Manufacturing loss:
nostalgia and risk in Ludwigshafen.

Peter Phillimore¹ and Patricia Bell²

1. School of Geography, Politics & Sociology,
Newcastle University,
Newcastle Upon Tyne,
NE1 7RU. UK.
Email. peter.phillimore@ncl.ac.uk

2. Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences (EHD),
64293 Darmstadt,
Germany.
Email. Bell@eh-darmstadt.de

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Peter Phillimore is Professor of Social Anthropology at Newcastle University, UK. He has a PhD in Social Anthropology from Durham University, based on fieldwork in Himachal Pradesh, India. He has published widely on environmental politics and health topics. He is currently working on two comparative projects which address the growing burden on health systems and services posed by chronic diseases in the Middle East.
Patricia Bell completed her Masters at the University of Glasgow in 1984 and was a founding member and mainstay of the Women’s Support Project in Glasgow until 1990. In 1999 she was awarded her PhD by the University of Tübingen, Germany for her work on sexual violence. Following research at the University of Teesside she conducted the German fieldwork for the University of Newcastle’s comparative study of risk in industrial settings until 2003. Since 2004 she has managed the research office of the University of Applied Sciences in Darmstadt (EHD), Germany. Her current research interest is sexual abuse of children.

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Abstract

This article takes cultural understandings of industrial risk in a centre of the global chemical industry as an opening that, perhaps unexpectedly, highlights nostalgia for a particular period in (West) Germany’s post-war history. Based on fieldwork in Ludwigshafen, we reflect on memories among an older generation of residents which evoke the severity of industrial pollution from the city’s vast chemical industry during the 1950s-1960s. Although the pollution of that era is hardly mourned, it was portrayed as emblematic of a culturally-defining era, an era valorized as one of enormous achievement in a more straightforward time. We draw on Tim Ingold’s concept of “taskscapes” and his emphasis on skill, and Tim Edensor’s discussion of “excessive spaces” and “multiple absences”, to explore the selectivity of the nostalgia of Ludwigshafen’s older residents, in which the celebration of the rebuilding of the post-war chemical industry, and its dominant company BASF, simultaneously obscured problematic memories associated with the city’s chemical industry in wartime.

Keywords

Germany, BASF, Chemical Industry, Pollution, Post-war
Introduction

“The Ludwigshafener suckled chemicals with their mother's milk”.

When older people in Ludwigshafen, a city in south-west Germany built around chemical manufacturing, were asked about the possible riskiness of living alongside their main industry, a common response was to shrug off the idea of risk, or to refuse the term “risk” altogether. Typically, a contrast would be drawn between the present and a far “riskier” past, in which emphasis was placed on the scale of industrial pollution then, a few decades ago, and the hazards which formerly had been a fact of industrial life. In remarks which spurned the very idea that theirs was currently a “risky” place to live, the hazards of the past were highlighted, and almost celebrated. Graphic imagery told of the multi-coloured effluents discharged into the River Rhine or the thickness of the air pollution at the time, in a manner which was both identity-affirming and nostalgic. Comparison was habitually made with the 1950s and 1960s, above all; and the comparison amongst this older generation typically favoured the past, for alongside its paradoxically celebrated pollution those years were recalled as a time of much greater economic security. The “risks” of the present day were, in effect, construed as economic and even social rather than environmental.

This article examines this evocation and valorization of past risk, showing a way in which environmental pollution and its potential risks may offer an unexpected resource for nostalgia, taking Ludwigshafen and its massive chemical industry as a case study. We use our data to shift analytically from a starting point where we focus on risk to an endpoint where our focus is primarily on nostalgia. A number of writers have made reference to
nostalgia in analyses of environmental risk cultures. In most cases, however, the sense of nostalgia which they describe contrasts a “risky” present with a past in which environmental risks were less evident or insidious: siting controversies are the classic case in point, where the siting of a new industrial process introduces a “new” source of risk into an environment portrayed as uncontaminated (Couch and Kroll-Smith 1994). Nostalgia then dwells on what has been lost by this contamination. This article reverses the terms of such a contrast, for it posits nostalgia for a past remembered as far “riskier” than a present whose risks are small – and culturally un-defining – by comparison.

