

A “Community of Opinions and Convictions”: Remembrance Techniques and Self-Perception of the East Elbian Nobility in West Germany, 1945/49-1974

For as long as nobility has existed, memory has played an important part in the socio-cultural form of life of this group. “Without memory, there is no nobility”, Otto Gerhard Oexle wrote in 1995 about medieval nobility – and certainly this statement is also true for the following centuries until our times. Concerning the constitution, cohesion, and identity of the nobility as a social group, the importance of memory cannot be overestimated. Therefore it is necessary to inquire the functions and significance of memory, even if the nobility in the second half of the 20th century is regarded. Did memory lose importance, or did it assume greater significance than ever before?

The focus of my paper is on the East Elbian nobility after 1945. In this context, the geographical term ‘East Elbian’ means a historical German region east of the River Elbe consisting of Mecklenburg and the eastern parts of Prussia. The end of World War II has also been the end of the particular form of life of the East Elbian nobility. But this did not mean that the East Elbian nobility disappeared as a social group. Although its largest part had fled from the approaching Soviet army or had later been expelled by the newly established communist regimes, the loss of its homes and homelands did not imply the loss of its noble identity. Without doubt, the “collapse of 1945” – understood by the East Elbian nobility as the collapse of state and society, but above all as the collapse of its traditional lifeworld, meaning the setting of its natural, social, and cultural environment – threatened the further existence of the East Elbian nobility. But that part which was able to flee to the western parts of post-war Germany, the later German Federal Republic, had the chance to maintain a noble identity. What did it mean for this group to be still noble? What was its self-image, and which role did memory play in that?

The following remarks concern memory and self-perception because they are two concepts that can hardly be separated from each other. After the loss of all its material and ideal criteria of self-identification, the East Elbian nobility had to reconsider its noble identity and recreate its shattered self-image. In this process, memory played an important part. On the one hand, memory influenced the self-image of the East Elbian nobility on the other, this self-image determined what exactly was remembered. Therefore memory and self-perception were two aspects of the same subject: the socio-cultural identity of the East Elbian nobility.

My paper consists of three parts: (1) in the first part, formal aspects of memory will be treated; this means that the function of memory will be considered as well as important remembrances techniques and media of memory; (2) by switching to the contents of noble memory in the second part, some main components of the noble self-understanding will be analysed; in this context will be demonstrated that the East Elbian nobility regarded itself as a “community of opinions and convictions” closely related to memory; (3) finally, in the third part, some terminological considerations will be made; there will be discussed what it does mean to characterize the Elbian nobility as a memory group (in German *Erinnerungsgruppe*) or, with a slightly different accentuation, as a community of memory (an *Erinnerungsgemeinschaft*). Let us now turn to the first part:

1. Significance, techniques, and media of noble memory

After the loss of all legal privileges in the Weimar Republic, the East Elbian nobility also had to suffer the loss of all its traditional socio-economic and socio-cultural means of distinction at the end of the Second World War. The only way left to distinguish itself from other social groups was the invention of new forms of socio-cultural distinction or, more often, the reinvention of old ones. Now the East Elbian nobility was forced to rely on its immaterial values in order to restore and sharpen its endangered noble identity. More than ever before, nobility based on ascriptions made by the nobility itself and by the so called non-noble or common people. Finally, nobility solely became a matter of belief. This is certainly true for the East Elbian nobility, but it seems that it is fitting for the German nobility in general after 1945. In order to be able to convince other people of its noble status, the East Elbian nobility had to use all possibilities to accentuate its supposed noble qualities. Memory was a part of this. The re-invention of noble traditions confirmed the conviction that the nobility was a naturally existing and clearly separated part of society. In the words of Benedict Anderson, the East Elbian nobility turned out to be an imagined community. After the collapse of its noble lifeworld in 1945, the East Elbian nobility used memory to re-establish itself as a distinct social group. In the entire history of the East Elbian nobility, there has never been a greater necessity for distinction than after 1945 because now only socio-cultural distinction could guarantee its maintenance as a social group.

The East Elbian nobility revived a “culture of memory” (Marcus Funck/Stephan Malinowski) which – adapted to modern times – could draw from a reliable reservoir of traditional remembrance techniques. This culture of memory did not only consist in mental

representations but also in 'real' socio-cultural practices. Via these practices, a specific style of life – in the sense of Max Weber's use of the term – was created, which enabled the East Elbian nobility to realize at least some aspects of its self-image in everyday life. Believing in being noble has in some ways been an imagination far from reality, in others it has to some extent manifested itself in one's daily way of life.

