

Interview

Martina Thiele and Siegfried Weischenberg

Bringing the past into the present

A conversation on the occasion of the publication of *Schuld und Geheimnis. Bekenntnisse von Legenden der deutsch-jüdischen Publizistik* [Guilt and secrecy. Confessions of legends of German-Jewish journalism]

Resistance, »internal emigration,« or flight? After the Nazis seized power, Jewish journalists mostly had no choice but to flee. How did they survive? How were they – and non-Jewish dissidents – able to oppose the dictatorship from exile through their journalism? And in contrast, how did others who stayed behind advance their careers or accommodate themselves to Nazi rule? In his new book, *Schuld und Geheimnis. Bekenntnisse von Legenden der deutsch-jüdischen Publizistik* [Guilt and secrecy: Confessions of legends of German-Jewish journalism], Siegfried Weischenberg, professor emeritus of journalism, focuses on well-known and lesser-known journalists. Whether Alfred Kerr or Hilde Spiel, Fritz Sängner or Elisabeth Noelle – a wide range of behaviors and accounts of their experiences are up for discussion. Author Siegfried Weischenberg and media scholar Martina Thiele (Tübingen) use the life stories and journalistic work of important 20th-century German journalists as a starting point to discuss autobiographies as sources, memory and forgetting, guilt and responsibility, as well as anti-Semitism and gender relations in journalism.

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Martina Thiele: Why a book about German-Jewish journalists? Is it your personal contribution to what we call collective memory?

Siegfried Weischenberg: From my generation's perspective, much has been neglected, even though there were certainly commendable examples of »coming to terms with the past.« Over the decades, I myself have been confronted with the topics of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism in various ways – or not at all. In high school, this wasn't covered at all in history class...

It was quite different during my school years, from 1974 to 1987.

I was born in 1948. When I was about 14, I saw a movie in the theater for the first time about the liberation of a concentration camp – I think it was Auschwitz – with all those unbelievable images of the murder of Jewish men and women.

Do you remember which film that was? Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* from 1956? Erwin Leiser's *Mein Kampf* from 1960?

I'm not entirely sure about that. Later, in 1978, there was the extremely controversial American series *Holocaust* about the Weiss family. And as a journalist, I wrote reports for *Reuters* for a while on the Düsseldorf Majdanek trial.

Eberhard Fechner made a three-part interview film about this trial, *Der Prozeß* (1984). He was incredibly disappointed with the time slot the film was given and the rather limited response it received ... I only mention this because I've dealt extensively with journalistic controversies surrounding Holocaust films.^[1]

Yes, in the 1980s, the topic of »coming to terms with the past« was more prominent. Years later, on the occasion of Gerd Bucerius's 100th birthday, I gave a lecture at the University of Haifa, where I also met with Holocaust survivors. My co-speaker was Moshe Zimmermann. And in Hamburg, until my retirement, I worked and lived very close to the site where the burned-down synagogue once stood and where the Talmud Torah School is located, which has had to be guarded for years – which is a shame. Throughout the area, so-called »Stolpersteine« (stumbling stones) have been laid to commemorate people who were killed by the

1 Thiele, Martina (2007). *Publizistische Kontroversen über den Holocaust im Film*. [Journalistic Controversies over the Holocaust in Film]. 2nd ed. Lit-Verlag. The book examines the controversies surrounding the films *Morituri* (1948), *Night and Fog* (1956), *Mein Kampf* (1960), *Ein Tag* [A Day] (1965), *Holocaust* (1978), *Der Prozeß* [The Trial] (1984), *Shoah* (1985), and *Schindler's List* (1993).

Nazis in the concentration camps. Of course, this is merely an outsider's form of moral or emotional engagement, incomparable to what someone like Hape Kerkeling recalls in memory of his grandfather.^[2] Such memories are particularly important, which is why I included Inge Deutschkron in my second book; she survived the Holocaust in hiding in Berlin with her mother and later made significant contributions to the »culture of remembrance« – such as through her speech in the German Bundestag on January 30, 2013^[3], 80 years after Hitler's rise to power, and in memory of the victims of National Socialism.

For your book on German-Jewish journalists, you draw primarily on their autobiographies. Aren't these rather questionable sources, especially from the perspective of a social scientist who has conducted empirical journalism research and who has argued from a systemic and professional perspective rather than an individualistic one?