Why might a risky and polluted past be the subject of nostalgia? There are certainly parallels elsewhere. For example, in Teesside, in north-east England, local historical accounts of the emerging iron, and later steel, industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries associated pollution with wealth, as a visible emblem of industrial success in an era before environmental costs were counted (Phillimore and Moffatt 1999). Others have written in a similar vein of industrial pollution in the USA (Edelstein 1988). But there is, crucially, an additional dimension in the case of Ludwigshafen which has to do with the potency of post-war reconstruction in later (West) German imagination. The subsequent emotional valorization of the 1950s and 1960s in the minds of those Ludwigshafeners who lived through that period gained much of its power from the demoralization of the end of the war and its immediate aftermath – the ruins of 1945, the Stunde Null, or “Zero Hour”, and the years of continuing collapse and occupation from 1945 to 1948. It was out of this time that the city’s prowess in chemicals had been revived. Memories of those years of despair in some ways elide with and thereby occlude the disasters and moral burdens of the war years themselves. We discuss this complex temporal background in more detail later.
This article is based on ethnographic research into understandings of environmental pollution and industrial risk, conducted in Ludwigshafen in 2001-2.1 Central to this analysis is that our exploration of idioms of risk early in the twenty-first century often pointed back to the emotional investment in the period when Ludwigshafen’s chemical industry, and above all the corporation with which it is synonymous, BASF, was rebuilt after the Second World War. In two main empirical sections of the article, we examine the powerful legacy of the 1950s and 1960s for older workers and their families when they reflected several decades later on what it had meant to live in a town dominated by a chemical industry of enormous scale, one which created considerable pollution. Our account emphasizes the distinctiveness of generational experience, a recurring theme in analyses of social memory (Haukanes and Trnka 2013). There is more at issue here, we suggest, than simply a sense of industrial machismo recalled in retirement, where a “dirty” past could be equated with personal strength of character and economic vitality. For the enormity of the social and economic task of rebuilding Germany after 1945 was perceived as a unique collective effort, enshrined in subsequent rhetoric of a social unity which has long since been lost. Nostalgic memories of the special challenges of the years of the “German economic miracle” worked forwards and back in time, we suggest, gaining their meaning against both the preceding period and the much more recent past. Ludwigshafen offers an exemplary case of the ideological significance of the post-1945 motif of a clean slate and, linked to it, the selectivity of nostalgia. This is all the more important in a context where the city’s gigantic production facilities were heavily implicated in some of the crucial industrial and genocidal policies of the Nazi era (Abelshauser et al. 2004; Teltschik 1992). In exploring this particular mix of pride and nostalgia we draw later on the writing of both Tim Ingold (on skill and “taskscapes”) and Tim Edensor (on “excessive spaces” and “multiple absences”).
The relationship of risk to nostalgia is mediated through an understanding of risk and time (Adam 1996). The primary temporal referent in risk discourses – whether scientific, political-legal, or ‘popular’ – is self-evidently to the future. The very notion of risk reveals a preoccupation with future possibilities; and the idiom of “what if?”, so central to risk imaginaries, projects us forward, into those questions concerning scientific and ontological insecurity first popularised by Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991). Yet this future-oriented dynamic surrounding any calculus of risk easily obscures a less evident orientation to the past, in popular concerns at least (Douglas 1992). For the risks of the present are habitually evaluated against a benchmark in the remembered past: “what if?” is commonly asked against a background of “what used to be” (Zonabend 1993). In this manner the door is opened to a nostalgia of risk, where the present is found wanting by comparison with the past.

The relationship of nostalgia and modernity has produced a large literature in recent years. Sometimes depicted as a reactionary residue – a failure to be ‘modern’ – nostalgia has more sympathetically been viewed as intrinsic to the ambivalent consciousness of modernity, which compels us to look back even as we look forward. Initiated by Fred Davis (1979), the most influential voices in subsequent debate have been Bryan Turner (1987), Michael Herzfeld (1994) and Svetlana Boym (2001). Boym, like Turner, stresses how nostalgia is integral to the structures of feeling of modernity, not – or not simply – reflective of disillusionment at a dystopic present. Others have emphasised how nostalgia takes on a more than personal form where people are collectively compelled by circumstances of dislocation to construe new relationships to their past (Tannock 1995). Edward Simpson, for instance, in his powerful analysis of the “political economy of nostalgia” in the aftermath of the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat, India, speaks of the chimerical slipperiness of nostalgic sentiments, and of shared yearning “for a time in which nostalgia itself was absent” (2005: 245) – a
phrase itself evoking the “time before time” of Herzfeld’s “structural nostalgia” (1997: 109). Simpson’s ethnography explores the yearning consequent on overwhelming distress. But nostalgia need be neither so painful nor so all-consuming. Inherently political as well as “cultural”, nostalgia may be more a fluctuating undercurrent to daily life rather than an all-pervasive feature of it (for a Turkish example, see Özyürek (2006), while for examples from the Ostalgie literature on eastern Germany, see Berdahl (1999), Boyer (2006) and Gallinat (2009)). Equally, nostalgia may be seen as more comforting indulgence than painful yearning – a reason why it has been dismissed as trivial. The example we shall discuss here might be seen in that light. We would argue, however, that its importance should not be minimised: for it harks back to a time of crucial symbolic significance in the western part of Germany, and to projection of this time in terms of an impossible but in some ways reassuring simplicity, resonant of Herzfeld’s notion of “structural nostalgia”.

