

Fellow-Feeling in Childhood Memories of Second World War France: Sympathy, Empathy and the Emotions of History

By Lindsey Dodd

Abstract: This article examines fellow feeling in oral narratives of French Second World War childhoods to argue that more attention should be paid to the complex ways that emotions affect the story(ing) of the past. Fellow feeling is understood as *a claim to feel for, with or about someone else*. The claim might be implicit but nonetheless leaves its imprint on the narrative. Fellow feeling exists in the happening past of the story (the early 1940s), the recounted story (the interview), and the disseminated story (e.g. this article). There is a gap between what can be known and what must be (imaginatively, empathetically, arrogantly, wrongly) filled with assumption. Assumptions run counter to positivistic demands for evidence. Yet, I argue, thinking into the gaps and spaces of our knowledge is both generative and illuminating. After a brief discussion of approaches to empathy, I draw on oral history narratives to illustrate the interplay of time, memory and affect in relation to fellow feeling. Using examples about the 1940 civilian exodus, the billeting of Germans into French homes, and experiences of persecution, I show that fellow feeling undergoes a recalibration when recounted in later life. It is bound up with desire, regret and hope, what a person wishes they had felt, or wants a listener to feel.

Keywords: *Oral history, memory, children, war, affect*

Introduction

Waged by humans upon humans, war is always an intersubjective affair. And like all encounters of humans with humans, it is saturated with emotionality, which we might see as “a responsiveness to and openness towards the worlds of others” (Ahmed, *Collective Feelings*: 28). Emotions can be understood as a cultural politics, operating between and across individuals and collectives, shaping desires and aversions, preferences and choices, and cultivating power relations (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*). Perhaps inevitably, then, accounts of the lived experiences of war are filled with claims to feel for, with or about other people. Even if such claims are not explicit, they impress themselves on narratives, shaping what gets told as affective intensity gathers around particular incidents and people. Broadly speaking, I am interested in what memory stories – spoken and recorded autobiographical narratives which might also be called oral histories – recounted by those who experienced the Second World War can tell us about the emotions of history at personal and

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collective levels. By the emotions of history, I do not mean the history of emotions. I mean the ways in which feelings *about the past* are generated, experienced, and circulate, publicly or privately, between groups and individuals, affecting the ways that the story of the past gets told.

More specifically, this article examines fellow-feeling in oral narratives of French Second World War childhoods to argue that careful attention should be paid to the complex ways it affects the story(ing) of the past. Fellow-feeling, understood as a claim to feel for, with or about other people, is bound into ideas of sympathy and empathy. The more modern concept of empathy is frequently invoked as a necessity for building respectful, peaceful, inclusive societies but, as this article suggests, empathy has both risks and limits. Sometimes sympathy may be the only – and the only ethical – form of fellow-feeling possible.

Oral history as an affective methodology

This article analyses short extracts from three oral history interviews to illustrate some of these complexities, which are situated in both the narrated past and the narrating present. This present-past relation is what distances this work from history of emotions territory. The article aims to suggest what such complexities may mean in the aftermath of the Second World War in relation to guilt, shame and loss at private and collective levels. The three oral history extracts deal with three incidents which happened to three French children during the Second World War, later recounted by the adults they became. Marie-Rolande Cornuéjols reflected on her mother's behaviour during the refugee crisis of May-June 1940 known as the exodus. As the Germans invaded, perhaps eight million Belgian and French civilians fled south in fear, forming long columns of refugees on the roads, leading not just to social upheaval but also to traumatic outcomes, as refugees were machine gunned and bombed from the air, families were separated, and people left bereft by looting and destruction. The extract taken from Sylvette Leclerc's interview focuses on her experience of having German soldiers billeted in her family home, following the Armistice of June 1940. This was not an uncommon experience for families living north of the demarcation line established by the Armistice, and is a recurrent, and gendered, cultural trope of the era (depicted, for example, in Vercors' 1942 novel *La Silence de la Mer* and Irène Némirovsky's *Suite Française*, published posthumously in 2004). The striking scene extracted from Remy Ménigault's interview centres on his experience, as a little boy, of witnessing a train of Jewish children pass by the railway platform on which he stood. In total, nearly 76,000 Jews were deported from France and killed, with the complicity and active involvement of the French government; among these

were 10,500 children aged seventeen years or younger (Klarsfeld and others, *Le sauvetage des enfants juifs*: 152).

The three interviews were recorded by or for different organisations, at different points in time, and for different reasons. None were recorded by the author. Marie-Rolande Cornuéjols's interview was made available by the Archives municipales de Beaune, without any documented context of its date or origin. Sylvette Leclerc's was recorded in 2010 for a cultural organisation called Le Son des Choses, which operates across the Champagne-Ardennes region recording memories of its inhabitants' lives. The 2013 interview with Remy Ménigault is part of a collection recorded by the national railway history society, the Association pour l'histoire des chemins de fer (AHICF, or Rails et Histoire); Remy's parents were stationmasters. All interviews were recorded in French, and all translations are the author's.