Throughout its historical existence, nobility has always shown a strong sense of history and tradition. Especially in times of crisis, the noble awareness of the history and traditions of one's own family and of the nobility as a whole has been sharpened in order to reinforce the troubled individual and collective position. Once again, this is exactly what the East Elbian nobility was doing after the loss of its noble lifeworld in 1945: keeping its historical memory alive for the sake of continued social existence. Texts and documents, such as family histories, genealogies, autobiographies, memoirs or other kinds of remembrance literature served the purpose of preserving and fixing the noble identity. Published or internally circulated family histories provided information about the family, for example about its historical age, its coat of arms, its origin, prominent events of its history, or biographical details of its members in the course of several centuries. Pedigrees documented the historical depth of a family, too, but they also pointed out who in past and present belonged to a family, and who did not. Memoirs and autobiographies were intended to record individual life histories as small parts of the larger family history. Implicitly, they were regarded as descriptions of an individual way of life in accordance with noble rank. Common features of all kinds of remembrance literature was the tacit presupposition that the remembered contents were worth knowing facts of the collective family history, and therefore, to a certain extent, of noble history in general. They passed on memories which were considered to be more or less important aspects of the noble form of life – and that way, noble identity was created. In this process, media of daily conversation as narrations or anecdotes were also of great importance. Their significance for shaping noble identity cannot be overestimated. Even sayings as the famous 'noblesse oblige' or the frequently used 'mehr sein als scheinen' – being more than to seem – fulfilled this function. Although empty formulas that could be filled up with various connotations, they created an aura of exclusivity.

Since the Middle Ages, remembering deceased family members has been an essential part of the noble culture of memory. In a modern version, this ancient tradition has been continued after 1945. Remembering recently departed relatives was a usual custom of regularly held family meetings. Additional to that, obituaries were published in circular letters. A prominent place in the commemoration of the dead has been reserved for the fallen

family members of both World Wars because they perfectly represented the collective honour and merit of the family. They were remembered in conventional family histories or in separately published memorial volumes. Outstanding individuals of the family history took a similar position. Again and again they were recalled as representative family members worthy of imitation. Especially relatives who had been involved in the failed attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler in the July Plot of 1944 were excellent subjects of noble memory and self-justification in post-war West Germany – but this cannot be considered in detail here.

After the “collapse of 1945”, the East Elbian nobility established a new tradition that became an important part of its memorial culture and self-identification: the remembrance of its lost *Heimat*, its former homes and homelands. The feeling of sharing a common fate, i.e. the fate of being homeless, and the memory of the ‘good old days’ in their *Heimat* worked as a unifying moment. It promoted the constitution and cohesion of the East Elbian nobility as an imagined community and produced a sense of solidarity. Part of this remembrance technique has also been the memory of flight and expulsion. Numerous trek reports were written in order to save the recollection of the last days in their homelands, the terrible experiences of flight and expulsion and the general misery of a life as a fugitive in the collective memory of the East Elbian nobility. Certainly, neither flight nor expulsion have been exclusively noble experiences, just as trek reports have not been exclusively a noble media of remembrance, but each of them could easily become a vehicle for specific noble memories. In the absence of men in war, for example, female nobles were often remembered as natural leaders of the trek – an image which corresponded to the noble role scheme of the lady of the manor (in German *Gutsfrau*), providing thus for the last time the possibility of paternalistic self-presentation. By all means, the oblivion of the lost *Heimat* should be prevented. This could be done by various techniques and media, for example through the aforementioned family histories, memoirs, or narrations. Among these, another one was of great importance: the collection of *lieux de mémoire*.

