

5.3 TOOLS

In order to research history, you need to equip yourself with a wide range of tools and a preparedness to use them each time you run into new challenges. If any of you is interested in medicine, you might compare it to getting to a particularly hidden area of the body that needs operating. To operate, you need many different tools and techniques, and the knowledge of when to apply them.

Before I set out to do this work I had some training in my back pocket. It was useful that I had done a Master's degree in International Affairs and always had a strong interest in history. One of my professors from that time wrote me letters of recommendation to research institutions so that they would help me, assuring them that I had the good sense to deal with whatever information I might find wisely, since I was trained.

Dealing with the information also meant recognizing that no matter how well trained you are, there will always be experts who know more than you do about a specific topic. Part of the challenge of doing historical research is not being shy about asking questions. Many times, particularly in the early stages of my journey, I wondered whether anyone would take my inquiries seriously. I learned that one should never think this way. We only increase our knowledge and get closer to the truth if we are all prepared to pitch in, collaborate and share. As it turns out, a number of professional historians found my research useful. They thought it contributed something new, so never underestimate the contribution you can make if you set your mind and heart to history.

Along the way, I met people who were very committed to the study of Nazi Germany, World War II and the Holocaust, and to opening up new information and ways of seeing a period of history about which

you would imagine almost everything has been said and written. For example, I had the pleasure of listening to an American historian (Tim Snyder), who had learned over ten different languages in order to carry out his research concerning the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. There is so much about the Holocaust we can never understand unless we are able to read the different languages in which those experiences are recorded. Imagine how much we miss by only being able to read in one language! I was greatly helped by having fluent German, but what might I have gained by having Polish and Portuguese too?

Finally, identifying not only conclusions, but also remaining and new questions is an essential part of approaching historical research.

- 5.3.1 What tools were used in *The Pendulum* to research family history? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each of these tools?
- 5.3.2 The identity of Baron von der Kleist presents a challenge in the work. Discuss and review the approach to this part of the research.
- 5.3.3 What historical questions remain open or unanswered in *The Pendulum*?
- 5.3.4 What are the potential consequences of language barriers in research, and how can our awareness of them impact the quality of our research?