This article contributes to discussions on the secondary analysis of already-recorded oral history data by highlighting the value of intersubjective and inter-affective relationships between the listener and the story(teller) when the listener is distant in time and space. Listening to other people's interviews can be as feeling-laden as conducting one's own, if listening practices are consciously attuned to the affective dimensions of the storytelling (Trivelli, *Exploring a "Remembering Crisis"*; Matthews, *Romani Pride*). I employed practices of affective listening, transcribing words, but also noting and reflecting on the emotional expression and weight of recorded words and gestures, noises off, mood, interaction and so on, as I felt and experienced them as an attuned listener. Selective translation took place long after the listening process occurred; listening and transcription were conducted in French; affective annotations to the transcript were made in English, the author's native language. Affective listening is by no means an objective, detached process, and its results derive from inferential interpretations drawing both on the evidence of the recording and the evidence of the listener's felt experience. Evidently, this is a subjective interpretive methodology, which draws on ideas from nonrepresentational, critical theoretical and cultural studies practices, not normally deployed in traditional positivistic scientific enquiry (e.g. Thrift, *Nonrepresentational Theory*; Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* and Knudsen & Stage, *Affective Methodologies*). In interpreting these stories, both against the grain and faced with all sorts of unknowns, I am comfortable with the inconclusiveness of what I propose, and recognise that I make only one interpretation among any number which are possible.

Cultural theorist Sara Ahmed notes that fellow-feeling always involves a fantasy of what you imagine others to be feeling (*Cultural Politics of Emotion*: 41).

She highlights the gap between what can be known and what must be filled with assumption. This inconclusiveness can be productive. Drawing on the researcher's own affective processes of feeling and imagining, and avoiding claims to omniscient knowledge of historical actors' lives, are honest and ethical ways of engaging with the people of the past (Code, *Ecological Thinking*: 41). In epistemological terms, we cannot *know* whether what these oral histories suggest is *true*; truths are filtered through many interpretations. But the fact that they suggest *something* to this researcher – made them feel, ponder and imagine – provides the basis for questions and responses (Vogel, *By the Light of what Comes after*: 257). Willing to risk the scholarly crime of speculation, I argue that thinking into the gaps and spaces of knowledge is both generative and illuminating.

This article is not just concerned with children's emotional encounters with war in the 1940s, but with adults' reflections on those encounters. Emotional encounters with war last a lifetime. The concept of "composure" has often been used in oral history, to describe the double action of "composing" (constructing) one's version of the past, and achieving "composure" (a version of one's past one can accept at the time of telling) (on composure see, e.g. Thomson, *Anzac Memories*). Composure implies dichronicity: the evolution of memory over time, moving from "then" (or various "thens") to now, the moment of telling. Inspired by Henri Bergson's concept of durational time, this article's interpretation takes dichronicity further, into multitemporality. Memories are not just about "now" and "then": *all time* is inescapably present in a memory (see Hamilakis, *Sensorial Assemblages*). A single recounted incident holds within it the lived events which preceded it, family and national histories predating it, the contents of lives lived afterwards, national and family trajectories, and virtual histories of futures not lived. Memories rest as much on what is articulated as what goes unsaid but may be discernible, affecting and affected by many things including the narrating context. The interpretive processes deployed in this article are as concerned with what is unarticulated; evidently, this relies on a different kind of interpretation and listening, against the grain of language. What is clear is that fellow-feeling in the past is recalibrated when recounted later in life, as it is bound up with desire, guilt, shame, loss, later-gained knowledge, worldly experience, and hooked into national and international narratives about the wartime past. As will be suggested, fellow-feeling recounted in the present complicates the original emotions of a wartime encounter, with consequences for coming to terms with violence and injustice, and for individual composure.

Children, war, emotion

Historians have studied many aspects of children's lives in war, including the various ways in which children become victims of war. Children's close encounters with war may result in injury, psychological damage, and lasting chronic conditions, mental and physical, such as the effects of malnutrition or bereavement (see e.g. Carroll and others, *Evaluation of Nutrition Interventions*; Daniele & Ghezzi, *The Impact of World War II*). Scholars have also investigated children's indoctrination by belligerent regimes (see e.g. Kater, *Hitler Youth*; Frierson, *Silence Was Salvation*), and there has been interest in children as participants in or bystanders to crimes against humanity (see e.g. Wessells, *Child Soldiers*; Donà, "Situated Bystandership"); both of these themes invoke issues around children's agency, a contested subject in the history of childhood (see e.g. Gleason, *Avoiding the Agency Trap*), and not one central to this article. My research on children in France in the Second World War has taken in children's experiences of bombing, evacuation and other forms of parental separation, their interaction with the wartime authoritarian Vichy regime, and aspects of their daily lives in war (see Dodd in references). I have drawn on the evidence of children's letters and drawings, local and state archives, and adult and child media such as press and radio.

But as my interest lies in both how war is experienced by children and how those experiences are remembered, oral history has been a key source. Oral history is a valuable methodological tool to study encounters with war because of its capacities both to reveal undocumented aspects of ordinary people's everyday lives, and to mediate past and present interpretations of individual and collective experience (see e.g. Ugolini, *Experiencing War*; Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out*; Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*; Jessee, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda*; and Clifford, *Survivors*). As such, it opens more of the past to historical scrutiny, and complicates it by refusing a clear divide between now and then.

It is worth commenting on how the present article differs in emphasis from history of emotions work. The history of emotions is a well-established sub-field, and has produced fascinating accounts of past emotional lives, with some exploring specific emotions over time, others analysing "emotional regimes" or "emotional communities" by thinking through the embeddedness of historicised emotional experiences in past societies and cultures (see e.g. Plamper, *The History of the Emotions*). These studies usually draw on the representational evidence of written or artistic expression; they can only get at emotion in the past by way of its representation in language or art. Such work may define itself as unwilling or unable to analyse the "embodied, sensate"

world of past emotions (Trigg, *Introduction*: 11). Yet research which focuses solely on the discursive representation of emotion cannot tell us what was “experienced” or, indeed, what was “processed” by a sensate body in time and space; texts can only *represent* experience. It is uncommon, because of the evidentiary requirements of the historical discipline, to move, as this article does, into nonrepresentative and affective terrains in order to attempt to understand how feelings felt and feel.