**Ludwigshafen and BASF after 1945**

Ludwigshafen-am-Rhein was a creation of the nineteenth century, emblematic of Germany’s rapid industrialization in the second half of that century (Zimmer 2013). Across the River Rhine on its east bank stands its older and larger neighbour, Mannheim, which grew to prominence two centuries earlier. In 1865, barely a decade after the town appeared on the map, the company with which Ludwigshafen has ever since been associated, BASF, was established there after Mannheim’s civic authorities rejected its location on their side of the Rhine. By the twentieth century, BASF was already a hugely influential force in German capitalism (Chandler 1990). Ludwigshafen grew as BASF grew: a single-industry town, and even more a single-company town, in which the recreational needs of residents were seen to
be largely catered for by the company (Zimmer 2013). The scale of BASF’s Ludwigshafen operation has for many years made it the largest single-company chemical production site in the world. Equally important for the city, Ludwigshafen has remained BASF’s global headquarters. Pride and relief that the corporation had not “outgrown” its relatively small and unfashionable birthplace were constantly heard in the refrain that BASF had “put Ludwigshafen on the map”. Nonetheless, by the time of our fieldwork, BASF could no longer assume the loyalty from Ludwigshafeners it might once have taken for granted: ambivalence about the character of the company, and scepticism about corporate intentions and even safety, had started to dent its image, a theme we return to later (see also Phillimore and Bell 2005).

This self-consciously working class city had a population of nearly 170,000 in 2001, with Turkish and Italian communities being prominent among over one hundred nationalities. Successive generations of what were initially called “guest-workers” fuelled the growth of its chemical industry from the end of the 1950s, and one legacy has been to make Ludwigshafen one of Germany’s more cosmopolitan cities. This industry included at least half a dozen sizeable chemical or petrochemical firms at the time of our fieldwork, with several smaller ones. BASF, however, was, and is, on a scale which dwarfs everything else. Even in 2001, nearly 45,000 people were employed (by BASF or its subcontractors) on a site whose waterfront on the River Rhine extended over seven kilometers. A generation earlier that workforce would have been around 60,000. There was scarcely a household in Ludwigshafen, we were endlessly told, without a connection with BASF and the chemical industry.
A major history of BASF (published in 2004 by Cambridge, and funded by BASF itself) reflects both the corporation’s enormous prominence in Germany’s economic history, and also, as the funding suggests, its acute sense of its own prominent position in German economic and civic life (Abelshauser et al. 2004). But within this self-regarding success story the Nazi period presents predictable difficulties, for the company and also for its historians. BASF had been absorbed into – indeed was a driving force behind – IG Farben, the conglomerate formed after the integration of all Germany’s major chemical companies in 1925, which lasted into and through the Nazi period. The name of BASF was not restored until after IG Farben was dismantled following the Second World War. Ludwigshafen and its IG Farben sites received some of the most intensive bombing of the war, especially from 1942 onwards. Although the effectiveness of the bombing has been questioned (Abelshauser 1983; Stokes 1991), by early 1945 productive capacity was minimal (Stokes 2004: 315-21, 336). There is conflicting evidence about the size of the workforce engaged in restarting production, under American control, immediately after the end of the war; however, within one year (1946) the workforce in Ludwigshafen exceeded 20,000 once again, and approached 27,000 by the time BASF was re-founded in 1952 – an astonishing post-war turnaround (Stokes 2004: 355-6).

The vitality of the Ludwigshafen operation, reestablishing itself so rapidly after 1945, is part of the ‘story’ we present in the penultimate section. Through the 1950s and 1960s, the re-formed BASF employed increasing numbers as expansion fostered the years of the “economic miracle”, and over the period 1951-1971 real wages in BASF tripled (Abelshauser 2004: 415). At this point it is worth situating these decades in the wider context of subsequent popular recollection and reflection in what was West Germany. The later nostalgic attachment there to the 1950s and 1960s had to do both with what came before as
well as what came after. Betts (2003: 184), for example, adduces “a slew of testimonies about the 1950s that patently mixed memory and desire” during the 1970s and 1980s, in which the leitmotif of the period depicted social harmony built upon collective effort and domesticity (also Behrenbeck 2003; Stokes 1991). This was indeed a “safe” past to be nostalgic about, the first such period of the post-war era, allowing for celebration of a society and economy rebuilt after the years of unrelieved destruction. Not only did subsequent memory of the “economic miracle” help supplant the trauma of their country’s utter destruction, symbolized in the ambiguous image of *Stunde Null*, or “Zero Hour”;³ it also pushed aside the even larger questions posed by the national injunction to come to terms with the implications of the war itself.⁴ As Eghigian notes, “West Germany’s ‘miraculous’ economic recovery of the 1950s and 1960s” helped to distance its people “from the pain and suffering of previous decades” (2003: 32).

**“It stank so badly”: pollution in the past**

We turn now to our own data. Comparisons between industrial past and present were common in our conversations or interviews with Ludwigshafeners, as in the following light-hearted remark by a man who was himself a manager in the chemical industry:

“I drove here with my parents sometimes [as a child], and you could already smell and see Ludwigshafen before you got there. It was like a big yellow bell and it stank. And at the entrance, where you come into the city, there used to be a sign which read: ‘Your shopping destination’. That was their try at pulling people away from Mannheim. It didn’t work though. Every time we drove past it my dad said, ‘your
smelly shopping destination Ludwigshafen’ (*ihr stinkendes Einkaufziel Ludwigshafen*). That was thirty years ago… My uncle always said that a person could develop their film at BASF’s waste pipe – that was in the ‘60s or ‘70s.”

