In 1989, only two years after blowing out the blast furnaces, Henrichshütte Ironworks was incorporated into the LWL-Industrial Museum, Westphalian State Museum of Industrial Heritage. Since that time, oral history has been formative in developing the site into a museum of life and work in the shadows of the blast furnaces. Interviews did not only have an important impact on the permanent exhibition from the beginning, they also offered a wide range of perspectives for future research. Apart from covering the stories of work, they also addressed the individual and collective ways of coming to terms with the story of industrial decline and structural change, from the point in time when the loss of work was a fresh experience to a more distanced, post-industrial narrative. From this perspective, the oral history material related to the Henrichshütte – and the general interview archive of all sites at the decentralised LWL-Industrial Museum – might offer a wide field of further future interdisciplinary and transnational research.

The LWL-Industrial Museum

The deep structural transformation in Western European heavy industries after 1945 gave rise to a new idea of industrial heritage. Exploring the remains of the industrial age, with its forgotten mills, closed mines and cold ironworks, was no longer restricted to a classic history of technology as a narrative of engineers, innovation and company history. Rather, the story of the common worker and daily work and life did not only come into researchers’ focus, but established a new kind of museums, which paid attention to the objects of the industrial era. The history of the LWL-Industriemuseum, Westphalian State Museum of Industrial Heritage, reflects this development and exemplifies the importance of oral history for the museum’s approach to social history.

In the Ruhr area, the increasingly severe coal crisis of the 1960s resulted in a deep regional change. The widespread demolition of mines in the industrial heartland of Western Germany became a major economic issue and social challenge. Vanishing pitheads left open spaces not only in the urban landscape. It became rather obvious that these mere technical constructions had an enormous significance as social reference points for the people, their work, biography and identity. The same effect could be recognised in the whole state of North Rhine-Westphalia. The Westphalia-Lippe regional authority (Landschaftsverband Westfalen-Lippe/LWL) responded to this