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A Visible Sign with a “Quiet Gesture”? The Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation in Berlin  
*Vidni znak s »tiho gesto«? Dokumentacijski center za razseljenost, izgon in spravo v Berlinu*

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*Abstract*

Starting from the analysis of the permanent exhibition of the newly opened Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation, this paper sets out to understand to what extent the Documentation Centre succeeds in offering a new approach to the place of remembrance “Flight and Expulsion of the Germans”, within the federal German museum landscape and in the museum landscape around flight and expulsion of Germans. Finally, I suggest that the diverse and contradictory expectations placed on the Documentation Centre results in a permanent exhibition that meets the wishes of the memory milieu (expellees and their descendants) to address their suffering and responds to the government’s mandate to anchor the topic in the centre of society (also outside the memory milieu) and to create a space of reconciliation, between memorial, museum, archive, and meeting place; although at the expense of understanding the specificity of the flight and expulsion processes.

*Keywords:* Germany, forced migrations, violence, memory, exhibition

*Izvleček:*

Izhajajoč iz analize stalne razstave novoodprtega Dokumentacijskega centra za razseljevanje, izgon, spravo si v prispevku prizadevam osvetliti, v kolikšni meri ta nova institucija uspe ponuditi nov pristop h kraju spomiña na »beg in izgon Nemcev« v kontekstu nemških zveznih muzejev ter muzejev, posvečenih begu in izgonu Nemcev. V sklepu ugotovim, da raznolika in protislovna pričakovanja Dokumentacijskega centra rezultirajo v stalni razstavi, ki izpolnjuje želje spominskega miljeja (izgnancev in njihovih potomcev), saj naslavlja njihovo trpljenje in se odziva na nalogo vlade, da temo zasidra v središču družbe (tudi zunaj spominskega miljeja). Na ta način se oblikuje prostor sprave, ki je hkrati spomenik, muzej, arhiv in kraj srečevanja, čeprav to doseže na račun razumevanja specifičnosti procesov bega in izgona.

*Ključne besede:* Nemčija, prisilne migracije, nasilje, spomin, razstava

On 21 June 2021, the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation (*Dokumentationszentrum, Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung*) was ceremoniously opened in Berlin. That this was out of the ordinary was shown by the prominent lineup at the opening ceremony: despite Coronavirus, the ambassadors of Germany's neighbouring countries to the East, the Federal President Joachim Gauck, members of parliament, the Chairman of the Federation of Expellees (*Bund der Vertriebenen - BdV*), Bernd Fabritius, and the Minister of State for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, (CDU) were present and Chancellor Merkel also joined in online.<sup>1</sup>

But it was not only the guest list that reflected the special nature of the occasion; the long and controversial history of the founding of this institution that preceded this opening also made this event special. Minister of State for Culture and the Media, Grütters, recalled in her speech:

For many years, there were struggles and sometimes bitter disputes about an appropriate form of remembrance, not least between the political camps. And that is why today I am filled with gratitude on today's opening day, that, as the saying goes, a visible sign against flight and expulsion has been set, for which the aged victims and their descendants [...] have waited so long. [Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung 2021]

And she also underlines its necessity:

With today's opening of the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion and Reconciliation, Germany is facing up to a historical truth that I believe has long been too little recognised: the immeasurable and millionfold suffering as a result of flight and expulsion in and after the Second World War unleashed by Germany. It is a truth that is unwieldy and politically uncomfortable and that for a long time had no place in col-

<sup>1</sup> The inauguration took place during the pandemic at a time when meetings were only authorised in very small numbers. The video was live-streamed the same day.

lective memory and remembrance. [Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung 2021]

A little later, Chancellor Merkel, in her address announced: "Today's opening of the Documentation Centre marks a new chapter in our politics of remembrance" (Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung 2021).

On the basis of these assertive statements by politicians, and from a political science point of view, I would like to devote this article to the question of the extent to which the newly established Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation actually offers a new approach to the site of remembrance (*lieu de mémoire*) "Flight and Expulsion of the Germans" (*Flucht und Vertreibung der Deutschen*), as announced by Chancellor Merkel, and link this to the politically charged and sensitive question: how to remember and exhibit negativity (violence and "immeasurable and millionfold suffering" – as mentioned by Ms Grütters)? Is it possible to remember the suffering experienced by displaced persons without having to fear feeding the spiral of violence that is already a feature of population transfers? Would not forgetting be more appropriate to break the role reversal between victims and perpetrators that marks the history of forced migration (Gerlach 2011; Schwartz 2013, 637–638; Gross 2022)? How to tackle the question of violence, especially since the legality of the expulsions remains unresolved to this day (Schwartz 2013, 624)?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Flucht und Vertreibung* (Flight and Expulsion) is an established formula that refers primarily to a traumatising historical event, when millions of Germans were forced to leave their homelands in the East at the end of WWII (to keep it as general as possible). But the expression also entails in a more metaphorical way a spatial dimension (Lotz 2007, 2) and refers implicitly to the lost homelands in the East and in doing so, to the territorial but also to the cultural losses. It is at once a reference to an event and to a space.

<sup>3</sup> In his conclusion, Michael Schwartz (2013, 624) remarks, "the legality of the expulsion of the Germans in 1945 remains an unresolved issue to this day". He also points at "the ambiguous position of international law with regard to 'population transfers' as the *ultima ratio* in cases of intractable conflicts". He highlights the contradictions of attitudes towards forced migrations yesterday and today, but also the fact that forced migrations do not necessarily al-

Historically, forced migrations such as the German “flight and expulsion” belong both to the history of migration (population movements) and to the history of mass violence.<sup>4</sup> They are also characterised by their proximity to genocide from which, however, they are categorically to be differentiated (Mann 2005, 7–8; Ther 2011; 8–9, Schwartz 2013, 2–3; Bazin Peron 2018, 17–18). These three thematic complexes which all (have) produced negativity, albeit to a different extent, are thematised in different institutions whose histories, aims and exhibition practices differ from one another: monuments and memorials, contemporary history museums, local and regional history or ethnographic museums, documentation, or memorial sites, etc. All follow the same functions which are conventionally patrimonialisation and identity building (Poulot 2009, 4) but also political and historical education, democratic self-assurance, acknowledging crimes, fighting against oblivion, repression, and trivialisation and, finally, honouring the victims (Wagner 2022, 12). However, they weight them differently and have different ways of handling the relations between negativity, remembrance, and knowledge, proposing different answers to the questions formulated by Sophie Wahnich: “what traces does (this) negativity leave that could find a place in a museum?” “How can they [those traces] be treated?” and “What do they imply in terms of the process of recognition?” (Wahnich 2017, 119).

ways originate from autocratic regimes and their dictatorial leaders, but must be understood as a phenomenon of modernity and are not alien even to democracies, that the flight and expulsion of the Germans cannot be explained without Nazi rule and violence, but that there were also other reasons that went further back in time. He underlines the importance of the economic redistribution and also the interaction and entanglement of different deportations.