To judge by such remarks, Ludwigshafeners old enough to remember thirty years ago or more acknowledge that the chemical industry is now far cleaner than it used to be. Another individual, employed as a federal environmental regulator, made a comparison with polluting industries in the former East Germany:

“You can imagine it being like it was in the East before reunification, let’s say, that’s how you have to imagine it was in Ludwigshafen. Everything was black. Even my grandmother spoke of how everything was black.”

In the same vein, a retired BASF employee, in speaking of improvements to water quality as much as air “around the ‘60s and ‘70s” highlighted how hard it could be to sleep in summer with the smell:

“There were times when we would wake up in the middle of the night, I always had a window open, it was summer and it stank so badly, that you couldn't sleep at night any more. It was a horrible combination of smells – hydrocarbon, carbon monoxide and God knows what else – it was dreadful, the whole lot smelled like rotten eggs.”

One recollection harked back to the late 1950s: another retired BASF employee, he was not the only person to mention the multi-coloured effluents polluting the Rhine, and how “impressive” had been the clean-up over the decades since then:
“I can give an example, which I experienced one day while I was walking along the Rhine in 1958. Out of the pipes… was red, green, and yellow water pouring into the Rhine. Bright red, very green, very yellow, and a little bit further away then back to really blue. You don’t see that these days any more. It’s an impressive sight now. And the stink has become less as well.”

These graphic quotes were told expressly to show us that air and water pollution was nothing like it had been thirty or forty years previously. Few lamented the pollution that the city once had to contend with; but the importance of these comments lay in pointing out the challenging character of those earlier times. Our research may have focused upon possible current risks associated with living alongside such a vast chemical complex, but in exploring this topic we were constantly reminded by those with longer memories that daily pollution had declined steeply since the 1960s and 1970s. Such remarks also belonged within an often-repeated narrative which harked back even further, to the period when BASF and the city’s chemical industry was rebuilt after the Second World War. The scale of the post-war achievement, and the labor and skill that went into it, was a source of immense pride across a couple of generations (i.e. Ingold 2000; for certain parallels in Nowa Huta, Poland, see Pozniak 2013). This attitude was epitomized in the remark at the head of this article, that “the Ludwigshafener suckled chemicals with their mother's milk”. The reference here was not sarcastic – to lives contaminated by toxins – but instead a powerful image of chemicals almost as vital substance: a part of the very constitution of the person for those immersed – by birth or adoption – in the city’s defining industry.
Reducing pollution and making chemical production cleaner, from the 1970s on, was a later part of the same narrative, linked to the earlier post-war years as stages in a cumulative achievement. The same story was retold by older residents, BASF employees, management and unions alike, local government officials, regulatory officials, and staff on the local newspaper. There were also echoes of the ubiquitous remarks quoted above within the BASF archives, as reported by Abelshauser. These were particularly evident around the time that the first concerns about environmental pollution were gaining momentum. Abelshauser refers to Minutes of the managing board meeting (5 August 1963) noting that emissions into the air “could be seen far and wide” (2004: 510). The stirrings of public concern about the effects of pollution could produce angry as well as defensive responses from the company, as is suggested when Abelshauser notes that “in the company’s eyes the public discussion of wastewater was culminating in ‘outrageous reproaches against industry.’ Laborious countermeasures through the media offered the only defense” (2004: 507). Abelshauser also records a quite different indication of political sensitivity concerning pollution and risk, when in the early 1960s the Federal Ministry of the Interior wanted “to prohibit flights through the air space over the works, but in Ludwigshafen it was considered ‘unwise’ to ‘call attention to itself in this context’” (Minutes of managing board meeting 16 March 1964) (2004: 511).

One facet of Ludwigshafeners’ pride in their industry’s achievement stemmed from its enormous scale. The gigantism of BASF was itself a token of status, reflected in the comment by one man that “somehow, as a small man, you were taking part in something enormous”. Rarely was the vast scale of BASF’s Ludwigshafen operations seen as a problem, although one environmental regulator we interviewed was in part reflecting on the problems of the industry’s size in acknowledging that “nowhere is it [industry] quite so incredibly concentrated as it is here in Ludwigshafen”. The scale of the chemical industry
signified recognition for a city which otherwise felt itself in the shadow of more famous neighbors, Mannheim and Heidelberg. Almost everything about BASF was spoken of in terms which stressed its abnormal scale – including its apparently renowned wine cellar, which was mentioned surprisingly often as indicative of the company’s prestige and largesse. Even its most tragic accident was on a gigantic scale, an explosion which killed over 550 in 1921 and whose blast was heard as far away as Munich (Johnson 2004: 195).