Such attempts notwithstanding, oral history is not a black box recorder. All sorts of shifts, mutations and recomposures take place in the retelling of past experience, many of which are unknowable. Psychological research has examined memory for emotion in numerous experiments, the aims of which are often to determine whether past emotion is accurately recalled (e.g. Levine and others, *Functions of Remembering*). Psychologists have concluded, among other things, that emotional memories laid down under stress tend to be more accurately recalled (Henckens and others, *Stressed Memories*), and that happy memories are more malleable over time (Scollen and others, *The Role of Ideal Affect*). However, no such controlled experimental context can replicate the conversational processes of an oral history interview conducted sixty years after events. And while emotional experience was sometimes expressed in interviews in the mutually comprehensible language of emotives (I was afraid, she was happy), or observable emotional behaviours (smiling, crying), it can be as fruitful to consider how past emotional experiences press upon memory narratives, contouring what gets told, and to think about what exists in affect rather than in (spoken and body) language.

Oral historians have long been interested in emotion in interviews, but have tended to take emotion as the object of their analysis rather than the means (e.g. Thomson, *Indexing and Interpreting Emotion*). Despite the post-positivist turn in oral history, which saw scholars reaching “beyond facts to meanings” (Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*: 2), those meanings have still usually been sought in the expressed words and gestures recorded on audio or video. And although emotion may not be explicitly represented in spoken or body language, like a heavy stone on a rubber sheet, the story bulges with its felt traces. These feelings stick in memory, gather importance, and create the conditions for later retrievability. We may only be aware of this manner of feeling through affective attunements in our listening practices: feeling should be an important part of our interpretive toolkit (e.g. Matthews, *Romani Pride*). Emotions press upon us; they leave traces of feeling in our bodies, our minds and our memories. Sara Ahmed suggests that emotions “define the contours of the multiple worlds that are inhabited by different subjects” (*Collective Feelings*: 25); she attributes to

them a quality to shape the social; they are “bound up with how we inhabit the world “with” others” (28). She writes that the *press* of the impression “allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very “mark” left by the press of one surface upon another. So not only do I have an impression of others, but they also leave me with an impression; they impress me and impress upon me” (29). Sociologist Eduardo Bericat states that “as human beings we can only experience life emotionally: *I feel, therefore I am*” (*The Sociology of Emotions*: 491; his emphasis). If that is the case, then memories of experiences must be memories of feeling. We can therefore consider many – if not all – oral history narratives to be structured by feeling and that feeling may be discerned by looking for affective intensities (Massumi, *The Autonomy of Affect*: 87). Thus tracking articulated and inarticulated feeling can provide insight into past emotional states when memories were laid down, and present ones as they are told.

Empathy and history

In contrast with emotion, which is usually taken as the object of analysis rather than its means, empathy is more commonly understood *by historians* as the means of analysis rather than its object (not so in other disciplines; see e.g. Lanzoni, *Empathy*). Empathy is a particular kind of felt relational engagement with another human being; we can put it, along with sympathy, under the heading fellow-feeling. Tyson Retz has outlined the opportunities for empathy in historical practice as the “emotional engagement” with the people of the past, the “imaginative exploration” of the past, and bringing the “possibility of freeing history from evidentiary limitations and entering more fully into the experiences of everyday and marginalized people” (2). Michael Roper has written that “the ability to imaginatively connect with the subjectivities of people in the past is what historians understand as empathy” (*The Unconscious Work of History*: 174). Empathy is seen as “an imaginative tool that can expand understandings of the suffering of others” (Field, *Critical Empathy through Oral Histories*: 663), and Retz notes its presence in history teacher training initiatives since the 1970s as the means to promote among students “an enriched understanding of historical context [via] reference to the beliefs, values and goals of the people who lived, thought and acted in it” (*Empathy and History*: 1). Yet making empathy nothing but an accessory to “understanding” or “connecting” does not do it justice. Samuel Moyn has criticised historians’ “rediscovery” empathy, and particularly its status as a “methodological requirement”. He says that “everyone feels the pressure to ‘empathize’ with the experience (and notably the suffering) of others” (*Empathy in History*: 397), but

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notes that empathising in the right kind of way is normatively and non-transparently controlled. This methodological tool called empathy lacks clarity in its definition, workings and applicability, and Moyn questions whether it should be “morally – not to mention historiographically – obligatory” (398). It has indeed become commonplace to invoke the necessity for empathy, and Moyn is right to urge caution, given the limits of empathy’s reach.

Sean Field recalls the importance of empathy to oral historians who, he says, tend to ‘see empathy as central to their listening techniques’, marking it out once more as a methodological imperative (*Critical Empathy through Oral Histories*: 663). He notes that they may succeed or fail in their empathising, citing his own comment to an interviewee: “I know how you feel”. He recognised afterwards that he did not and could not (665-666). He cautions that the “empathetic imaginings of researchers are at best approximate visualizations” of interviewees’ lifeworlds (663), and continues: “Empathy for qualitative researchers is neither sympathy nor an emotion but a tool of understanding, which involves imagining what the interviewee possibly experienced and thought at specific moments” (663). Caution is necessary, but Field’s decoupling of empathy and emotion is problematic, as is his disconnection from sympathy. Although sympathy has become rather unfashionable, its uses and functions matter in human interactions. As Sara Ahmed proposes, empathy and sympathy complicate the politics of emotion because they shape relations of power between individuals (*Cultural Politics of Emotion*: chapter 2). Empathy, then, is clearly of interest to historians and oral historians, but has usually been seen in methodological terms. This article is just as interested in empathy – and other forms of fellow-feeling – as the object of research.