4 Christian Gerlach defines mass violence as “widespread physical violence against non-combatants, that is outside of immediate fighting between military or paramilitary personnel. Mass violence includes killings, but also forced removal or expulsion, enforced hunger or undersupply, forced labor, collective rape, strategic bombing, and excessive imprisonment – for many strings connect these to outright murder and these should not be severed analytically” (Gerlach 2010, 1; also Semelin (2000, 143–145)).

Monuments and memorials first and foremost aim at patrimonialising the violence, mostly through an aesthetic form that thematises it in an indirect way (Koselleck 2002, 31–32), honouring the victims and maintaining both in national memory. Their mourning function takes precedence over the transmission of knowledge. For museums the weighting is the other way round. These institutions usually find it difficult to deal with negativity, which is contrary to their heritage function, generally understood to be to generating positive identification. History and ethnographic museums usually cover a longer period of time (exceeding the sole violent episode) and have a strong identity component. They primarily target knowledge and education (historical as well as political), violence being mediated through museal staging schemes and narration. Documentation centres<sup>5</sup> and memorial sites combine aspects of both; they have a salient memorial aspect, usually linked to the task of patrimonialising sites/places where (mostly Nazi) crimes have been committed, and at the same time, they aim at documenting the latter (diffusing knowledge) through the preservation of traces. Here, violence is the most unmediated.

The positioning of the Documentation Centre in this field appears to be, if not ambiguous, then at least complex. Not only does it have to position itself in relation to the numerous museum-type institutions, scattered over the whole of Germany, that already exist in the very crowded field linked to “flight and expulsion”: the hundreds of small *Heimatstuben* (Local history rooms), *Heimattmuseen* (local history museums) (Eisler 2015), and medium-size museums dedicated to the lost homelands, villages, cities and regions, the oldest of which date back

5 The term Documentation Centre is specific to the German context. It is often used for memorial sites (mostly former Nazi-concentration camps, but not only) where the history of National-Socialism is documented in an authentic place, to which elements of information and documentation are added in order to make the site decipherable for future generations.

to the 1950s,<sup>6</sup> and to the dozens of more professionalised and institutionalised “§96 regional museums”<sup>7</sup> dedicated to wider areas of expulsion (Vertreibungsgebiete) like Silesia, Eastern Prussia, and Western Prussia, and to the settlement areas of Germans from Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia, of Transylvanian Saxon, of Danube Swabian, of Russian-German, etc., which display historical, as well as cultural and ethnographic, material, that have been created or expanded in the last decades (Perron 2016). The Documentation Centre must also position itself in the more general museal and memorial landscape of the Federal republic.

The term “Documentation Centre”, which was chosen by the federal government instead of “museum” or “memorial” to name the new institution, deserves a closer look. According to the director, Gundula Bavendamm, its mandate goes well beyond creating an exhibition (Möck 2021). Thus, choosing this name is first and foremost a way to stress the educational and research goals of the institution, which is presented as “a unique place of learning and remembrance”.<sup>8</sup> Yet, this denomination has several further implications in the realm of memory politics, like the fact that it strongly echoes the neighbouring Topography of Terror Documentation Centre, (*Dokumentationszentrum Topographie des Ter-*

*rors*),<sup>9</sup> one of the most influential<sup>10</sup> memory sites linked to the Nazi Regime. In fact, in Germany this term is mainly used by institutions dedicated to the documentation of the crimes of both totalitarianism of the twentieth century on German soil, that were created in the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s, a time the exhibitions dedicated to the national-socialist past started being strongly criticised for their praxis of “reducing the NS past to fright and repugnance without knowledge basis” (Knigge 2002, 384) and where there was a wish to get rid of the heavily ideologised memorial practice of the GDR in the new Länder. At the time and based on the *Beutelsbach Consensus*<sup>11</sup> which was achieved a decade earlier in the realm of political education, there was an attempt to move away from emotionalising exhibition practices that aimed less at informing and stimulating critical thinking than at purifying German society from possible remains of national socialist ideology.

In fact, the “Documentation Centre” principle, which is born out of the museography of national socialist crimes, hints at a particular way of exhibiting violence marked by a specific equilibrium between narration and objects. It implies a specific way of conceiving the exhibitions of institutions dedicated to violent episodes, following a documentation principle (*dokumentierendes Prinzip*) (Knigge 2002, 384–387; Wagner 2022, 11–12) which has been developed in opposition to narrative presentations. If a narrative can be defined as “a chronological-semantic entity preceding the exhibits, which regulates the arrangement of the exhibits in the

6 If the form of the *Heimatstube/Heimatmuseum* dates back to the late nineteenth century, after World War II the ones dedicated to the lost homelands in the East were a new phenomenon. They were set up by the refugees and expellees (with the active support of their Homeland associations) to mourn the loss, cultivate the memory of the lost homeland, collect cultural artefacts but also everyday objects from those areas, and as a place to meet. Their collections were made of a range of disparate items, sometimes originals, often recreations recalling the flight or the expulsion (Eisler 2011).

7 Those are funded by the *Länder* and the federation by means of the §96 of the law on expellees of 1953, and often display exhibitions that are a mixture of history and ethnography. Their collections are made of historical and cultural objects and artefacts, pieces of art and ethnographic material.

8 As announced on the homepage of its website: “a unique place of learning and remembrance on displacement, expulsion and forced migrations in history and in the present” (*Dokumentationszentrum Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung* n.d.a).

9 Both memorial institutions lie a few metres away from each other in the very centre of Berlin.

10 The Topography of Terror Documentation Centre initiated what can be considered one of the most important memorial civic initiatives that took place in Berlin at the end of the 1980s. It was dedicated to securing the traces of the headquarters of the Gestapo and the SS and of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* on the area of Prinz Albrecht Strasse, where they were located. It was transformed into a site dedicated to documenting the perpetrators’ side of the national socialist terror regime (Wüstenberg 2020).