Selective nostalgia

This may not appear the most promising setting in which to trace an undercurrent of nostalgia, for as we have seen the dominant attitude in Ludwigshafen was a fairly strident assertion of the city’s pride in its foremost company. Yet, as we mentioned above, alongside this celebratory story, though much less trumpeted, we heard also a more ambivalent attitude towards BASF, one in which the time of the (West) German “economic miracle” was used as a key motif. Crucial here has been the shift in BASF’s standing in its home town, and the loss of some of its long-held luster as the epitome of the good corporate employer. Various factors were interwoven in the following assessment by a lifelong Ludwigshafener and journalist, including a perceived change in the tacit social contract between company and city (explored more in Phillimore and Bell 2005):

“It's changed a bit… the attitude towards BASF. I can still remember – my grandfather worked at BASF, my father was there, I was also there for over 12 years – and it was always that Ludwigshafeners identified themselves with ‘their’ BASF… ‘make sure that you get into BASF, you'll be secure there, have a good job, a good
wage, nothing will ever happen’. It was almost like being in the city administration somehow, a civil servant. And that’s changed. BASF has massively reduced their personnel in the last ten, fifteen years… They don't talk as highly of BASF anymore… the management is changed every few years and then it's people who have nothing to do with Ludwigshafen.”

Similarly, a woman whose family was steeped in BASF reflected on the jobs which the company had cut in the years since her husband had died. Her husband had been a true BASF loyalist, and had been shocked when his son had decided to leave the company – unthinkable for his own generation:

“That was our factory… And when my son left, it was terrible for my husband, terrible…I often think, if he came back today and saw everything, that BASF had let over 10,000 people go, what would he say?... It was his Anilin.”

One facet of this recent disillusionment and sense of insecurity about BASF’s “loyalty” to its birthplace has been an accentuated wistfulness among older people for a time when BASF’s loyalty to Ludwigshafen was conceived as beyond question. The 1950s and 1960s, the “golden years”, provided the benchmark here. Yet a few of those we interviewed also harked back even earlier, to recall “lessons” about the relationship between company and workforce from the very earliest days after the war. Here the terms of loyalty were reversed: it was BASF, we were told, which depended for its very survival on the loyalty and commitment of its workforce. One elderly retired employee, who started work for the company in 1945, summed up his personal history like this:
“After the war I helped to rebuild... That is why I am saying, the top 10,000 [i.e. management and the non-manual workforce] do not know at all what it means, 12 hours night work and 12 hours a day. And what the circumstances were. If I think about it, 1945 BASF was a poor company, a poor works…. the workers at BASF nourished the factory with their strength. What we accomplished during those 12 hours, under terrible, bad conditions.”

Another, a former BASF Trade Union official, drew our attention to a crucial moment in 1947 when the workforce (in what was still at that point IG Farben) came out on strike in support of the works director facing trial at Nuremberg for war crimes:

“Conditions were also different after the war. I mean, you simply ought to know that the workers at BASF prevented BASF from being dismantled by going out on strike. The workers at BASF removed the then head of BASF from the Nuremberg war crimes trials...Times were different.”

These two comments, by some of the oldest individuals we interviewed, convey a great deal. Here is the almost visceral sense that the social contract between company and city was no ordinary one, but had been forged in that most critical moment of crisis and national limbo, with the workforce cast not so much as beneficiaries of the company but as its midwife. Here also the watershed of the post-war rebuilding is underlined – the sense of 1945 as the starting point of a wholly new phase of history. None of our interviews touched on the Nazi years: personal histories and memories that our interviewees were willing to share might, in a few instances, begin in 1945, but significantly none started earlier. We heard about the rubble of 1945, and occasionally that Ludwigshafen had been heavily bombed. Yet we never heard
about the social relations of those years, with not a word, for example, about the forced labour employed in the chemical industry in large numbers. There are a number of reasons why this might be the case, including the history of post-war migration which we discuss below. But both the silence concerning the one time, and the celebration of the other, tell a powerful story. Sociologically it is important that the rebuilding of BASF, to “nourish” “our Anilin”, made possible a powerful remembered sense of agency in later years, as well as affirming the values idealised in that agency – of remaking nation, civic sphere, and society. As those involved saw it, exemplified in the two remarks above, without their efforts, individual and collective, there would have been no revival of BASF; success was not preordained. Such a period of profound and shared adversity, mutually overcome, enabled the public celebration of their skill, energy and solidarity. At the same time, such affirmation helped to divert attention from the acutely difficult moral accounting surrounding BASF/IG Farben’s work in wartime Ludwigshafen, and got sidestepped in the shared narratives of the city’s older residents.¹⁰