I'll have to back up a bit to explain that. Right from the start of my sociology studies, I not only explored the methodology of interviewing in theory – at the time, based on the volume *Das Interview*^[4], edited by René König – but also gained practical interview experience. For instance, during the semester break, I worked as an interviewer in the Ruhr region and the Eifel for a study on administrative reform. I conducted my first extended journalistic interview during my internship at the *Neue Ruhr-Zeitung* with Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in her apartment in Mainz. The topic was the successes and failures of public opinion polling. Later, I launched representative surveys on »Journalism in Germany«^[5] and offered university courses on the theory and practice of interviewing, because I repeatedly observed shortcomings in real-world journalism. I had experienced this firsthand during my time as DJV chairman^[6] when I was frequently interviewed and appeared on talk shows, for example. At the same time, I had discovered autobiographies as, so to speak, »answers without questions« – or more precisely: memoirs as a form of self-interrogation.

2 Speech by Hape Kerkeling on the anniversary of the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp on April 11, 2026, available in German at: <https://www.stiftung-gedenkstaetten.de/reflexionen/reflexionen-2026/kerkeling>; accessed on May 28, 2026

3 Speech by Inge Deutschkron in the German Bundestag on January 30, 2013, available in German at: https://www.bundestag.de/webarchiv/textarchiv/2013/rede_deutschkron-252298; accessed on May 28, 2026

4 König, René (1957) (ed.). *Das Interview. Formen – Technik – Auswertung*. [The Interview: Form, technique, and analysis.] With the collaboration of Dietrich Rüchemeyer and Erwin K. Scheuch. 2nd, completely revised and expanded edition. Verlag für Politik und Wirtschaft.

5 Weischenberg, Siegfried, Löffelholz, Martin, & Scholl, Armin (1994). Merkmale und Einstellungen von Journalisten. *Journalismus in Deutschland II. Media Perspektiven*, 4, pp. 154–167. And: Weischenberg, Siegfried, Malik, & Maja, Scholl, Armin (2006). *Die Souffleure der Mediengesellschaft. Report über die Journalisten in Deutschland*. [The whisperers of the media society: A report on journalists in Germany.] UVK.

6 Siegfried Weischenberg served as Federal Chairman of the German Journalists' Association (DJV) from 1999 to 2001, one of the largest journalists' unions in Europe in terms of membership.

Self-questioning sounds good, but self-answering carries the risk of omitting events or glossing over them.

In the first chapter of the book, I discussed the question of the validity of these sources in greater detail, and this seemed necessary to me. Of course, autobiographies generally contain a mix of memories and inventions, which becomes particularly evident when authors appear to reproduce dialogues and details of encounters from the distant past verbatim, which does not seem credible. Furthermore, there are examples of contradictions between the memoirs of different individuals. However, this is offset by the advantages of authenticity, because these autobiographies describe firsthand experiences rather than primarily reproducing what is found in secondary sources. In the case of public figures, there is the additional factor that they generally wrote their memoirs themselves, since, as professional authors, they did not need ghostwriters. Above all, however, it is important to note: What I am doing here is not alternative journalism research, but rather a kind of supplement to the empirical research that I have focused on for many years.

I'm also particularly interested in the selection of the people profiled and the term »media legends« you've chosen. What defines a media legend? Which publicists, writers, and journalists do you count among the legendary ones?

I naturally asked myself these questions when I dusted off the book project that had been sitting in my drawer for a long time. At first, selecting the people I wanted to profile seemed quite simple: generally, only someone who is sufficiently popular to find a publisher willing to release their memoirs can publish them. Legends, however, – one would assume – play in a league of their own. Often, even during their lifetimes, they possess the status of »chosen ones,« a status that has been established in the public eye through a mix of being »out of the ordinary,« »famous,« and »enduringly popular.« For induction into a Hall of Fame, factors such as charisma, presence, and impact in a specific field – be it politics, soccer, art, or the media – apparently play a central role.

In your case, as a journalism professor, the field of media and journalism was clear. Still, the question remains: who had to be included when it comes to German-Jewish media legends? What exactly does »German-Jewish« mean?