In this context, the technical term *lieux de mémoire* – in German *Erinnerungsorte* – does not only mean sites of memory in the literal sense of the word, it rather generally signifies material symbols of memory. Their function has been to constitute, represent and strengthen noble identity. A large amount of objects could be used for this purpose, among them a large number of traditional *lieux de mémoire*. Once again, the East Elbian nobility used well-known and well-proven remembrance techniques to construct and symbolize its unchallenged noble status – a status which – in its view – could not even be harmed by the loss of the noble lifeworld in 1945. More than ever before, *lieux de mémoire* became

indispensable tools for constructing noble identity because due to the loss of its former socio-economic and socio-cultural resources and insignia of distinction, the East Elbian nobility was not able any more to represent its noble status in public, except for its name. Important *lieux de mémoire* have been portraits of ancestors, photos of deceased family members, pictures of lost estates or even old family histories. Several other objects could join their ranks, for example signet-rings or historical documents. Many of these memorial symbols were used to decorate the interior of one's home, creating thus a way of life that was able to symbolize noble status in everyday life – a necessity which has never been as urgent as after 1945.

At this point, I would like to finish the consideration of remembrance techniques and draw your attention to the second part of my presentation:

2. The East Elbian nobility as a “community of opinions and convictions”: important aspects of the noble self-perception

After the loss of its material means of distinction in 1945, the East Elbian nobility was forced to reinvent itself as a *Gesinnungsgemeinschaft*, a “community of opinions and convictions”. In this case, the often cited phrase “reinvention” (Isabelle-Claude BreLOT, David Cannadine) is truly appropriate because now only the immaterial values of the East Elbian nobility were left to uphold its noble identity. Regarding itself as a *Gesinnungsgemeinschaft* meant that the East Elbian nobility believed to be a community based on common ideals. According to this conviction, nobility was constituted by successfully proven values handed down through history. This implied a twofold form of memory: first, a concrete knowledge of the history of one's family and the nobility, and second, an abstract knowledge of the fact that the familial and noble history rooted deep down in the past. The East Elbian nobility still adhered to the traditional idea that the noble family consisted of a vertical and a horizontal dimension. The horizontal dimension compromised all living members of the family, the vertical one all ancestors. Therefore history, tradition, and memory were important aspects of the noble self-image. History and tradition were regarded as vehicles of timeless values. The aforementioned *lieux de mémoire* are a good example to illustrate the noble concept of a vertical family community. In the sources, *lieux de mémoire* are usually called *Erinnerungsstücke*, what is best translated as souvenirs. This is a characteristic notion because *Erinnerungsstücke* as, for example, portraits of ancestors or pictures of old family estates dating back to the 19th century can hardly be considered to have the same quality as souvenirs

remembering particular events of one's own biography. By identifying oneself with life histories of the ancestors, they created an affective relation to the past.

The astonishing ability to take up old traditions and adapt them to changing times can once again be found in the self-understanding of the East Elbian nobility. Old patterns of perception were transformed in order to recreate an identity which did not differ too much from its origins. Thus the east Elbian nobility was able to believe that its identity still had not changed. In the following, six main components of the noble scale of values or, in other words, the noble mind-set will be considered, which were regarded by the East Elbian nobility as timeless characteristics of nobility:

(1) At the top of this scale ranged the family in its horizontal and vertical dimension. It was considered as the genuine nucleus of nobility, not only causing a sense of solidarity among the family members but also among the so called *Standesgenossen*, literally the comrades of estate or the class fellows. Even after 1945, the traditional phrase of the “nobility as a great family” was used to express the noble fellowship.

(2) Closely related to this topic were birth and descent. Although the nobility had been abolished as an estate – a *Geburtsstand* – in 1919, being noble was still regarded as a quality delivered only by birth. In this respect, nobility maintained the character of an estate.

(3) In the hierarchy of values, family and birth were followed by name and title. Only bearers of a noble name were considered as truly noble. Although this narrow concept of nobility has been expanded in the course of time by including married daughters who adopted a non-noble name, name and title remained constitutive elements of nobility. The name became the most important symbol of the family history and the only remaining public sign of noble status. Therefore it should be protected from all kinds of abuses, irrelevant if committed by family members, other nobles or non-noble people.

(4) As mentioned above, the vertical dimension of the noble family concept caused a more or less evolved appreciation of history and tradition. For example, this can be seen in the appreciation of family histories, pedigrees, and remembrance literature in general.

(5) Religion has been another important aspect of the noble scale of values. Irrespective of the question whether each of its members may have really been religious, highlighting the profound religiousness of the nobility was at least a cultural heritage and strategy of distinction. In accordance with an old tradition, nobility was still regarded as an epitome of Christian values. Claiming to lead a Christian way of life – in this context, of course, mostly a Protestant one – therefore belonged to the self-evident convictions of the East Elbian nobility. This intended to stress its exceptional dignity.