11 The main of the three points of the *Beutelsbach consensus* was “a prohibition against overwhelming the pupil” (*Landeszentrale für politische Bildung* n.d.).

sense of a meta-message” (Knigge 2002, 385), the idea behind the documentational principle is to avoid imposing such a (potentially ideologically loaded) meta-message, and more so, a judgment for the visitor, by following a “quasi forensic” approach (Wagner 2022, 11), in which objects, documents and traces are conceived of as testimonies (of the crime). This form of exhibition puts the visitors in an active position. They are offered “the possibility to form their own opinion about history by being presented with an exhibit-landscape open to multiple perspectives and as large interpretations as possible” (p. 12). The approach relies on the belief in the aura of objects which are not only treated as visual aids to illustrate the narrative, but as “documentary evidence of the criminal action” (Wagner 2022, 12; Knigge 2002, 378–379). As such they serve to prevent against negationist tendencies in society. The “documentation principle” is usually used on authentic sites of violence - like camps for example – (documenting the side of the victims) or on sites that are intimately connected to the perpetration of violence (documenting the side of the perpetrators) – like the Central commandment of the Gestapo, the SS, at the Topography of Terror Documentation Centre in Berlin. Using this denomination is thus a way to inscribe the memory of “flight and expulsion” in the nexus of the commemoration practices of genocide and mass crimes, and can also be understood as a reaction to the fact that “flight and expulsion” had been kept out of the official federal Memorial Conception (*Gedenkstättenkonzeption*)<sup>12</sup> adopted by the Bundestag in 1999 (Unter- richtung durch die Bundesregierung: Konzeption der künftigen Gedenkstättenförderung des Bundes und Bericht der Bundesregierung über die Beteiligung des Bundes an Gedenkstätten in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland) and of its Update (*Fortschreibung*) adopted in 2008 (Unter-

12 The *Gedenkstättenkonzeption* is a central document dedicated to the politics of history and memory of the unified FRG, adopted by the Bundestag in 1999, that recognised the federal responsibility for the legacies and traces of the sites of terror of the Nazi regime and the need for a federal financing of those - especially of the ones located in the former GDR.

richtung durch den Beauftragten der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien: Fortschreibung der Gedenkstättenkonzeption des Bundes; Verantwortung wahrnehmen, Aufarbeitung verstärken, Gedenken vertiefen).

As Gundula Bavendamm explains:

Well, I think we are just filling a gap on the national level, [...] until recently, [...] such a place of remembrance, whose founding idea revolved around the topic of the flight and expulsion of the Germans, did not exist. In this respect, we are definitely on the same level as the Topography of Terror, as the Memorial to the Murdered Jews, and in the future perhaps as the Exile Museum diagonally opposite to us at the Anhalter Bahnhof [...] and we see ourselves in this circle of institutions that refer in very different ways to the deep ambivalences of contemporary German history and illuminate the different aspects that are part of it. I think we can say quite confidently that this is how we were founded, that we are now part of it. And from our perspective, with our founding mission, we want to keep this topic alive. [Möck 2021]

Drawing on the reflections on the musealisation of negative pasts (Knigge 2002; Koselleck 2002; Becker and Debary 2012; Bechtel and Jurgenson 2016; Wahnich 2011; 2017; Wagner 2022), I will now examine to what extent the “documentation principle”, as described above, is appropriate for the musealisation of “flight and expulsion” and used in the new institution. In doing this I will first consider the political dimensions of the announced mode of exhibition (documenting the crime, preventing negationist tendencies and oblivion) by looking at the missions assigned to the Documentation Centre. I will then examine whether this form of exhibition is appropriate for an institution located on a site that has only a very weak direct historical connection with what it is documenting. I will thus investigate whether and with what means a public institution like the Documentation Cen-

tre exhibits the violence and suffering/negativity linked to displacement and expulsion, but also which sufferings are, or rather can be, exhibited. With what traces, respectively objects, does the exhibition work? What is the status given to the collection and the objects displayed and how do they relate to the narrative? And finally, I will question what goal a documentation centre dedicated to “flight and expulsion” of Germans can have in Germany today?

### The Mission of the Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation: Squaring the Circle

As stressed by minister Monika Grütters during the opening, the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, and Reconciliation is the result of decades of bitter disputes. The initiative goes back to the newly elected President of the Federation of expellees Erika Steinbach,<sup>13</sup> when she expressed the wish in 1999 to “create in Berlin a ‘Centre of the 15 million’”<sup>14</sup> (‘Wir brauchen in Berlin ein “Zentrum der 15 Millionen”: Ein weißer Fleck muß aufgearbeitet werden’ 1999, 5) which became one year later, on 6 September 2000, the Foundation Centre against Expulsions (*Stiftung Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen*).<sup>15</sup> In Steinbach’s opinion, “Germany need[ed ...] for this dramatic and incisive part of pan-German history a central information, documentation, archival and meeting site in Berlin, with permanent and changing exhibitions, about the way of sorrow of the 15 million victims

of expulsion” (‘Wir brauchen in Berlin ein “Zentrum der 15 Millionen”: Ein weißer Fleck muß aufgearbeitet werden’ 1999, 5).<sup>16</sup>

At the time, the initiative was welcomed by politicians first and foremost of the conservative CDU/CSU in power, but also by some SPD MPs of the Bundestag (such as Peter Glotz).<sup>17</sup> It happened against the backdrop of an increased focus on the German victims of World War II in public debates and a discourse about the lack of national recognition of their sufferings in German national memory in the media, but also among writers and essayists (Rauschenbach 2008, 180). In the context of the approaching eastern enlargement of the EU, however, the activities of Federation of expellees and its Foundation Centre against expulsions were closely followed by Germany’s eastern neighbours (the expelling countries). They soon took a highly contentious turn and started seriously threatening the government’s commitment to pacifying

13 Erika Steinbach, who was the head of the federation of expellees (*Bund der Vertriebenen – BdV*) from 1998 to 2014, was also a member of the conservative wing of the CDU (Christian Democratic Union), and an MP at the Bundestag between 1990 and 2017 when she resigned from the CDU fraction. After 2017 she did not run anymore but supported the AfD in the federal elections.

14 A provocative way of calling the BdV’s project because of the implicit reference to the six millions Jews that were killed by the Nazi (Dakowska 2003) which was soon abandoned for the more neutral Foundation Centre against Expulsions.

15 A name that was less polemic for an institution whose creation can be seen as a reaction to the adoption by the Bundestag of a resolution on the creation of a central memorial to the murdered European Jews (called *Holocaust Mahnmale*) on 24 June 1999.

16 Motion adopted by the Federal executive board and the Praesidium of the Federation of expellees on 20 March 1999 (‘Wir brauchen in Berlin ein “Zentrum der 15 Millionen”: Ein weißer Fleck muß aufgearbeitet werden’ 1999, 5). In fact, Steinbach reactivated a claim made a decade earlier by Hartmut Koschyk, the Secretary general of the BdV, to transform the Berlin memorial to “Flight and expulsion” into a “Central memorial to the remembrance of the 14 million victims of the flights and expulsions ... where more than 2 million people died”, as well as to commemorate “the unicity of the crime against humanity”. If Koschyk did not specify at the time how this transformation should occur and what it concretely meant, he nevertheless wanted to add to this central memorial the creation of a commission of historians which was supposed “to deal with the reappraisal of the expulsions” (‘Koschyk fordert zentrale Gedenkstätte’ 1990, 2).