Yes, selecting individuals who meet specific criteria is difficult on a case-by-case basis, especially if one wishes to explore »media legends« over a longer period of time. However, for *Schuld und Geheimnis*, which focuses on the first half of the 20th century and in particular the period between 1919 and 1945, it wasn't that

difficult for me. This applies in particular to outstanding figures such as Alfred Kerr, Theodor Wolff, Hans Habe, Georg Stefan Troller, Ralph Giordano, Hilde Spiel, Margret Boveri, Elisabeth Noelle, Sebastian Haffner, and Henri Nannen. »German« was defined broadly here, thus including figures such as Stefan Großmann, Friedrich Stampfer, Hans Habe, Hilde Spiel, Georg Stefan Troller, and Stéphane Roussel in the Austro-Hungarian Empire or in Austria after World War I, as well as those born in Czechoslovakia, such as Willy Haas, or in Poland, such as Marcel Reich-Ranicki. They all had – »just like« Alfred Kerr, Theodor Wolff, Gabriele Tergit, Immanuel Birnbaum, Hans Sahl, Curt Riess, Gerhard Löwenthal, and Ralph Giordano – »Jewish roots« in the sense of a racialized attribution, regardless of the extent to which they professed the Jewish faith. As for the »media legends,« the decisions regarding the second volume on the »Bonn Republic,« which I am currently working on, were more difficult for me. There was, for example, the »man of the century« Eduard Rhein, who filled the coffers of the Springer-Verlag with his tv guide *HörZu*, or Marion Gräfin Dönhoff and Peter von Zahn, who had a formative influence on the press and television, respectively. But what do you do with someone like the agitator Karl-Eduard von Schnitzler, who was very influential in the GDR with his tv propaganda program *Der schwarze Kanal*, or the far-right Franz Schönhuber, who, with his dialect talk show *Jetzt red' I* in Bavaria, almost became tv editor-in-chief at *Bayerischer Rundfunk* before he ended up with the far-right parties Republicans and the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD)? In any case, both have left behind interesting autobiographies.

The autobiography of the former ss man Franz Schönhuber had the revealing title *Ich war dabei* [I Was There]. This brings me back to the question of the selection criteria and the two-part structure of the book *Guilt and secrecy*: On the one hand, you write about those journalists with »Jewish roots« who were »persecuted and expelled«; on the other, about those who incurred a »second guilt« through »concealment and repression.« In his book of the same name, Ralph Giordano used this term »second guilt« to refer to the guilt of repression and denial after 1945. But what about before that? What exactly constituted the first guilt of those who remained in Germany – I'll call them »desk perpetrators« for now?

This dichotomy was not initially the basis of my concept; however, after intensive study of the material and a focus on the years after 1933, it emerged almost of its own accord. This second group consisted of individuals whose culpable behavior varied greatly. There were those who actively participated as registered Nazis, others whom one would rather describe as bystanders and conformists [Mitläufer] – but also those with »proof of Aryan descent« for whom no (»primary«)

guilt can be established because they – like Axel Eggebrecht or Felix von Eckardt – successfully withdrew to the margins of journalism. Or »Aryans« who, like Carl von Ossietzky or H. H. Stuckenschmidt, were persecuted by the Nazis for (cultural) political reasons. »Concealment and repression« refers directly to such cases, which, in Giordano's view, incurred a »second guilt« after the war by failing to acknowledge their past in the journalism of the »Third Reich.«

As I delved into all these »legends,« I repeatedly came across behaviors that drew direct parallels to the present day. For instance, the trivialization of right-wing extremism – even after Hitler's rise to power, when the Nazis turned the country upside down within a matter of weeks and the first emigrants abroad, initially mostly in Prague, believed the Nazi interlude would soon come to an end, so there was no reason to settle into exile.

The second important term in the book's title is »secret.« What secrets are you referring to?