Fellow-feeling

Debates about sympathy and empathy reach across morality and ethics, hermeneutics, phenomenology, into poetics and aesthetics, and cultural studies. Not only do the different branches of psychology define empathy differently, they do not always agree on the meanings of each other’s research. Beyond ongoing work on so-called ‘mirror neurons’, research suggests two levels of empathising: the first, a form of mirroring – involving these neurons – which allows us to resonate with others’ mental states immediately, but in an inflexibly responsive way not accessible to consciousness; and the second, a form of mental projection, which is cognitively more complex, flexible and reflexive, and accessible to consciousness, allowing us to project our mental states to infer another person’s mental state (Corradini & Antonietti, *Mirror*

Neurons and their Function: 1153). The variety of ways that empathy is being researched and understood leads to further questions about what it is actually for (Smith, *What is Empathy for?*: 709). Is empathy “the cognitive act of attributing a context to another person’s behaviour in order to make sense of it”? (Retz, *Empathy and History*: 6) Does it, more precisely, enable humans “to understand what others intend to do”, thus giving it anticipatory value? (Corradini & Antonietti, *Mirror Neurons and their Function*: 1152) Or does it exist to “provide us with knowledge of how others feel”? Not just that they feel something, but how that feeling feels (Smith, *What is Empathy for?*: 711). In each case, empathy is a prosocial behaviour; given history’s concern with the social above almost all, it is surprising, then, not to see empathy more commonly discussed by historians as motivation and intention for action in the past.

Terminology is slippery. The popular psychologist Brené Brown has described empathy as connection with others, and views sympathy as disconnection, and less desirable.¹ If we turn to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, however, we see sympathy described as sharing feelings, and empathy as understanding feelings without sharing them.² Robert Solomon places empathy, sympathy, compassion and pity under the banner of “fellow-felling”, while Elizabeth Spelman differentiates compassion as “suffering with’ others and pity as ‘suffering for” others (both cited in Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*: 41). Even if we agree that empathy is, in some way, “feeling what another person feels”, how can this be possible with historical actors? How can we “catch” their feelings, asks Tyson Retz? (*Empathy and History*: 6) Sara Ahmed might respond that we do not “catch” emotions from other people. Feelings are generated inter-relationally and do not seep in from outside or emanate from the inside; they grow *between* people and things. She writes:

Emotions are not simply directed at nearby others: a *feeling for and with others* can also occur when others are remote or distant. Such distance is transformed into proximity through the very “impressions” we make of others, which transforms others into objects of feeling. (*Collective feelings*: 34; my emphasis)

Like others, Ahmed makes use of the prepositions *for* and *with* to think about fellow-feeling.

Yet it seems that both sympathy and empathy are feeling *with* others, in some way, and, as Adam Smith wrote, “nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow feeling with all the emotions of our own breast” (cited in Smith, *What is Empathy for?*: 720). It satisfies us to be “in tune with” others (711). Bringing the Greek-rooted English words sympathy and empathy together with

their German translations helps make distinctions. In English, the Greek-rooted prefix “sym” gives a sense of *feeling together* or *with*, whereas “em” gives a sense of *feeling in* or *within*. In German, the translation of sympathy is *Mitleid*, which carries the sense of *feeling along with*, whereas empathy is translated by *Einfühlung*, which gives the sense of *feeling into*. In English and German, the word sympathy integrates companionship in the act of feeling *along with* and *together*, which feeling “for” cannot convey, as it objectifies one of the parties. And in both languages, the word for empathy points to an internalisation of feeling. In contrast with Brené Brown’s description above, it seems as though sympathy reaches out from the sympathiser, while empathy happens inside the empathiser. Although these words help delineate *where* feeling might be happening, and the relation between two feeling parties, it gives no sense of *what* is felt.

Empathy is often described as putting yourself in someone else’s shoes, or seeing things from their point of view. One of empathy’s great puzzles is to do with this displacement. Kramer asks: “Are we only *imaginatively* – *as if* – putting ourselves into really foreign situations? Or are we truly thinking, seeing, and feeling as would the other or as we would from the other’s perspective, no matter how dissimilar?” (*As if*: 279, his emphasis). Adam Smith wrote that “it is by changing places *in fancy* with the sufferer, that we come either to conceive or to be affected by what he feels” (Smith cited in Sugden, *Beyond Sympathy and Empathy*: 70; my emphasis). For Smith and others, this displacement is an act of imagination, or as Ahmed would have it, a fantasy or a “wish feeling” (*Cultural Politics of Emotion*: 30). Thus empathy carries a great many risks. It rests on assumptions of what it might feel like to be in someone else’s shoes. At worst, it may fall into “sadistic solipsism”, where the other’s individuality is subsumed; identity of perspectives is assumed, and thus the other’s identity is effaced (Kramer, *As if*: 285). At best, empathy achieves some level of accuracy, but a number of conditions must be met. The observer must be “consciously aware” that another person feels in a particular way, and must be “consciously aware” of what being that particular way feels like (Smith, *What is Empathy for?*: 712-713). They must be “acquainted with the feel” of a particular feeling, either by feeling it themselves, simultaneously, or reaching into episodic memory to locate an experience of being “in some state that affectively matches” or “is similar enough” (714). The first risk, then, stems from empathy’s rootedness in imagination, which opens the door to misrepresentation, misinterpretation and misappropriation. Its second risk derives from its moral ambivalence. To empathise does not mean to care. Empathy may lead to care, or it may simply lead to a morally neutral comprehension of another perspective. A torturer uses empathy to anticipate the response of the person on whom he inflicts pain, in

order to torture better (716). So while empathy may appear desirable to promote greater understanding of other perspectives, it has limitations in relation to imagination, experience and care.