Apart from the fact that there had already been such an officially appointed commission, headed by the historian Theodor Schieder, that had published a series of volumes of documentation about the crimes of expulsions (Beer 1998), this statement is not only highly problematic because of the qualification of expulsion as a unique crime against humanity which puts it on a level with the Holocaust – a rhetoric typical of the Expellees associations – but also in the numbers cited. (About the numbers see the very precise counting by Hahn and Hahn (2010, 698–705).)

17 Whereas the first ones claimed it was necessary to remedy a “blind spot” of history, an old anthem of the federation of expellees and of Steinbachs, the social democrats insist more on the disinterest, the cold heartedness and lack of empathy of the leftists towards the Expellees and their sufferings. Cf. ‘Rede vom Bundesinnenminister Otto Schily, am 29 Mai 1999 im Berliner Dom’ (1999).

the bilateral relations with the East, especially with Poland and the Czech Republic (Dakowska 2007). What was at stake as well in the domestic debates and in the disputes with the eastern neighbours was how to weight and to put in relation the commemoration of the victims of the German National Socialist terror regime to the German victims of the Second World War (Salzborn 2003, 1124). The question was whether the recognition and the place given to the German sufferings linked to the expulsions in German official commemorations would lead to a “completion or [to] a revision of history” (Assmann 2007, 11; see also Hahn and Hahn (2008, 39–40)).

Hoping to put an end to the polemics (Peron 2015) and silence the more or less openly revisionist stances<sup>18</sup> of the Federation of Expellees, the German government (the grand coalition CDU/CSU-SPD), under the auspices of the CDU/CSU, took over the project in 2008,<sup>19</sup> initiating the creation by the Bundestag of a dependent Foundation placed under the control of the Foundation *Deutsches Historisches Museum*.<sup>20</sup> The purpose of this new institution, which was a hundred percent a creation of the German federation and as such also funded to a hundred percent by the federation,<sup>21</sup> was “– in the spirit of reconciliation – to keep alive the remem-

brance and commemoration of flight and expulsion in the 20th century in the historical context of the Second World War and of the National Socialist expansion and extermination policies and their consequences.”<sup>22</sup>

These fights over the politics of history impacted the conception<sup>23</sup> and the legal purpose of the Foundation<sup>24</sup> drafted by the federal government in 2008. It laid down a decidedly complex and contradictory task, that is formulated unusually precisely and directly.<sup>25</sup> On the one hand, the remembrance policy dimension is very clear. It is a matter of setting a “visible sign” in Berlin, in a time marked by the disappearance of the generation of witnesses; in other words, of transforming a communicational memory into a cultural memory – to use Jan and Aleida Assmann’s terms – in order to meet the political demands of the associations of expellees to commemorate the sufferings endured in the newly reclaimed capital and more so, in the core of the commemoration landscape of unified Germany. On the other hand, however, the Bundestag

18 As shown by the resentful comments in the Visitor’s Book of the exhibition *Erzwungene Wege*, that was opened in August 2006 in the Berlin Kronprinzenpalais, organised by Steinbach’s *Stiftung Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen* (Assmann 2007, 11).

19 The intent to create a “visible sign” in Berlin was laid down in the Coalition contract in 2005.

20 On December 21, the Bundestag adopted a law establishing a *Deutsches Historisches Museum Foundation*, in which the creation of a dependent *Stiftung Flucht Vertreibung Versöhnung*, was mentioned in Paragraph 2. The supporting organisation of the Documentation Centre is the Foundation for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation, which was established by the German Bundestag in December 2008 as a non-party, dependent foundation under public law. It is funded by the State Minister for Culture and the Media (Dokumentationszentrum Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung n.d.a).

21 As such it was taken out of the direct control of the Federation of expellees. Very few cultural institutions are mandated and controlled by the Federation since culture lies in the exclusive domain of responsibility of the Länder.

22 See purpose of the Foundation in Section 2, paragraph 16 of the “Law on the establishment of a Foundation ‘Deutsches Historisches Museum’” (Beauftragter der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien, 2008)

23 See Dokumentationszentrum Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung (n.d.e).

24 Act on the Establishment of a Foundation “German Historical Museum” of 21 December 2008, Section 2 Independent Foundation “Foundation Flight Expulsion Reconciliation”, § 16 Purpose of the Foundation “The purpose of the dependent foundation is – in the spirit of reconciliation – to keep alive the remembrance and commemoration of flight and expulsion in the 20th century in the historical context of the Second World War and of the National Socialist expansion and extermination policies and their consequences” (Bundesamt für Justiz n.d.b).

25 The Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation is to my knowledge the sole German Museum to which politics tells how to tell history as precisely. This scope of intervention from politics in the realm of historiography is the more astonishing for those who remember the controversies that accompanied Chancellor Kohl’s initiative to build a House of the History of the FRG (*Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik*) in Bonn in the middle of the 1980s). At the time, the sole fact that it was a governmental initiative to build such historical museums was contested (François 1992; Werner, 2016). In the case of the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, and Reconciliation, the political interference goes much further and determines the frame of the historical narration.



raises the claim of working through a complex past and sets a very narrow historical framing, which contradicts the usual narrative of the associations of expellees. The remembrance and commemoration of “flight and expulsion” must take place “in the historical context of the Second World War and the National Socialist policy of expansion and extermination and its consequences” and “in the spirit of reconciliation”. And finally, the topic has also “to be anchored in the centre of society”, outside of the remembrance milieu and transferred into a publicly accessible memory form.

If the explicit wish expressed by politics for memorialisation of this historical episode is in accordance with the documentation principle, the necessity to fight negationist tendencies or, to use the words of the association of expellees, its “tabooisation”, is very questionable (Hahn and Hahn 2010; Beer 2011, 135). Neither are flight and expulsion contested, nor their violence negated. The sufferings and crimes related to this mass violence have been extensively documented by the West German State authorities (Beer 1998) and the episode has always been present in (West-) German politics, historiography, and memory. Further the very tight historical frame laid down in the statutes of the Foundation Flight, Expulsion and Reconciliation by the Federal Government seems to contradict the documentation principle, in that it heavily constrains the scope of interpretation of the historical episode, obliges to a narrative and more so directs this narrative. “Flight and expulsion” must be presented as a consequence of World War II and not – as the federation of expellees and the heads of expellee organisations have done so often – treated as an independent historical event, that happened because of circumstances that were out of the control of the individuals. And indeed, this has been practically implemented on the second floor of the Documentation Centre, dedicated to “the displacement and expulsions of the Germans”. The visitor is obliged to start the tour with a module about the “German expansionist policy and the Second World War”

which cannot be sidestepped, before accessing the spaces dedicated to the expulsions and the new post war order.