In a way, my book owes its context of discovery to Stefan Zweig's lecture »Das Geheimnis des künstlerischen Schaffens« [The Secret of Artistic Creation] as well as his autobiography *Die Welt von Gestern* [The World of Yesterday], which is still well worth reading. Initially, I applied the search for secrets directly to journalism and asked what journalists and writers have left behind in the rather numerous autobiographies written by this group in terms of insightful information about their profession. My attempt to uncover the mysteries of their creative and professional practice and ask questions about them, in a way, continues my engagement with Max Weber's »program of disenchantment« on the individual level. What do they reveal, in his words, about the ways in which they tried to live up to the »demands of the day«? It seemed natural, however, to then apply this specifically to those individuals who, having provided »proof of Aryan descent,« continued working in the media of the »Third Reich« and, after World War II, obscured their activities in ways that were at times quite sophisticated. Some journalists, such as Fritz Säger or Focko Lützen, got away with this until their deaths. I consider Giordano's concept of »secondary guilt« to be apt in this context, while there are differing views even among Jews regarding the question of »collective guilt« on the part of the Germans.

The predominantly accepted formulation is now »no collective guilt, but collective responsibility.« Yet in the postwar period, the majority remained silent, denied, or glossed over the past. What justifications and explanations were put forward? Who was able to carry on with relative ease, what continuities existed, and what breaks occurred?

In the postwar years, there was a tacit agreement within old and new networks to secure the continuation of one's own career by adopting a defensive stance against any form of coming to terms with the past, and thus to survive the process of denazification pursued by the Allies with varying degrees of intensity. Of course, journalists were not the only ones to adopt this defensive stance; the same applied, for example, to lawyers and artists. In journalism, the strategy of claiming that one had written »between the lines« and managed, through a kind of »inner emigration,« (a claimed internal withdrawal from the Nazi regime while remaining in Germany) to avoid incurring guilt during the Nazi era also proved successful. That they thereby made themselves guilty a second time only gradually became apparent in various cases as examples of inflammatory articles and propaganda pieces that could not be excused came to light. As a result, media legends such as Werner Höfer and Fritz Sängner – were belatedly unmasked, as had previously been the case with someone like Karl Korn and his vile piece on the film *Jud Süß*; he was, however, able to remain co-editor of the national newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) and continue to exert great influence on cultural life in the young Federal Republic. It is inexcusable that some staunch and apparently incorrigible Nazis were able to quickly rebuild their careers in the media of the Federal Republic, particularly at the Israel-friendly Springer publishing house. It is more difficult to judge individuals who were not National Socialists but opportunistically adapted to the circumstances and allegedly engaged in something like a so-called »gray-brown resistance« – a form of opportunistic, semi-compliant dissent.

Now that we've talked a lot about memory, sources, methodology, guilt, and secrecy, I have to ask: which of the 36 people profiled in your book do you sympathize with? Whose life story and attitude have touched and impressed you?

In my first book, I profiled only three people whom I had met in person: Georg Stefan Troller, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, and Henri Nannen. I saw Troller only once, briefly, at the Academy of Arts in Berlin. He was in his eighties at the time, had his hair tied back in a ponytail, and came across as almost shy and very likable. I saw Noelle from time to time after the interview, including in the U.S. when she presented the English-language version of *Die Schweigespirale* [*The Spiral of Silence*], and so I can understand why some of my colleagues have been permanently captivated by her charisma. But I don't understand when they gloss over or sugarcoat what she revealed in her autobiography. In her case, it proves particularly helpful to study what her contemporaries report about her. I once encountered Henri Nannen at a party at the Düsseldorf office of the magazine *stern*,

where the man – powerful in both senses of the word – carried himself exactly as described by his contemporaries: commanding the room.

Generally speaking, after reading so many memoirs, I tend to sympathize more with the relatively few women than with the men. This applies particularly to the Jewish women Gabriele Tergit and Hilde Spiel, but also to Margret Boveri, whose role during the Nazi era remains ambiguous, as well as to *Das Reich* editor Helene Rahms, whose unpretentious and open self-portrayal impressed me. Among the men, besides Troller, I would especially like to mention Axel Eggebrecht, whose life – which he describes without a trace of vanity – was extremely varied. Then there are the unjustly forgotten journalistic all-rounders Stefan Großmann and Hans Sahl.

And then there are also a few unsympathetic figures, vain and incorrigible ...