(6) In the following, a lot of further values could be mentioned, but at this point I just want to make some remarks on notions that culminated in the image of a noble character. The East Elbian nobility adhered to old patterns of noble self-representation that to some extent were additionally charged with Prussian values. Although the Prussian ethos had been discredited by recent German history, the Prussian parts of the East Elbian nobility still emphasized its Prussian character, its *Preußentum*. Values, such as *Pflicht* (duty) or *Dienst* (service) were regularly stressed as essential features of a nobleman. In this sense, one of the main characteristics of nobility was to serve the common good. The supposed fact that especially the nobility suited this purpose was explained by reference to its traditional and time-proven values. Because of these values, the typical nobleman – and, of course, the typical noblewomen – was regarded as a *Persönlichkeit*, a person of excellent character and moral integrity.

Altogether it can be stated that the East Elbian nobility still had a pronounced class-consciousness or, in its own words, a strong *Standesbewusstsein*. The East Elbian nobility still regarded itself as a distinct and exclusive social group. Although its status as a political elite had been lost long before 1945, the East Elbian nobility still regarded itself as an elite, but now as an elite of character and values. In the course of the 20th century, the German nobility in general has increasingly been forced to justify its exclusivity by interior values. After the loss of its noble lifeworld in 1945, for the East Elbian nobility this process reached its climax.

3. The East Elbian nobility as a community of memory: some terminological considerations

In a well-known and well-received article, the German historians Silke Marburg and Joseph Matzerath use the term '*Erinnerungsgruppe*' – memory group – to characterize modern nobility. This is surely convincing, especially as modernity has been unfolding in the course of history. But what does it exactly mean? As mentioned above, nobility has always been constituted by memory. Unfortunately, Marburg and Mazerath do not define their concept. This does not mean that the term would be useless, but I would like to take a closer look at its implications. The best way, I think, to make it operational is by connecting it to the flourishing Cultural Memory Studies of these days. Here, some classical notions will be used to sharpen the term.

The following attempt to define the concept is based on the research of Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann on collective and cultural memory, respectively, complemented

by Max Weber's differentiation between *Vergemeinschaftung* – communalization – and *Vergesellschaftung* – societization. Let us begin with the last topic. In the terminology of Max Weber, *Vergemeinschaftung* means the constitution of a social group by social relations that emerge from a subjectively felt belonging; on the other hand, *Vergesellschaftung* means group-constitution by a rationally motivated association that is either value-oriented or goal-oriented. According to this, I shall use the term 'community' for a social group that is constituted by *Vergemeinschaftung* or, in other words, by a shared feeling of solidarity. In this sense, I think, the term 'community' is more appropriate to describe the East Elbian nobility as a social group based largely on memory than the neutral term 'group'. Therefore, I prefer the formulation 'community of memory' to the rather vague one 'memory group'. This corresponds to the usage of the term '*Erinnerungsgemeinschaft*' – community of memory – in the German Cultural Memory Studies. In a different context – by inquiring into iconic memory –, the term was first introduced by Aby Warburg in 1920. Although frequently used in German memory studies, it has never been defined. Inspired by Max Weber, Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann, I suggest the following definition: 'Community of memory' shall mean a group of people that is constituted by a collective feeling of common characteristics and solidarity which bases itself on an emotional relationship with the past, which is charged with values. This relationship with the past evokes a specific self-image that causes social relations among the members and produces certain socio-cultural practices. At last, it generates socio-cultural identity.

I think that this definition is very appropriate to characterize the East Elbian nobility after 1945. But as Maurice Halbwachs has shown in his inquiry about the social conditions of memory, every social group can be considered as a community of memory relying on collective remembrance. Nonetheless, nobility has always been an exceptional community of memory – or in the words of Marcus Funck and Stephan Malinowski an unparalleled "master of memory" –, and this did not change after 1945. On the contrary, as far as the construction of noble identity is concerned, memory has dramatically risen in importance.

Before finishing my paper, please allow one last remark: Characterizing nobility as a community of memory means to emphasize specific aspects of the noble form of life for the sake of analytical type-building. But nobility did not merge in memory. I believe that there are other ways of suitable description, too. For example, Bourdieu's concept of habitus is a promising approach as has been shown by Monique de Saint Martin in her work on the contemporary French aristocracy, but this is another topic not treated here. Thank you for your attention!