

## **Tips for the Follow-up Discussion** **Following the Meeting with a Contemporary Witness**

Contemporary witnesses from the GDR describe history as they remember it, often addressing traumatic experiences of flight and repression as well as painful events from their time in prison. These descriptions can sometimes conjure up vivid images in the listener's mind and evoke feelings that make it difficult to maintain a critical distance. It is therefore all the more important that the conversation be understood as a complex, multifaceted learning experience. Afterwards, during the follow-up discussion, in addition to reviewing the content, it may also be necessary to address any emotions that were triggered and to critically examine the source.

### **Suggested sequence for a follow-up reflection:**

#### **1. Introduction by the teacher / What did we just experience?**

Personal experiences tend to move listeners deeply. The teacher should begin by asking whether anyone had an emotional response to the conversation with the contemporary witness. If so, these feelings can be addressed afterwards in a follow-up discussion between the teacher and the students. Providing a safe space and an open ear allows the experience to sink in and ensures that a trusting exchange takes place during which the encounter with the contemporary witness is placed in context.

##### *Possible Questions:*

- Did the meeting with the contemporary witness help you better understand the GDR past?
- Were you able to relate to the feelings and thoughts expressed by the contemporary witness?
- Did the material on the GDR that we covered in class help you understand the contemporary witness' story?

#### **2. Discussion in small groups / How should we deal with emotions?**

An open exchange about triggered emotions is best achieved in small groups. A moderation kit can be used to make discussions more interactive. Key words, questions and feelings are noted on moderation cards to provide a common thread for the joint discussion.

##### *Possible Questions:*

- What feelings did you experience during the contemporary witness' visit? Sadness? Compassion? Incomprehension? The desire not to speak? Or perhaps joy? Laughter? Interest? Astonishment?
- What images came to mind while the contemporary witness was speaking? Were you reminded of a specific event, photo or film?
- Do you see any parallels to your own life, personal memories in your family or recent events?

#### **3. Joint evaluation as a group / What can we take away from the conversation?**

A joint evaluation as a group, led by the teacher, can capture the range of emotions experienced and place the contemporary witness' narrative in context. The lightning round method is a good way to briefly collect initial impulses from the small groups without commentary.

Learners often find it difficult to question the presumed authentic testimonies of contemporary witnesses.

It is therefore important after the meeting to present different perspectives through other sources and information. This helps the students form their own independent judgment and stimulates critical discussion.

*Possible Questions:*

- What does a meeting with a contemporary witness represent as compared to other sources, such as textbook and legal texts, official documents, video interviews, films, and newspaper articles?
- What information can a contemporary witness interview provide and what are its limitations? How can we verify its accuracy?
- How does the contemporary witness testimony guide us in the present and what central message do you take away from the meeting?

#### **4. Conclusion and suggestions for further in-class project work**

In the content-related project work, additional questions can be discussed together in class to place the testimony in historical context, transition to the present and stimulate further engagement with the topic:

- **Endure or Fight**  
What reasons did people have to put themselves in danger, to flee or to publish critical texts? Why did others choose to remain silent or adapt to the situation? What would you do?
- **Coping and Starting Over**  
How can people put the past behind them and start a new life after a painful experience? What kinds of help or compensation programs are needed and available to former political prisoners today?
- **Democracy and Dictatorship**  
How do we view the GDR today? How is it relevant to me and my generation? How do formerly incarcerated people feel when the injustice they experienced in the GDR is trivialized?
- **Flight in the Past and Present**  
Flight and integration continue to be major challenges today. Many people are currently fleeing their homeland at great risk to themselves. What parallels and differences can you identify?
- **Learning from History**  
How can we remember the injustices that occurred in the GDR and commemorate the victims today? What places come to mind? How can we prevent totalitarian ideologies from spreading in the future?