### The Aporias of the Musealisation of the Negative

In order to determine now how concretely this museumification project is located in the German public memory and museum landscape, in which tradition(s) and to which practice of museum representation it belongs, I will start to consider three seemingly very simple questions<sup>26</sup> posed by Reinhard Koselleck (2002, 26) in his reflections on the “forms and traditions of negative memory” which help highlight the complexity of the project.

“Who is to be remembered?” Through this question, Koselleck aimed at reflecting on the aporias of the memorialisation of Nazi crimes to which the newly unified German State had committed itself.<sup>27</sup> Since reunification, an official state-led negative memory culture, that put the Shoah and the crimes committed by Germans in the centre of Germany’s national commemorations, had become mainstream (as symbolised by the erection of the memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe and its location in the heart of the new capital in 2005). In this context, Koselleck pleaded among other things for a memorialisation not only of the victims (as the Holocaust memorial does) but also of the crimes and their perpetrators. In fact, Germany’s official memory landscape contains institutions dedicated to both: commemorating the victims and documenting the crimes and the perpetratorship of the Germans. Yet, the roles are clear cut. A clear distinction is made between both victims and

<sup>26</sup> Who is to be remembered? What is to be remembered? How is it to be remembered?

<sup>27</sup> First and foremost, he shows the impossibility of making sense of those crimes. Contrary to previous memorialisation of defeats that turned the dead into heroes and used the negativity for nationalistic positive aims, such as group unity and identification, in this case, according to Koselleck, the remembrance of the suffering cannot be transformed into such a thing as a collective memory nor be used to lay the foundation of a collective identity. Quite the opposite (Koselleck 2002, 24).

perpetrators and commemoration takes place from the univocal perspective of the perpetrator.

Answering Koselleck's second question: "what is to be remembered?", there is no doubt that adding the commemoration of "flight and expulsion" to that negative memory breaks with this univocity and adds a layer of complexity to German official memory. In this case, the group of perpetrators and the group of victims overlap. The challenge thus lies in the question of the compatibility of the memory of suffering and guilt, and in the fact that the victims cannot be commemorated only as such. It is thus not possible to focus solely on the German sufferings.

At the same time, including the numerous other experiences of expulsion does not solve the problem since the juxtaposition of several different cases of forced migrations<sup>28</sup> confers to the Germans a special status in regard to the sheer numbers of German expellees<sup>29</sup> because the narrative underlying this kind of presentation is that the history of the twentieth century in Europe was one of forced migrations<sup>30</sup> driven by the desire to create ethnically homogenous nation-states, of which Nazism was ultimately only the most extreme incarnation. In this respect, commemorating "flight and expulsion" (only) from the victims' point of view leads to a revision of Germany's history by putting into ques-

28 Muslims from the Balkans, Armenians, Turks, Greeks, Jews, Poles, Germans, Finns, Italians etc.

29 This was the narrative behind the exhibition "Erzwungene Wege" that was organised in 2006 in the Kronprinzepalais in Berlin by the *Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen*, the Foundation of the BdV, and this was also the narrative behind the first exhibition "Gewaltmigration Erinnern" that led to a political scandal and to relieving Manfred Kittel, the first director of the Foundation Fight, Expulsion, Reconciliation from his duties by the Foundation Council.

30 This is the title given to the exhibition on the first floor in the *Konzept für die Dauerausstellung, Stiftung Flucht Vertreibung Versöhnung* (Bavendamm et al. 2017), published by the Foundation. This title is not to be found anymore in today's exhibition. The first floor is not named, and the conception of the exhibition has changed from a chronological approach whose aim was "to give an [historical] overview over the enormous and the hitherto unknown extent of forced population displacements of millions of people in the Europe of the long XX century" (p. 14) to a more thematic one, centered around the individual experiences of forced migrations, that includes today's migrations.

tion the exceptionality of the Holocaust. To prevent this, the Foundation Act of the Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation refers to the indispensable historical contextualisation, expecting that this would thus prevent the norm of German national memory (the overarching framework of remembrance of guilt as Assmann calls it (2006, 188) that has applied at the latest since the *Historikerstreit*<sup>31</sup>) from being put into question.

Finally, if the way of remembering the victims of "flight and expulsion" not only as victims is a moral challenge and a challenge to national memory culture, the remembrance of the perpetrators and the criminal dimension of "flight and expulsion" are challenges to knowledge and understanding (Piotr Cywinski, quoted in Wahnich 2011, 59). Indeed, a sole focus on the victims does not permit grasping historical events in their full dimension. To be able to ask the historically essential questions, to understand the causal chains to give the moral commandment of "never again" (which is at the origin of the efforts of patrimonialisation of the negative – Wahnich (2011, 48)) a concrete content, one has to bring to light the perpetrators' side. But the remembrance of the perpetrators and those responsible for the crimes is as complex from a memory and historical point of view as it is politically delicate. It might stand in the way of the desired reconciliation (and more so since reconciliation is part of the name of the Documentation Centre) with the neighbouring states to the east, which were both perpetrators *and* victims of the Germans.

Coming to the third question, "how is it to be remembered?"<sup>32</sup> a first indication can be found in the location of the Documentation

31 The Historikerstreit was a debate among historians of the present, that took place in 1986/87, about the place of the Shoah in German history and its uniqueness.

32 Koselleck (2002, 29–31) notes in relation to the Holocaust four possible interconnected modes: (1) through a moral judgment (that is necessary but insufficient to understand what happened), (2) through science that completes the moral judgment and helps understanding, (3) through a religious memorial cult (that does not reach everyone), and, because all those three ways are insufficient, he adds (4) the aesthetic one.



Figure 1: The monumental concrete staircase leading to the first floor (photo: Catherine Perron, 2015)



Figure 2: Staircase leading to the second floor (photo: Catherine Perron, 2015)

Centre in the core of the German capital in the immediate vicinity of the most important NS memorial sites of the Federal Republic, as well as in the monumental (interior) architecture of the *Deutschlandhaus*. Both create a monument which is in itself a “visible sign” and give it, independently of the exhibition’s content, the status of a memorial. They constitute a political statement about the legitimacy and status given to “flight and expulsion” in official German commemorations, this official legitimization of the memory of “flight and expulsion” being reinforced by the musealisation mandate and funding by the federation.

We now need to explore how the latter has been implemented, and how the permanent exhibition tackles the above-mentioned contradictions.

### Loss as the Guiding Line of the Permanent Exhibition

Given the choice of naming the institution Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation, and given the political and cultural discourses about the necessity to commemorate the victims’ suffering that had accompanied its creation, one would expect the exhibition to be centred around the violence of that process. Yet, the focus is on the dimension of loss (of home – *Heimat*)<sup>33</sup> – a very abstract notion. Violence and injustice are addressed, but only marginally.