Sympathy is also risky. Returning to the question of *what* is being felt, we might say that in empathy, we should be feeling *it* with someone else, where *it* is the same thing they are feeling. Sympathy pertains to non-identical feeling. We feel *something* with someone else, as in alongside them, but our feelings differ from theirs. Sympathy therefore has a reputation for objectification, condescension and insincerity. But there is more to it. First, sympathy does not collapse the boundaries of otherness, nor does it assume that feelings are transparently replicable between individuals. Second, in the gap between the sympathiser and the other person, there is space to develop critical judgements. As Phillips notes in relation to compassion, the Latin-rooted companion to sympathy, we make a judgement about how what is happening to the other person affects their capacity to flourish (Phillips, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage*: 53). The torturer might empathise with his victim, but if he sympathised he could not do his job. Yet sympathy's non-identity of feeling may be twisted:

The pain of others becomes "ours", an appropriation that transforms and perhaps even neutralizes their pain into our sadness. [...] It is not so much that we are "with them" by feeling sad [...]. Rather we feel sad *about* their suffering, an "aboutness" that ensures they remain the object of "our feeling" (*Cultural Politics of Emotion*: 21; her emphasis).

Again, here is a route into solipsism and effacement. Yet Ahmed turns the inability to feel *it* with someone else – to empathise through an identity of feeling – into an ethical call:

The impossibility of feeling the pain of others does not mean that the pain is simply theirs, or that their pain has nothing to do with me. I want to suggest here, cautiously and tentatively, that an ethics of responding to pain involves being open to being affected by that which one cannot feel. (30)

Genuinely felt, sympathy does not appropriate the feelings of others and upholds an ethics of care. We cannot care only for those into whose shoes we knowledgably and consciously step. Sympathy extends fellow-feeling to those with experiences alien to our own, whose feelings, unlike the torturer's, we see as justifiable and appropriate. "Care", Joel Smith writes, "clearly falls on the side of sympathy" (*What is Empathy for?:* 716), while "[e]mpathy can be

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consistent with the indifference of pure observation or even the cruelty of sadism" (Darwall, *Empathy, Sympathy, Care*: 261). For these reasons, empathy may suit the traditional objectivism of historical enquiry as a methodological tool; and for these reasons, sympathy deserves further exploration.

A mother's despair

The rest of this article draws on extracts from the interviews with Marie-Rolande Cornuéjols, Sylvette Leclerc and Remy Ménigault, which were introduced above, to think about three things. First, the children's different experiences of fellow-feeling in relation to various others, occasioned through their own close encounters with war in the past. Second, the recalibration of that fellow-feeling when the story gets told in later life: this is an important issue in relation to understanding how oral histories about childhood might be methodologically different to oral histories recorded about periods of adulthood, a question which is undertheorised by oral historians, who frequently use memories of childhood but rarely discuss their specificity (for two recent examples see Cullinane, *"The Man Was the Fella that Went Out to Work"* and Byrne, *Growing up in "The Mental"*). Third, these three extracts enable reflection on the complex problems of French war memory (e.g. Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*; Gildea, *Marianne in Chains*; Ledoux, *Le Devoir de mémoire*; and Wieviorka, *La mémoire désunie*). In a population that actively collaborated with the Nazis at state and societal levels, *and* actively resisted the occupation and the Vichy regime, *and* stood by, simply trying to survive amid widespread violence, family separation and extreme penury, all memories are bound into bigger stories of suffering, perpetration and victimhood.

In May and June 1940, as the Wehrmacht advanced into France and millions of civilians fled (Diamond, *Fleeing Hitler*), Marie-Rolande was around ten years old. Her father had been mobilised into the army, and so her mother, with Marie-Rolande and her younger brother, had moved to Antibes (Alpes-Maritimes) from Paris, to live with her own parents. But after the Italians declared war on France, lacking a bomb shelter, they began to feel increasingly anxious. At the invitation of her sister, Marie-Rolande's mother decided to move with her children to the interior of France, to Peyrat-le-Château (Haute-Vienne), where other family members had sought refuge. Two incidents on the journey struck the girl Marie-Rolande, and their affective intensity causes them to stick in her memory. Marie-Rolande's feelings about her mother show a reasoning child, who recognized the gulf between how things were and how they should be. She said:

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So we left, leaving my grandparents there, and I'll always see, but this is because I was so young, I'll always see my mother, completely exhausted, sleeping on the ground [she emphasises the words] in Limoges station. That's really stayed with me. Mum lying on the ground! [Again, she emphasises the words] Really, on the ground! In the station – , I wasn't asleep, I was next to my brother, looking after my brother, and I was cross. I said to myself "It's not possible to do such things." The shame of it! I don't mean to overstate it, but it was really shocking. And after that, we took an old [tram] to get from Limoges to Peyrat-le-Château, and Mum was watching night fall [from the window], it's a flash memory which has really stayed with me. I was sitting next to Mum, and Mum was looking out, at the countryside as night was falling, and she said to me "Do you think we'll get used to it? Do you think it will be alright?" And I remember thinking to myself, "How can an adult ask advice from a child of ten?" It really shocked me. Because it wasn't for me to tell her if it would be alright. (*Interview with Marie-Rolande Cornuéjols*, Archives municipales de Beaune.)