Here, Hans-Georg von Studnitz is unbeatably at the top, though when it comes to vanity, he was surpassed by Friedrich Sieburg. I have mixed feelings about people like Gerhard Löwenthal, Ralph Giordano, and Marcel Reich-Ranicki, but with them, of course, one has to take into account what they went through before they became legends in the media industry. This also applies to Curt Riess and Hans Habe, who personally behaved in ways that were sometimes borderline, but who left their mark as extremely prolific authors in German-Jewish journalism. Of course, I have a particularly hard time with those who, in the Bonn Republic, brazenly lied about their activities during the Nazi era, so that the term »zweite Schuld« [second guilt] applies to them in a special way: Fritz Säger and also Werner Höfer, despite all their contributions to the young German democracy, or Walter Henkels and also Günter Diehl.

Theodor W. Adorno described anti-Semitism as the »rumor about the Jews.« How susceptible were journalists in the 1920s and 1930s to the Nazis' anti-Jewish propaganda? Who benefited directly from the fact that Jewish journalists were banned from their professions and could no longer work in Germany?

For these journalists, it wasn't just about the looming professional ban, but – as the example of Gabriele Tergit shows – very quickly about the danger to their lives and safety. All the »Aryans« who were able to fill the vacant (management) positions benefited from the disappearance of Jews from the newsrooms. The extent to which anti-Semitism had already been an issue in newsrooms prior to this is not clearly evident from the sources I have studied. Someone like Axel Eggebrecht is certainly credible when he writes that it was not until 1933 that he realized how many of his colleagues and friends were Jewish. The dilemma one

then found oneself in had already arisen with the very concept: Who is a Jew, anyway? Those as astute as Sebastian Haffner knew what an important role Jews had played in Germany's political and cultural life. In his memoirs, written in exile, he erected a magnificent monument to the industrialist and politician Walter Rathenau. I became interested in Rathenau early on, partly because I grew up on a street named after him. Previously, it had borne the name of a Nazi general.

The perspective on journalism as a profession and a calling is also highly interesting, as is the journalistic self-image of the people you portray as media legends: Who stands out with particularly pointed statements?

It's probably a product of the times that one finds statements – especially from Friedrich Sieburg and Hans Habe – that are practically dripping with occupational ideology. Back then, journalism was likely viewed as a profession based purely on natural talent, something that couldn't be learned. In a short essay, Sieburg takes his thoughts on the profession so far as to reject any form of protection for press freedom and to paint a picture of journalism that can only be described as detached from reality. In this, he aligned with media scholar Emil Dovifat and his practice-centered professional ideology, which he propagated during the »Third Reich« and was permitted to continue promoting after the war in a brochure by the Federal Employment Agency aimed at aspiring professionals. I actually met Dovifat in person – his talk of the »journalistic personality,« by the way, long kept me from engaging too deeply with journalists as individuals, leading me instead to focus primarily on observing and describing the structures of journalism.

How did the Nazis' rise to power and later the war affect women's journalistic work? You write, on the one hand, about Gabriele Tergit, Stéphane Roussel, and Hilde Spiel, and on the other hand, about Margret Boveri, Ursula von Kardorff, Helene Rahms, and Elisabeth Noelle. The latter, of course, later became very important to our field as a pollster and the first professor of journalism in Germany.

Of course, making generalizations based on the available autobiographies is problematic here, because these »legendary women« were in a privileged position. In this context, it is also essential to distinguish between those who were forced to emigrate and those who were able to continue working in the state-controlled media; the latter also benefited from the fact that many of their male colleagues went off to war, leaving their positions vacant. That said, in light of the memoirs, there are patterns here as well – keyword: #MeToo – that extend into the present: inappropriate behavior toward young women colleagues and

the prejudice that journalism, at least in the news sector, is not for women. The accounts by Helene Rahms, who worked for many years after the war at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, are particularly illuminating. What surprised me, however, was the high regard – indeed, downright devotion – with which the otherwise so down-to-earth and self-assured Margret Boveri, looking back, treats Paul Scheffer, her boss at the *Berliner Tageblatt*, who was a particularly colorful personality.

Regarding journalistic work, which takes place both individually and collectively within an editorial office – what stood out to you? How has the journalistic creative process changed? Have hierarchies become flatter? Is working from home, for example, not a new invention at all?

