ... that ... that ... they ... in fact, nowadays we cannot ... sss ..., in any sense, hmm ... eer ... reply to these questions, because, question, because we are not in the same situation ... as eeeh ... they were so ... we don't consider the same facts as ... they ... had in mind. (Recording group 3, 00:12:29–00:13:28)

Conclusion

Petr Fiala's trajectory has led him from Prague over Theresienstadt and Switzerland back to what was to become the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, and later to Israel, Iran, Germany and finally the United States. His story stands as an example for a life beyond but not without borders and offers promising opportunities for history and history education with the aim of moving beyond the national context. Petr Fiala can be used as a case study for transnational migration during and after World War II and, following a biographical approach, offers insights into how these processes were experienced and remembered on an individual level.

This article is not based on a complete study, and the interviews were analyzed hermeneutically. However, the discussions among students from Prague and St. Gallen indicate that history classes are often still held in a nation-centered way, reproducing well-established national narratives, and rarely focusing on transnational aspects or on persecuted individuals as actors with emotions and – even if often limited – spaces to act freely. In this respect, tools like “iWalk” seem promising as they make transnational trajectories, as well as national borders and restrictions visible. The testimony clips that are included in each stop of the “iWalk” can help to establish a link between historical events and present places, thus connecting time and space and making history “easier to imagine” or “more real” as some students described it. The emotionally intense moments of Petr Fiala's testimony can be seen as a chance to foster a certain personal

connection and thus interest in learning about the Holocaust, but also bear the danger of leaving viewers overwhelmed and (re-)traumatized. Therefore, it seems important to focus not only on empathy, but also on alterity as well as on a critical reflection of the survivors' testimonies from a present-day perspective. Especially for high school students, the possibility to let them reflect on, discuss, and answer questions at the end of each "IWalk" stop, is a suitable tool for this practice.

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Review

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Audio Recordings of Group Discussions:

Recording Group 1 (24 June 2023), Discussion among one Swiss student teacher and two Czech students, total length: 00:15:01.

Recording Group 2 (24 June 2023), Discussion among one Swiss student teacher and two Czech students, total length: 00:21:03.

Recording Group 3 (24 June 2023), Discussion among one Swiss student teacher, one American student and one Polish student, total length: 00:16:11.

Recording Group 4 (24 June 2023), Discussion among one Swiss student teacher and one Czech student who attended high school partially in Germany, total length: 00:15:55.

Recording Group 5 (24 June 2023), Discussion among two Czech students (Swiss student teacher was missing for the discussion), total length: 00:15:25.

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