These remarks also bear intriguingly on an argument advanced by the historian Jonathan Wiesen. He argues that far from simply being silent on the Nazi legacy, West German business elites after the war made strenuous public relations efforts at “damage control”: “industrial ‘memory’ was fundamentally a public relations exercise, which relied on the repetition of a few basic motifs” (Wiesen 1996: 205; 2000: 350). While our two informants may not have been immune to BASF’s highly effective corporate public relations, they certainly chose to emphasise a viewpoint which cast the workforce, not the board and its public relations “spin”, as the agents of BASF’s renewal.
The immediate post-war decades of rebuilding and economic success therefore functions as a reference point against both the periods before and after. Shifting our attention back to the period since the later 1960s, we suggest that there is also a racialized demographic dimension to this nostalgic focus on the period of post-war rebuilding. BASF in many ways stands as a symbol of continuity in the city, spanning its entire history. Accounts which tell of successive generations of the same family working in BASF, or in the chemical industry more generally, unconsciously reassert the synchronisation of familial and corporate continuity. Yet this sought after continuity obscures a very different picture of the city’s history: for Ludwigshafen has always been a city of migrants (Zimmer 2013). The city experienced profound population upheaval in the Second World War with an influx of enforced or slave labour to service the industrial war effort. After 1945, rapidly expanding employment at BASF in particular made the city attractive for Germans displaced from further east, or released from capture (Abelshauser 2004). Indeed BASF’s willingness to employ or re-employ former prisoners of war released by the USSR was one of the many ways in which the company was seen as the proverbial “good employer”. From around the mid-1960s, there started a new phase, with the introduction of Gastarbeiter foreign labour recruitment. Initially Italian, and then, in larger numbers, Turkish migrants came, to be followed by many more from different national backgrounds as well. The past seventy years have thus witnessed perpetual population movement. This constant flux makes for an important but often unacknowledged demographic counter-current to the rhetoric of continuity which has been a staple of the city’s political culture. What is also significant about the post-war period until the 1960s was that this was the last time that Ludwigshafen was almost exclusively German, not the magnet for Ausländer that it later became. Thus the highly selective nostalgia of older Ludwigshafen residents harks back also to a time when their city was quite simply more “German” than it is today.11
Discussion

“Ludwigshafen is an industrial city with little culture, I’ll say now… A person would surely never drive to Ludwigshafen to have a nice weekend. Ludwigshafen is an industrial city which has done a lot in the past, where a person has to seek out its secrets” (a senior local government official).

In exploring local evaluations of the “riskiness” of living and working in Ludwigshafen at the beginning of the present century we were led by our informants to look back to earlier decades, to consider the ways in which older Ludwighafeners evaluated the present against their past. 12 Behind the façade of sometimes assertive pride in the achievements of “their” chemical industry and “their” BASF, we glimpsed a less confident city. 13 Among this older generation, this often took the form of nostalgic comparison with one period of the post-war past, when confidence in the chemical industry and BASF was portrayed as easier and life more secure. This celebration of the so-called golden years of the “German economic miracle”, the 1950s and 1960s, was despite a level of air and water pollution in Ludwigshafen at the time which was remembered later with awe. Indeed, the pollution of the period was part of what made that time memorable, reflected in such comments as the one with which this paper starts. But if the scale of the pollution was later construed as defining of the city, it was because of its association with the rebuilding of the chemical industry after 1945. A polluted city was the price of economic success, which in turn was portrayed as in large measure the achievement of the workforce in “rescuing” BASF and breathing life into it through their own efforts. It is easy to see the subsequent potency of the imagery of a
phoenix rising from the ashes for the generation who recalled that phase of the post-war era. What was equally noteworthy was the absence of comment on the period before recovery: the stories we heard invariably started in 1945 at war’s end. There may be every reason why this should be so: the post-1945 workforce of Ludwigshafen’s chemical industry would have had little continuity with the wartime workforce. Nonetheless, the ambiguous connotations of Stunde Null in (West) Germany generally, as both starting point and erasure of what had gone before, are discernible in the accounts we heard.¹⁴

We should consider at this point whether it is in any way surprising that a predominantly working class city should wear its industry’s pollution as more badge of honor than discrediting stigma. As the city’s few environmental activists wryly observed, a city like Ludwigshafen was not the place one would expect to find a strong “green” challenge to the chemical industry, still less echoes of Beck’s “risk society” critique. Jobs and job security trumped other concerns (Griesshammer 1993). Nonetheless, as we noted elsewhere, it was sometimes suggested that Ludwigshafen was unusual even among German chemical centers in the degree to which pollution was tolerated (Phillimore and Bell 2005: 311-2), and a common refrain was that Ludwigshafen was quite simply like no other city in Germany (in its identification with its industry).¹⁵

Tim Ingold’s (2000) conception of the cities and landscapes we inhabit as “taskscapes”, created through human skill, helps us recognize the significance of this mix of pride and nostalgia in Ludwigshafen – a vast industrial taskscape if ever there was one. Ingold qualifies Marx’s analysis of alienated labor by insisting on the importance of skill in the performance of tasks as a means to counter the subjective sense of being merely a unit of labor in a system of industrial production (Ingold 2000: 331-2). Much of the celebratory
rhetoric about their work and their company, internalized by older women as well as men in Ludwigshafen, can easily sound like implausible corporate loyalty towards BASF, and it is certainly the case that BASF could scarcely have wished for a city and workforce which identified itself more with its main company. Yet is it enough to see this loyalty simply as the “manufacturing of consent”, to use the title of Michael Burawoy’s classic monograph (1979)? We suggest that Ingold’s emphasis on skill helps us to understand better how older BASFlers saw themselves – a vital starting point for any ethnography. For the caliber of their skill, and the systems they created, was central to the self-affirming rhetoric of this older generation in Ludwigshafen. Indeed some of the fiercest criticisms of BASF at the time of fieldwork were about fears that a tradition of skill and training was being jeopardized through increasing outsourcing. Furthermore, alongside the centrality of skill, Ingold also emphasizes the importance of temporality, for his phenomenological conception of a taskscape requires recognition of the ways in which the present contains the past, with the social relations of the present emergent from the social relations of the past.

