In the first seminar of the fall 2008 semester, Christopher Browning talked about his current research on the three factory slave labor camps in Stacharowice, south-central Poland. His lecture first discussed methodological issues relating to historians’ use of survivor testimonies, before focusing on the perceptions of other ethnic groups (Poles, Germans, Ukrainians) emerging in the these sources.

The case of the Stacharowice factory slave labor camps is exceptionally suited to tackle methodological questions, since a large number of testimonies exist—from the immediate postwar years, the 1960s, the 1990s, and finally interviews Dr. Browning himself conducted more recently. While many Holocaust historians, such as Saul Friedländer, favor early testimonies as the most reliable and informative, Dr. Browning highlighted some of their disadvantages, as well as the advantages of more recent testimonies in connection with his analysis of the various “layers of memories”: repressed memories—usually particularly painful experiences—are absent from the earlier testimonies and are only rarely recovered in more recent interviews conducted with survivors. Similarly, secret and communal memories concerned aspects of life in the camps which individual survivors considered taboo or a community of survivors might have tacitly agreed not to mention publicly. Only in the 1990s did some of the interviewees eventually disclose these events. The existence of both secret and communal memories that later become public clearly contradicts the notion of the greater reliability of early testimonies. On the other hand, Dr. Browning emphasized the problem of incorporated memories—common Holocaust tropes appearing in well-known memoirs by, for example, Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel—which he found some of the interviewees had included into their own stories. And yet, against the extreme positions—either viewing any questioning of survivor testimonies as blasphemous, or claiming overcautiously that one cannot really trust survivor testimonies at all—Dr. Browning
insisted that the large sample of the Stacharowice testimonies agreed on certain basics, which he labeled the *core memory*.

The second part of the lecture shed light on how the inter-ethnic relationships between Jews and Germans, Ukrainians, and Poles emerged in the testimonies. Dr. Browning found that survivors tend to distinguish clearly between “dangerous Germans” who were to be avoided, “corruptible Germans”, who could be bribed, and very few “decent Germans.” Survivors had different views of the Ukrainians—who generally worked as camp guards: survivors spoke negatively of the Ukrainian guards as a group as cruel and sadistic, but when talking about other topics—such as smuggling—inadvertently revealed that a number of the guards were quite lax or corrupt individuals, which made an underground camp economy possible. In the case of Jewish-Polish relations, it became evident that they deteriorated when the Germans arrived in the region. In general, the survivors remembered the Poles in a similar manner as they remembered the Ukrainians. Thus, one can see a distinction between broad negative generalizations about Poles as a group, juxtaposed with testimonies that revealed good relations with individual Poles with whom survivors had hidden property, when they were talking about economic survival. Finally, the later testimonies on Poles became more negative, which Dr. Browning attributed at least partly to the postwar Polish violence against Jews.

The ensuing discussion focused on the change of the *core memory* over time—it became, among other things, more openly anti-Polish—but mostly on the relationship between the historian and the survivors. Dr. Browning emphasized that he found generally no sense of infallibility among the survivors, and neither did the survivors try to “push” a particular version of the story.

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Number of Participants: 42