Of course, one always compares reading such memoirs with one's own experiences and observations – though one must always take into account that some things appear embellished in memoirs. This applies in particular to the atmosphere that supposedly prevailed, for example, in the newsroom of the weekly newspaper *Das Reich*. But this collegial atmosphere was likely due primarily to external pressure, although there was a vertical structure everywhere, with an editor-in-chief – a man – at the top. This did not change for many years even after World War II. Journalism took place in newsrooms; only freelancers could or were supposed to work from home. One example was Marcel Reich-Ranicki, whom the editorial staff at *Die Zeit* didn't particularly want to see around back then either... The fact that the »journalistic creative process« subsequently changed significantly is largely attributable to the digitalization that began in the late 1970s. This also had a direct impact on editorial structures: departments were reorganized and hierarchical structures were adapted to the new circumstances. I worked on this at the time together with a few other colleagues⁷; for a long time, the »technology factor« played no role at all in communication studies – meanwhile, the trend is moving more toward the other extreme.

How did journalists in the first half of the 20th century react to technological change, to the then »new« media of radio and later television?

Autobiographies contain scattered remarks on this subject, which essentially indicate that these new media were initially ignored or explicitly rejected. It is interesting to note that this applies specifically to two legends who later achieved success in radio and television: Axel Eggebrecht, who became one of

7 Weischenberg, Siegfried, Altmeyden, Klaus-Dieter, & Löffelholz, Martin (1994). *Die Zukunft des Journalismus. Technologische, ökonomische und redaktionelle Trends.* [The Future of Journalism: Technological, Economic, and Editorial Trends.] Westdeutscher Verlag.

the pioneers of public broadcasting after the war, but who had reacted with ignorance and bewilderment to the activities of Nazi Propaganda Minister Goebbels regarding radio. And Georg Stefan Troller, who was so enamored with radio production that he was slow to respond to television, to which he later owed his fame as a journalist.

In his afterword to *Schuld und Geheimnis*, your colleague Ulrich Pätzold writes about the »fruits of the unexplored remainder.« From the perspective of journalism research and in your opinion, what is the »unexplored remainder« that still needs to be addressed despite your comprehensive study? What do we need to focus on, and which questions do we need to address more closely?

In this age of AI, which threatens to overwhelm us all, answering this question is certainly more difficult than ever. I believe we must be careful not to approach journalism research in an overly fragmented manner, following the model of the natural sciences. We should not lose sight of the big picture. By that I mean persistently asking to what extent journalism fulfills the functions described in Article 5 of the German constitution, the so-called Grundgesetz [Basic Law], which are fundamental to an open, democratic society. To this end, we must continuously investigate how journalists think and act – through representative studies, but also through case studies, which include the analysis of autobiographies, perhaps even with the help of AI. Moreover, communication studies in particular must continually ask what conditions need to be created to preserve quality journalism, which fortunately still exists here. This concerns its financing more than ever. Otherwise, I agree with Georg Stefan Troller's life conclusion: »The older I get, the more positively I view the world, despite all the gloom.«

That would also answer the question Erich Kästner was asked time and again: where is the positive side...? Your answer is more optimistic than his. That is comforting. Thank you very much for the conversation and for your book, which strikes me as a treasure trove. After this absolutely enriching read, I am looking forward to the next volume.

About the authors

Prof. Dr. Martina Thiele, born in 1967, studied Slavic Studies, Journalism, and Political Science at Georg-August-University of Göttingen. She has been a professor at the Institute for Media Studies at the Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen since 2020. Her research and teaching focus on communication theories and media history, the public sphere, gender media studies, and research on

stereotypes and prejudice. She has authored numerous books and journal articles, including monographs on media and stereotypes and on journalistic controversies regarding the Holocaust in film. Thiele is co-editor of *Journalistik/Journalism Research*, where she and Boris Romahn curate »Must read: Books by journalists« – a selection of current books written by journalists.

Prof. Dr. Siegfried Weischenberg, born in 1948, studied sociology, history, and journalism at Ruhr University Bochum, where he also earned his doctorate. After completing an internship, he worked as an editor and served as honorary federal chairman of the German Journalists' Association (DJV). He taught for many years as a professor of communication science and journalism both in Germany and abroad. His research focuses on the theory and practice of journalism, systems theory and constructivism, political communication, Max Weber's sociology of the media, and the history of journalism.