Marie-Rolande articulates remembered emotions: shock, annoyance, shame. Her recognition that her mother was exhausted justifies why she slept on the ground, and the older Marie-Rolande includes this detail. But the young Marie-Rolande was astonished at behaviour that transgressed the norms of respectability, and left Marie-Rolande responsible for her brother.

Marie-Rolande's narrated self – the young girl – struggled, it seems, either to empathise or to sympathise with her mother during these moments. This marks the child as separate from the adult; she inhabits a separate lifeworld, and is not dependent on her parent for the interpretation of what is around her. The clarity of these remembered feelings in relation to her mother flags them as striking. Perhaps – thinking into the gaps of my knowledge – one reason they strike her is because of the discomfort which her recollected inability to empathise or sympathise generates in her memory. Sugden notes the philosopher Adam Smith's point that the "dissonance between our sentiments and those of others is a source of pain" and that we feel "unease and irritation [when] we cannot sympathize with someone else's apparent sentiments of distress" (*Between Sympathy and Empathy*: 72). The emotions that impress on memories are not just emotions experienced in the past, but emotions generated in between past experiences and present evaluations. Of course, the young Marie-Rolande might struggle to empathise with her mother at the time, given that it was probably impossible for her to find in her own episodic memory an emotional state which "affectively matched" her mother's despair. Sara Ahmed has noted that "how feelings feel in the first place may be tied to a past history of reading [those feelings]" and that "recognition (of this feeling, or that feeling) is bound up with what we already know" (*Cultural Politics of Emotion*: 25). With little experience of life, Marie-Rolande could not share in her mother's affective

state. This uncomfortable gap in part creates the affective intensity of these incidents; it is why the story got told.

The recalibration which occurs later is not explicitly articulated in language, but listening affectively to the story suggests feelings of regret are present. As noted above, emotional resonance with others is highly valued. Adam Smith proposed that we approve of other's feelings to the extent that we "go along" with them; as Sugden paraphrases "to the extent that we have fellow-feeling for them" (*Between Sympathy and Empathy*: 74). Marie-Rolande did not go along with her mother's feelings in the past, but her retelling of the story denotes a shift; we see her process of composure. She may still not go along with them, but she recognizes they were, perhaps, legitimate in the circumstances. The older Marie-Rolande does not necessarily put herself in her mother's shoes, but she can feel something other than her child's disapproval, which validates the her mother's despair as appropriate to the situation. In this non-identity of feeling, in her care for her mother's condition which emerges through the uneasy child-adult gap, and in the granting of approval by telling the story, fellow-feeling appears as sympathy.

Marie-Rolande is a victim of war, although she does not label herself such. War created suffering in her life. She experienced the trauma of Italian bombing in Antibes, she was deprived of her father, on the road as a refugee for the second time, and emotionally abandoned by her overwhelmed mother. Marie-Rolande's memories are contoured by the impressions made by fear and anxiety across 1940. Enemies and perpetrators are absent from the story; they are not in the next two cases. Marie-Rolande's victimhood rests not an encounter with physical violence, but within her involuntary, inevitable imbrication in the waves of anxiety that the German invasion sent rippling across France. While French civilians who were neither collaborators or resisters have often been stigmatised as *attentiste* – waiting it out, looking out for themselves – such a label ignores the complex, minute, interpersonal emotional interactions taking place in ordinary everyday life which are the mark of war's impacts on young lives.

The young German

Sylvette was born in 1932, and spent the war in Saint-Mesmin (Aube) in the Occupied Zone of France. German soldiers were billeted in her family home:

At first, I was really scared of these Germans, and then afterwards, they requisitioned a room at my parents' house. There were only two rooms: one downstairs, and one upstairs. It

wasn't really even an upstairs actually, it was more of a loft with a mansard window [...]. In winter, it was too difficult to heat that room, so we all slept downstairs in the same room. And they requisitioned the upstairs room. We had Germans billeted there for quite a while. It wasn't always the same ones, because they got moved around. And well, some of them really frightened me, and made a big impression on me. But others were nicer. And as the years passed, they became younger and younger. They didn't have enough men for their troops, so they were really young. I remember the last one. He can only have been eighteen, that's all. You could see he really missed his family, because he was always with us, the children, my goodness – ! [There is a pause, an audible catch in her voice. She sighs audibly.] (Interview with Sylvette Leclerc, *Le Son des Choses*)

Sylvette's narration moves between an articulation of past emotional states (being scared, frightened), and a non-explicit articulation of fellow-feeling in this wartime encounter. Sylvette does not describe the billeted Germans in detail. She passes over the earlier men, but dwells on the last young man, probably there in 1944.

Unlike Marie-Rolande, Sylvette does not narrate her child-self's feelings towards this young man; she just says he spent a lot of time with the children of the household. As with Marie-Rolande's story, though, it is the case that what is remembered and retold is what was felt. Given that she does not recount shared activities, conversations, or how she felt at the time, it could be suggested that no strong feelings were evoked by this relationship. Yet Sylvette knew what it was like to be separated from family members; her father had been taken prisoner of war in 1940. Perhaps – thinking into the gaps of knowledge – this was how she inferred that he missed his own family. But she had no experiential resources to enable her to empathise with the young man's experiences as a Hitler Youth, a Nazi, a soldier entering a dangerous war that was nearly lost, as a perpetrator of violence. From the limited account she gives, we cannot know much about the child's feelings, except I assume – based on my analysis of a corpus of 120 oral history narratives like this one – that if they were strong, shocking or unusual, she might have said more. Strong feelings are sticky in memory. The young German was a brief part of her everyday life, and we do not know whether she regarded him with empathy, sympathy or anything other than the habit of regular acquaintance. Nor do we know the fate of this young man, but we – and she – might assume the worst. Over 700,000 Germans were killed, went missing or were taken prisoner during the period of the liberation of France in July and August 1944, and as the German army was forced into retreat, soldiers were being taken prisoner or going missing in action at a rate of 70,000-75,000 per month across the winter (Biraben, *Pertes allemandes au cours de la deuxième guerre mondiale*: 520).