It is noteworthy that even though the director Gundula Bavendamm denies it,<sup>34</sup> this choice brings the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation close to the nexus of museums devoted to migration<sup>35</sup> (a high-

33 Cf. interview conducted by the author with one of the main curators online, on 14 September 2022. See also the homepage of the Documentation Centre, which explains, under the tab “Our topic”, “understand what loss means” (Dokumentationszentrum Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung n.d.d).

34 In an interview with *Evangelische Zeitung*, a protestant weekly magazine, she says “we do not see ourselves as a new variety of a migration museum” (Philippi 2021).

35 The curators of the main exhibition (interviewed by the author in December 2021 and in September 2022) admit that the arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees in Ger-

ly topical theme in a Germany that increasingly sees itself as a post-migration society). As the curators explain,<sup>36</sup> migrations were the elephant in the room at the time the permanent exhibition was drafted, the time of the massive arrival of refugees on German soil in the mid 2010s. Migrations as a topic was pervasive in German society and the historical parallelism with flight and expulsion after World War II was a frequent trope in German media and culture (Perron 2021). To gain some credibility, the Documentation Centre could not avoid the topic.

As a result, the universal dimensions of the experience of migrating were included in the exhibition on the first floor, which was initially thought to be dedicated to the European history of forced migrations.<sup>37</sup> Aspects such as Nations and Nationalism but also War and Violence, Rights and Responsibility, Loss and New Beginnings, Routes and Camps, Memory and Controversy are treated as the main stations of an open tour. However, numerous references to present migrations are to be found, in the texts as well as in the objects displayed. An orange life jacket used for crossing the Mediterranean, a damaged smartphone of a Syrian refugee, a reference to the Dublin III regulations of the EU, figures of the world-wide number of refugees in 2019, the description of current asylum procedures in Germany, refugee law and refugee aid, etc. The parallelism drawn with “flight and expulsion” is reinforced by the fact that some of these objects of today’s refugees that are displayed replicate

many in 2015 gave the exhibition a new conceptual thrust. Museums dedicated to migrations are very much up and coming in these years. Before 2015 the projects were mainly local and the exhibitions temporary. Afterwards, some bigger institutions like the *Deutsches Auswandererhaus* dedicated new exhibitions to the subject. Projects like the DOMID in Cologne, and the Exile Museum in Berlin appeared, and numerous exhibitions dedicated to “flight and expulsion” or the German expellees were prolonged to encompass the theme of migrations (Fuchs and Kolb 2017, 291).

36 Interviews conducted by the author with two of the main curators in December 2021 and September 2022.

37 And more so the fact that on the website the overall title of the exhibition is “the century of flight”, flight being something different than expulsion (Dokumentationszentrum Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung n.d.b)!



Figure 3: Key to a lost home in Northern Cyprus, shown in the first floor of the exhibition (photo: Catherine Perron, 2015)

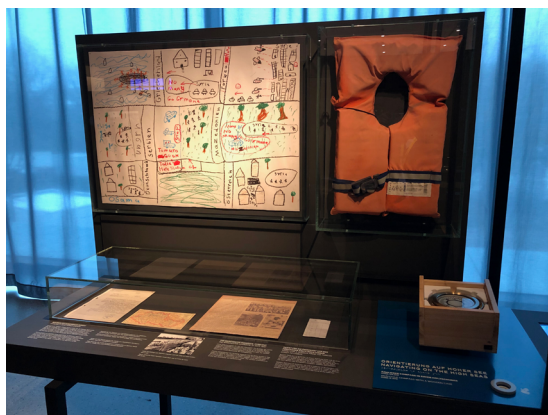


Figure 4: The life jacket of a migrant that crossed the Mediterranean (photo: Catherine Perron, 2015)

the iconic objects of “flight and expulsion” with which they are mixed: a refugee agency kitchen set, a key to a lost home, a rucksack, ration/cash cards, images of refugee camps... pointing to the universal aspects of this experience.

The museumisation of loss raised complex questions, starting with the fact that it may seem paradoxical and challenging to make the loss present by means of material artefacts. As mentioned above, on the first floor, loss is initially staged as one of the fundamental experiences of refugees. Here, the universal dimension is first brought to the fore through the filmed testimony of nine people. Three of them are portrayed



Figure 5: In the area of ‘Loss and new beginnings’ on the first floor of the permanent exhibition, life-size portraits of people who fled and settled in Germany are shown. Their memories can be heard in the audio guide (photo: Catherine Perron, 2015)

almost life-size. They have different regions of origin (Vietnam, former Yugoslavia and the former German Reich and settlement areas). In the short audio sequences that accompany the pictures, the visitor discovers that what links these seemingly very different people is the fact that they all had to leave their homeland involuntarily and that they settled in Germany.

This individualising approach is a conscious choice of the curators. It runs through the entire exhibition (Möck 2021) and is taken up again in the second part (2nd floor),<sup>38</sup> which deals specifically with the “flight and expulsion” of the Ger-

<sup>38</sup> In contrast to the first floor, the second floor works in a chronological way, starting with the “German Expansion policy and World War II”.

mans.<sup>39</sup> As the director explains, the idea was to make history become concrete through human destinies, not to present one history but “a multitude of histories, as diverse and complex as the subject”, depending on the age at which flight and expulsion have been experienced, whether male or female, from where to where, if one has experienced violence or not, and how integration functioned (Möck 2021). This diversity is encapsulated in the numerous green biography flaps that accompany each historical episode and exposed object on the second floor. Once

<sup>39</sup> This approach is echoing the one of the “Information centre under the field of stelae” that is underneath the neighbouring Memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe, where after a scientific introduction the exhibition works with biographical perspectives.



Figure 6: A biography Flap dedicated to the Ukrainian Family Kocur, which was sent to forced labour to Germany after the German occupation of Eastern Poland in 1941. Second floor of the exhibition, panel dedicated to the evacuation of the Eastern front. (photo: Catherine Perron, 2015)

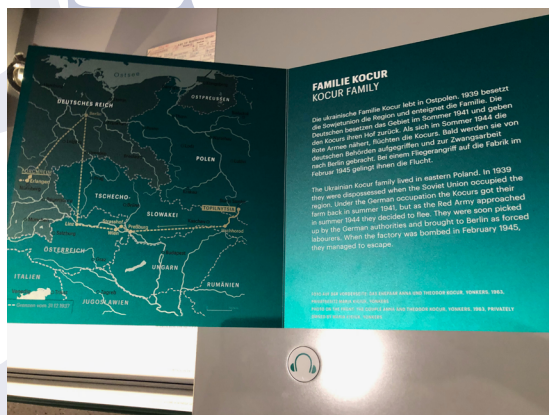


Figure 7: An opened Biography-Flap and the audioguide button on the second floor of the permanent exhibition, illustrating the fate of the Kocur Family (photo: Catherine Perron, 2015)

opened, those outline a short biography and the specific trajectory of one individual. They comprise a photograph of that person or family, a map showing where the person came from, sometimes his or her route and a very short text notice, all of which is further detailed in the audio-guide linked to each biography flap.