It is precisely at this point, however, that Tim Edensor complements Ingold. Edensor, in a series of articles (2005, 2008, 2012), has written of the “multiple absences” and the “haunted” quality of memory and history in what he calls “excessive spaces” or sites, drawing particularly on de Certeau. Urban and industrial settings, and their presences and absences, figure prominently in his writing. On the face of it, the affective power of ghostly presences in industrial ruins might seem a less than apt parallel given the vitality of the city’s chemical industry. However, Ludwigshafen does indeed have its ghosts, as the reference to secrets in the remark at the head of this section implies, and as our earlier discussion of the watershed of 1945 and Stunde Null also implies. Ingold’s sense of past woven into present, which frames well the connecting thread between the present and the era of the post-war
rebuilding, comes up against the barrier of *Stunde Null*, and a past resistant to incorporation. Edensor reminds us instead of what is not spoken about. We might contrast the complementary insights of Ingold and Edensor in a different way, drawing on the politics of recognition. While Ingold’s taskscape conceptually highlights the “recognition” given to the 1950s and 1960s through the self-affirming stories of older generations, Edensor’s exploration of absent presences and haunting is a reminder of what receives minimal “recognition” in residents’ narratives of the city’s past.¹⁶

Despite the extent of the literature on Germany and its sites or sources of nostalgia, little of it (in English) relates to the sort of industrial history we discuss here. Conversely, the literature on industry and nostalgia from other countries (for example the UK) does not have the added complexity of the negotiation of the Nazi past and its toxicity as a source for nostalgia. Writing on nostalgia in the context of Berlin, for example, has highlighted the multiplicity of sites which carry or evoke different pasts (Boym 2001; Huyssen 2003). Yet this writing serves to emphasize some of the features that Ludwigshafen lacks. Ludwigshafen has no site of public memory of the chemical past, whether self-consciously commemorative, such as a museum, or public spaces associated with significant or contentious events. It would be hard to say that anything to do with the chemical industry is commemorated in Ludwigshafen, unless the visibility of the crater marking the Oppau explosion of 1921 might be described as such. There is nothing to mark anything since then. We may counter by asking why indeed there should be any such site, for the chemical industry remains such a powerful presence in Ludwigshafen that the grounds for nostalgic retrospect scarcely obtain. Yet, as this article has sought to show, the celebratory attitude of older Ludwigshafeners about BASF and “suckling chemicals with their mother’s milk” is grounded in shared memory of post-war
adversity and achievement, and the growing anxieties about the future at the time of our fieldwork only served to accentuate nostalgia for that era.

Notes

1. This study was one of two undertaken in parallel (the other being in Grangemouth, Scotland). The comparative aim was to examine whether and how the broad generalisations of Ulrich Beck’s “risk society” (Beck 1992) thesis might be manifested in two industrial settings – one in Germany, one in the UK – selected as places where his arguments concerning risk, time, insecurity and expertise might be thought to have potential relevance, given the character of the industry. Neither setting was selected because of any on-going political-environmental controversy that we knew about beforehand. Both studies involved fieldwork lasting 13 months (August 2001 to September 2002). As part of fieldwork, Patricia Bell interviewed over 80 individuals in Ludwigshafen. We have discussed methods and approach across the two settings in an earlier article (Phillimore et al. 2007: 74-5). Phillimore and Bell (2005) focus on the relationship of risk and trust in Ludwigshafen; while Schlüter and Phillimore (2005) analyse disputes around safety in Grangemouth. Although interviews with those of working age included management and “blue-collar” workers, most managers did not live in Ludwigshafen and commuted. Interviews with those who were older and had retired were nearly all, in consequence, with those who had been blue-collar workers.

2. As late as 1960, the proportion of “non-German” residents in Ludwigshafen was c.1%. With the Gastarbeiter (“guest-worker”) system, the proportion of residents classed
officially as “non-German” rose steadily, from 7% in 1967 to 22% in 1998 (Stadt Ludwigshafen 2002). In 2003, one fifth of the population of Ludwigshafen was classed as non-German (or Ausländer), with residents of 140 nationalities (PB’s personal correspondence with Statistikstelle Stadtverwaltung Ludwigshafen). Both in interviews specifically and in the fieldwork more generally, we sought to reflect Ludwigshafen’s demographic composition. Thus, of nearly 80 interviews, 12 were with “non-Germans”, including five with Turkish and four with Italian backgrounds. All had been living in Ludwigshafen for a good many years. Of these twelve, one was retired from, and four were currently working in, the chemical industry. The distinctive experiences of those who migrated in the 1960s from Italy or Turkey are beyond the scope of this article, and arguably less relevant to our focus extending back before the 1960s, to the immediate post-war decade, before the arrival of the “guest-workers”.