We know more about Sylvette's fellow-feeling for this young German at the

point the story is recounted. The clue to this recalibration comes in the vocalisation of her narrative. The intensity of feeling comes through her final exclamation “My goodness – !” with an audible catch, a sigh and a pause. She holds back, perhaps regretful of the loss of life his presence in her childhood home implied as the Nazis had “used up” Germany’s male population by then; perhaps saddened, even horrified, in the face of war’s excess. Sylvette cannot put herself in his shoes, but her exclamation speaks of compassion for him, or for his loved ones. There may be empathy here, alongside sympathy: the two are not mutually exclusive. Sylvette may have had children and grandchildren herself (none are mentioned in the interview); even if not, as an adult she would have observational knowledge of the deep scars bereavement leaves on parents. She might empathise with the young German and/or his family, and/or sympathise with them.

Yet the young German man was an enemy. Aged eighteen in 1944, he likely joined the Hitler Youth around 1940; membership for eligible populations was around 98 percent in 1939 (Kater, *Hitler Youth*, cited in Miller and others, *Indoctrination and coercion in agent motivation*: 202). Research suggests that the Hitler Youth generation of soldiers had “internalized Nazism” (210) and observers remarked on their fanaticism (195). Sylvette, as a child civilian, was a victim of the Nazi quest for dominance, struggling with the severe food shortages that German requisitions created in France, and deprived of her father for several years as a prisoner-of-war; when he returned, he was seriously ill and immediately bereaved when his own mother died. Sylvette was not a victim of *this* young German, however, and her compassion for an enemy of France, and a member of an anti-Semitic perpetrator society, complicates her fellow-feeling in the post-war world. It has been said that there is a “madness” in trying to “understand” perpetrators, and such acts are “morally inappropriate”; on the other hand, Gobodo-Madikizela writes of the “critical and foundational role that understanding and empathic connection with the Other play in forgiveness” (*Empathic Repair after Mass Trauma*, 342). There is empathy in Sylvette’s recognition of what fear and loss felt like; but more powerfully there is sympathy: her bleak sorrow at war’s devastating consequences. Just as there was a gap for Marie-Rolande between her girl-self’s feelings towards her mother and what, in the adult recollection, appeared a reasonable response of a struggling mother, so there is a gap here between the sympathy Sylvette feels, and what might be deemed morally appropriate, given that such sympathy works to neutralise his guilt, transforming *this* war to *any* war, *his* loss to *all* loss, his crimes to her sorrow.

Cries from a train

Remy was born in 1937, and his parents were stationmasters at a rural railway crossing near Audeville (Loiret). The crossing was about twelve kilometres to the north of Pithiviers, where an internment camp for Jews in France was situated. Six convoys of Jews rounded up in Paris left Pithiviers for Auschwitz between June and September 1942. It was usually the case that children were separated from their parents at Pithiviers before the adults were deported. The children themselves may have then been transported to Drancy camp in Paris, from where many were also deported. Remy was only five or six years old, and knew nothing of this. In his interview, he described a vivid memory:

I'm on the platform with my mother, and a train is coming, it's slowing down, it's not going to stop, but we hear children screaming, crying, they were throwing things from – , and so I asked my mother, "Why are those children crying?" And she said, "Well, what can you expect, they're just little children and they've been taken from their parents, and they're sending them to Germany." That was it. Just, they're little children – she didn't say Jewish children – just little children, they've taken them from their parents. Who had taken them? We didn't know – in fact, it was French people, not Germans – and they were taking them to Germany. To do what? That was it. And me, [...] well, I was barely six years old, I asked her questions anyway, lots of questions. But that, the story of those children left such a mark on me; why? Well first, because it was children, they were in cattle wagons, do you understand, and you couldn't see their faces, but you could hear the screams, screams [...]. (*Interview with Remy Ménigault, Rails et Histoire*)

At this point, the interview jumped to a more solid-voiced Remy speaking about another topic. A note was included with the interview: the archivists explained that they had decided to cut out part of the recorded interview, out of respect for the interviewee's distress. They recognised that this was an erasure of important non-verbal communication but had chosen, nonetheless, not to archive the full extent of his emotional breakdown. It was, and this was their hope, clear how he felt.

As a little boy, Remy struggled to understand what he was witnessing, or rather, what he could hear. As Plessner has written, "the aural impression [of crying...] holds us in its spell, it is contagious [...] The [...] crying of our fellow man [grips] us and [makes] us partners of his agitation without knowing why" (Plessner, cited in Kramer, *As if*: 285). What Remy saw was incomprehensible to him, but what he heard made sense: the child recognised other children's distress. Remy's mother's explanation – that the children had been separated from their parents – was likewise comprehensible insofar as he knew he would not like being separated from his own parents. As a causal explanation, it

matched the distress he heard. Without knowledge of why *these* children had been taken, a certain affective intensity may have gathered here as the little boy feared a similar fate for himself. Remy's fellow-feeling towards the sightless, screaming children, a puzzling empathy comprised only of partial knowledge, left a powerful impression.