This individual approach creates a pluralisation of perspectives that makes it possible to reflect the complexity and multi-layeredness of the topic as intended by the curators. More than often, it works with testimonials collected in the 2010s, thus from individuals who were very young at the time. If this children's perspective, which is dominant in the exhibition, is effective in denouncing forced migrations (which is the very purpose of the Documentation Centre) by pointing to its injustice and the sufferings it causes, this approach, however, also nourishes the impression of "absolute victimhood" (Chu 2022, 592), due to the innocence of the witnesses/victims and the fact that their family histories in the interwar and war period (such as the relations to or involvement in the third Reich, its administration, its military and/or police forces and even less so in possible mass violence committed by the Nazis) are seldom or only very vaguely mentioned. As Winson Chu argues, there is a "segregation of macrolevel collec-



Figure 8: Green biographical Flap depicting the biography and the itinerary of the Viennese hat maker Paula Laufer (photo: Catherine Perron, 2015)

tive guilt from microlevel victimization”, which echoes Harald Welzer’s, Sabine Moller’s and Karoline Tschuggnall’s findings about the gap between historical knowledge and successful reconnaissance of German guilt and perpetratorship among young Germans on the one hand, and on the other hand its paradoxical correlation with representations of the family past that are mostly that of the moral integrity of grandparents portrayed as victims or heroes (Welzer et al. 2002, 53).<sup>40</sup>

In addition, choosing an individual approach can also be explained by the fact that loss is easier to grasp at the individual level than at the group level, where it is much more difficult to clearly define who has lost what. For what exactly this “loss of home” is, what belonged to whom and who belonged where, is more ambiguous and politically much more controversial at the group level, as Eva and Hans Henning Hahn (2018, 37) have stressed. Contentious collective aspects of loss (such as territorial loss or the border issues that point to the theme of injustice) and their collective relevance (for the nation) are present in the exhibition, but they are only addressed indirectly (e.g. through maps, through political posters of the 1950s or through the recording of later Bundestag debates) in the last part of the exhibition. Yet, even on the individual level the questions of property loss and transfer are only touched. As Chu (2002, 591) observes, “more could have been done in the exhibition with how German and ‘Volksdeutsche’ property, often itself ‘aryanized’, played a role in the expulsions on a national and local level”. Thus, “the process character” and the mutual in-

40 In this respect an analysis of the testimonies collected in the frame of the contemporary witness project *Zeitzeugen*-project of the Documentation Centre would be of interest. This *Zeitzeugenarchive* (collection of personal reports about the flight) goes hand in hand with the exhibition. “Contemporary witnesses” are supposed to “convey particularly vividly how forced migrations affect the individual” (Stiftung Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung 2018, 3–4) as well as families and societies. Their testimonies provided the content of the green biography flaps. However, all of them must have been children at the time of flight and expulsion. The victimhood bias might thus have been reinforced.

fluence between mass violence and social crisis, a very central element to the understanding mass violence such as population displacements (Gerlach 2011, 265), are missing.

But maybe the most striking feature of the permanent exhibition of the Documentation Centre is that it is not about cultural loss, as one could have expected. It is noteworthy that in contrast to the state museums financed by the federal and state governments under so-called *Kulturparagraf* of the Federal Expellees Act (§96 BFG – *Bundesvertriebenengesetz*),<sup>41</sup> the Documentation Centre is not dedicated to presenting the historical East German provinces or the settlement areas of the Germans in Eastern Europe. According to the curators, this was consciously avoided.<sup>42</sup> If no culturally outstanding artefacts are exhibited (such as can be found in the pre-existing §96 Regional Museums<sup>43</sup> and expellees *Heimatstuben* and museums) which testify to the cultural accomplishments of the Germans in their respective settlement areas and by which one could measure the loss; and if no attempt is made to display the history of the lost territories nor of the very diverse territories of settlement of German minorities in the east, it might also be because cultural loss has been a central trope in the German discourse about the East and more so in expellees associations’ discourses and practices (Lotz 2007). Loss was instrumentalised to legitimise discourses about historical injustice and the non-recognition of the new borders in the interwar period until the

41 Preserving “the cultural assets of the expellee territories in the awareness of the expellees and refugees, of the German people as a whole and of foreign countries ...” is the official reason for the federal funding via the §96 BFG (Weber 2012). This funding dates back to 1953 and is financing the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation but also the numerous other regional museums dedicated to “the lost territories of the Reich and to the territories of expulsion” (Bundesamt für Justiz n.d.a.).

42 Interview conducted by the author with one of the main curators of the permanent exhibition in December 2021.

43 Such as the Silesian Museum in Görlitz, the Pomeranian State Museum in Greifswald or the East Prussian State Museum in Lüneburg, the Danube-Swabian Central Museum in Ulm, the Transylvanian-Saxon Museum in Gundelsheim and many others.

mid-1950's.<sup>44</sup> It was thus important to distance the new institution from this kind of discourse and from a museography (that of *Heimatstuben* and other museum institutions of the expellees) that was based since the 1950s on the attempt of reconstructing the lost homeland, offering idealised and biased visions of the latter, free of crisis or conflicts (Eisler 2011; Beer, Fendl, and Hampe 2012, 7–15; Reinsch et al. 2023, 233). It was also a way to prevent any competition with the §96 Regional Museums dedicated to the lost German Reichs- and settlement areas, even though the existence of the latter was never mentioned in official discourses about the necessity to commemorate “flight and expulsion”. Some of them had expressed the concern that their funding might be reduced after the Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation was added to the list of the §96 BVFG funded institutions.