3. Ambiguous because Stunde Null also connoted a ‘clean slate’, both end and beginning. The idea of a new beginning conveniently erased allusion to the past (Betts and Eghigian 2003; Hoffmann 1992).

4. See Moeller (1996) on “the search for a usable past” in West Germany after the war, and Heineman (1996) on “the hour of the woman” in the same period. Both suggest a tendency in that immediate post-war period for (West) Germans to portray themselves as Hitler’s victims also, just as much as those of other nations or the Jews. This last point is widely mentioned (i.e. Hoffmann 1992; Wiesen 1996).

5. Abelshauser is quoting from Minutes of the managing board meeting, 6 February 1961.
6. The relationship between the three centres making up the Rhein-Neckar conurbation was epitomised in a class-laden aphorism casting Heidelberg as the head, Mannheim as the heart, and Ludwigshafen as the legs of the common body.

7. BASF stands for Badische Anilin und Soda-Fabrik AG, and the company was often affectionately termed “our Anilin”, with its lifelong employees “Aniliner”. Stokes states: “BASF…profited from a skilled core workforce whose members, seeing themselves as ‘Aniliners’, increasingly identified with the company” (2004: 409-10).

8. Stokes refers to “an unprecedented sense of solidarity among employers and employees, who were united against the occupiers [Ludwigshafen was in the French zone]… This solidarity extended to other areas as well. For instance, the BASF workers laid down their tools for an hour on August 20, 1947 in protest against the trial of their works director, Carl Wurster, in Nuremberg” (2004: 357; parentheses added).

9. One wartime legacy was soil contamination caused by the bombing. A city politician commented: “Everything you do in Ludwigshafen is always hindered by soil contamination. It doesn't matter where you dig something up in Ludwigshafen, you'll almost always come across soil contamination. It has to do with the fact that it was so heavily bombed, a lot of things leaked out of the chemical plants back then, but all of the bomb holes were filled with some kind of waste too.”

10. One issue discussed by Stokes is the role of the Ludwigshafen plants concerning Auschwitz and the linked Monowitz site. He writes: “The Upper Rhine group was not directly responsible for the IG’s activities at Auschwitz... But the main technologies
deployed, the design of the plant, and the personnel who undertook the planning, construction, and management of the facility stemmed almost exclusively from Ludwigshafen, Oppau and Leuna” (2004: 331).

11. Another response by some residents to questions we posed concerning environmental risks from the chemical industry was to point us instead towards problems the city faced with recycling. This in turn led to racialization of the topic, for the intention here was typically to question how committed the Ausländer population was to “German” recycling standards. The term Müllsünder (combining Müller [garbage] with Sünden [sinner]) had gained currency to stigmatise “the Other” (typically Turkish) in this context. Linke discusses similarly revealing rhetorical uses of “garbage” imagery (Linke 1999: 177, more generally 170-183).

12. A referee posed the question of whether the same nostalgia persists a decade after our research. That is hard for us to answer. However, fewer now survive of the generation which worked in the “boom years”, with all that entailed in terms of BASF’s social programmes. One senior civil servant in Ludwigshafen recently spoke to PB of what the loss of that generation meant for the city’s social memory.

13. There are of course methodological challenges in reading the mood of a city, and seeking to distinguish the particular preoccupations of different sections of its population. These difficulties are accentuated when considering topics which are skirted around, even if not evaded directly.
14. There is an important gendered story to note here. It seems significant in hindsight that we heard nothing about the “women of the rubble” (*Trümmerfrau*). This term ostensibly celebrated the prominent role women played in clearing the rubble – Heineman calls it “the central symbol of the era” which “entered popular iconography” and “came to personify West Germany’s reconstruction” (1996: 375, 377, 378). The 1950s gradually froze this image, however: women’s centrality to the workforce at that historical moment met the re-masculinization of work in the 1950s, and a briefly assertive image got recast as a “safe” heritage motif. Presumably the “women of the rubble” would have been integral to Ludwigshafen’s revival. Equally, the macho masculinity of work in the chemical industry, constantly asserted, would perhaps explain why a time when men were less visible than women was never recalled in our interviews – even by women themselves.

15. We were reminded occasionally that those who could not reconcile themselves to living in Ludwigshafen would have moved away, in the process removing potential environmentalist critics.

16. The same duality is evident in Luisa Passerini’s *Fascism in popular memory* (1987), a study of Turin’s working class based on life-story interviews. There is the same recognition of skill, in its many forms, as a source of class pride. There is the same reluctance to speak of the “hauntings” of the fascist past and its implications. Yet only up to a point. For Passerini’s interviewees did talk about everyday life under fascism, casting themselves even as agents navigating a difficult period – at the same time avoiding all but glancing reference to the hardest and most painful experiences. Edensor’s emphasis on absences and silences also approaches by a different route an
issue Boyer (2006) raises in coining the notion of a repressed “Westalgie” as a counter to the emphasis on Ostalgie.

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