The recalibration of Remy's fellow-feeling for these Jewish children in adulthood provides evidence of the limits of empathy, and a further role for sympathy in the face of empathic impotence. What Remy has learnt across his life about the fate of such children transforms his child's pained curiosity into overwhelming horror at what he had witnessed. The Jewish children's anguished cries resonated to a degree with the child, but the adult understands that he can never know how their fear felt; nothing can "affectively match" their pain; nothing is "similar enough" (Smith, *What is Empathy for?*: 712 and 715). So Remy cannot empathise; his feelings are not theirs. But sympathy is a source of unease, for what can sympathy *do* in the face of abjection? Sara Ahmed notes that "stories of pain involve complex relations of power" (*Cultural Politics of Emotion*: 22). Remy's compassion reflects the "patterns of [...] subordination responsible for such suffering" (Spelman, cited in Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*: 22). Remy was in a literal sense a bystander to the persecution of these children; but years later, *he* is protected by the archivists, his distress respectfully effaced from the record. Michael Rothberg has developed the analytical category of the "implicated subject" to explore what it means to be "a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator [...but] in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles" (*The Implicated Subject*: 1). The category of the implicated subject helps move away from "categories of guilt and innocence" (34), both expanding the "ethical burden" to include the beneficiaries of violence towards others, but also "loosens the terms" of that burden by separating it from the ambiguities of guilt (20-21). The little boy Remy did not perpetrate the crimes against these Jewish children. Yet part of Remy's deeply felt distress may stem from his being an "onlooker to violence" (Gobodo-Madikizela, *Empathic Repair after Mass Trauma*: 333) from a perpetrator nation. In his interview, Remy states that "it was French people" who were responsible here. Nearly 76,000 Jews were deported from France with the complicity of the French government. Very evidently, Remy-the-child may have feared being on the train, but he never would be; Remy-the-man lived to cry in his old age, but those children did not.

Hannah Arendt wrote that during the deportation of the Jews, non-Jewish populations "could not have cared less" (Arendt, cited in Gobodo-Madikizela, *Empathic Repair after Mass Trauma*: 334). Remy did care, to the extent that he was

upset by what he heard; a child recognised other children's distress. Remy, unlike Marie-Rolande, was not old enough to reason his emotion, however. The recalibration of Remy's fellow-feeling for these children creates acute discomfort in part because of his impotence; as a child onlooker, his feelings are not consonant with those expressed in public memorials and apologies where responsibility can be assumed and forgiveness sought. He heard them crying, but did nothing; he could do nothing. There is a gap between the child upset by other children's distress, and the man who can never feel *those* feelings, never know *that* pain. It would be wholly inappropriate to try to put himself in their shoes; empathy can only fail here. Remy is left with sympathy: with compassion that overflows language and resists composure. His sorrow rests on the knowledge of their pain, but acknowledges the gulf that separates him from them. It is this affective gulf, into which are poured all the complexities of the implicated subject, which breaks him. That he cares is evident. But when empathy has reached its limits, it is left to sympathy, respecting the essential separateness of souls, to recognise the enormity of past wounds.

Conclusion: the "ethical demand" at the limits of empathy

Feelings with, for and about other people, and claims to feel with, for and about other people, are complicated and intriguing. Fellow-feeling, whether sympathy or empathy, engenders a set of moral and ethical questions about who should or can feel what about whom, why, and with what consequences. As this article has suggested, the intimate realm of the everyday is rich terrain for examining instances of fellow-feeling in wartime close encounters, whether they be within families, across the enemy-victim divides, or in relation to persecuted-persecutor populations. It has also indicated some of the shifts which become evident when past attitudes are recounted in later life, following changes in life experience, knowledge and emotional range, and in post-conflict cultural and political contexts. The article has analysed past fellow-feeling through oral history interviews, although it is of course possible that other sources – particularly qualitative ones – might be useful for thinking about how feelings towards and about other people provide evidence for complicated political and moral judgements inside populations at war. These may be important insofar as they encourage or dissuade action – including care – and so have a very real historical value in relation to the intention and motivation of historical action. A further intention was to demonstrate that secondary analysis of oral history interviews can be undertaken using affective practices, including a conscious, subjective attunement to the beyond-language impressions that the felt realm of experience leaves in the narrative. These may be interpretively

discerned through intensities of feeling that accrete around particular people or events, or by thinking about why particular memories might get stored, retrieved and told.

Empathy is something of a buzzword in its popular usage, sold as a cure for intolerance, hate and exclusion. But empathy may not always be the route to caring more or caring better. This article has attempted to show where sympathy steps in, given empathy's limitations in terms of assumption, effacement and experience. Sympathy matters because it invokes care, concern and responsibility for another's wellbeing. Ahmed writes of the "ethical demand" in relation to fellow-feeling: "I must act about that which I cannot know, rather than act insofar as I know" (*Cultural Politics of Emotion*: 31). As an historian who is not French, who is not a war child, and who is not Jewish, this injunction feels pertinent: I research and I write about that which I cannot know, and I shall not pretend that I do. For this reason, many conventions of traditional historical writing – conclusiveness, confident argumentation, mastery – are inappropriate. Instead, this article opts for many perhapses, and offers the alternative of being open to being affected by that which I cannot know and feel, thinking into the gaps and spaces of knowledge to expand the possibilities of past experience, rather than to insist on its certainties.

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