### The Collection: Objects as Carriers of Histories and of Negativity

To analyse further the approach to loss of the Documentation Centre, it is necessary to look both at the collection and at the way the objects that comprise it are dealt with, as well as at the exhibition practice. In the first place it is important to recall that the Documentation Centre, with its library, its testimony archive and its room of stillness understands itself as something more than a museum in the classical sense of the word, “a unique place of learning and remembrance” as announced on the website (Dokumentationszentrum Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung n.d.c). The main focus of the Documentation Centre is on the exhibition and no

44 Here it is important to note that the trope of the cultural loss originates well before the expulsions that followed World War II, in the defeat of the First World War and the will to regain the lost territories, to “not forget” and to reclaim supposedly lost German heritage (Weger 2015, 388–389). For instance, as shown by Tobias Weger, this was done through the diffusion of well-known visual motifs, like the city hall of Thorn/Torun, the St. Mary's Church in Dazing/Gdansk, etc. that stood in the “lost territories”, on post-cards or stamps.

longer on the collection,<sup>45</sup> as the status of the latter shows. In fact, the legislator has not given the Foundation a collection mandate that goes beyond the creation of an exhibition, and there is significantly no planned funding to take care of such a collection. Like many of the §96 Regional Museums that were founded as the result of a political decision, the objects of the permanent exhibition do not originate from a pre-existing collection (as most national museums or local history museums exhibitions do). However, neither were they acquired on the art market, or taken from the holdings of other museums (such as those of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum), nor are they on loan from the federal government, as is the case in the §96 Regional Museums. The exhibits mostly come from private sources and were collected through public appeals for donations from expellees or their descendants over the past ten years (Möck 2021).

As in museums dedicated to migrations, but also to the (Nazi) memorials, the collection is characterised by the fact that most of the objects displayed are everyday things: artefacts, photos, documents, posters, etc. Their value is not the one of masterpieces in the artistic or historical sense, but it derives from their ability to bear witness as a legacy, to tell a story, to be seen as fleeting traces, as a testimony to and a symptom of exile (Alexandre-Garner and Galitzine-Loumpet 2020). These objects are both realia (remains) and relics.<sup>46</sup> Despite their apparent banality, their task is to provide proof and to be able to say something about the “experiential dimension” (Wagner 2022, 11) of forced migrations and its violence to the visitor.

Accounts of experiences, life stories and objects with a biographical reference illustrate the range of possible experiences and pro-

45 As in many museums of the second modernity (Beier-de Haan 2005, 220–230) to which the §96 Regional Museums belong.

46 Volkhard Knigge writes (2002, 380): “Realia are the basic material of every exhibition. Relics, on the other hand, are not exhibited but recovered, preserved, and presented in special consecration rooms that shield them from any profanation.”





Figure 9: The iconic objects of 'Flight and expulsion', like the ladder truck and the chest, are to be seen in the permanent exhibition on the second floor (photo: Catherine Perron, 2015)

vide an understanding of which experiences can be understood as universal and substantial in the context of forced migrations. [Bavendamm et al., 2017, 25]

Hence, their function is more than the reconstruction of what has been lost. They aim neither at supporting historic reconstructions, as in the 96 Regional Museums, nor to embody an imagined past, as in the *Heimattmuseen*. Their function is, according to the concept of the permanent exhibition, the "presentation of individual fates and the presentation of biographical narrative strands against a general historical background" (Bavendamm et al. 2017, 25). If they speak for themselves through their intrinsic "quality, haptics, aesthetics, aura, authenticity, and emotionality", because of their sheer

everydayness as Wagner (2011, 11) argues, their sign content is only fragmentary and needs to be re-contextualised. This happens in two ways: first through the life stories and accounts of experience that complement them (they are briefly touched upon in the attached biography flaps and can be found in more detail in the audio narratives, each of which can be activated). Second, through the historical-scientific narrative that determines the overall narration perspective of the exhibition, and the way in which they are arranged.

#### **A Source Critical Approach: The Disentanglement of the Real and the Relic**

It is in the relationship between the objects and the stories that the specificity of the approach of



Figure 10: Projection of shadows of people on the wall behind the showcases that can be made visible when the audio-guides are activated (photo: Catherine Perron, 2015)

the Documentation Centre (in comparison to the *Heimatmuseum*, the oldest and most widespread form of musealisation of this past) is best understood. At first glance, none of the visual icons of “flight and expulsion” are missing in the Documentation Centre: ladder trucks, keys, fur coats, chests, suitcases, armbands, traditional costumes, etc. are all on display.

Yet their handling differs from that in the *Heimatmuseen*, where they are mostly used as decontextualised symbols. In the Documentation Centre, the curators paid great attention to object histories: the objects’ lore, provenance, etc. are stored in object databases and narratives related to these objects are specifically queried and documented. The use of artefacts, images and films in the exhibition is characterised by a source-critical and multi-perspective approach whose goal is, as Volkhard Knigge (2002, 388) writes about the Nazi memorials, the “disentanglement of the realia and the relic through the suspension of respect for the relics in the careful handling of the realia”. Here the influence of memorial collecting and exhibition practice of the curators, many of whom had previously worked in Berlin’s Memorials, cannot be overlooked. All in all, the exhibition does refrain from using the

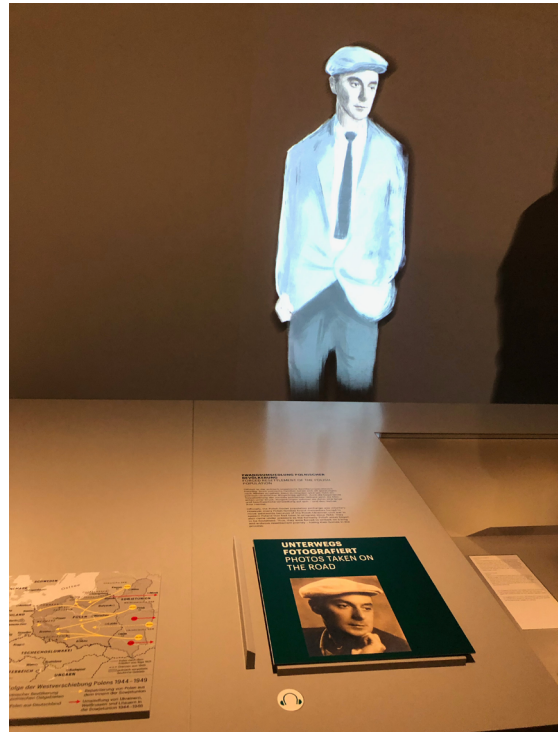


Figure 11: The projection on the wall of a shadow that has transformed itself in a graphic novel type image, inspired by a real photograph (to be seen on the green biographical Flap), of young Polish man, who documented the forced resettlement of the Polish population with his camera. (photo: Catherine Perron, 2015)



Figure 12: A projection on the wall in the graphic novel style of several members of a German family forced to stay in Poland. The original image is to be seen on the green biographical flap next to the showcase (photo: Catherine Perron, 2015)

full range of modern exhibition tools and consciously avoids too obvious staging. No emotionalisation effects are sought. The rooms are sober and restrained. They are equipped with simple table showcases and are mainly animated by lighting effects.

Particularly significant in this context are the wall projections of people that enliven the exhibition. Initially, the idea was to evoke the great mass of people who suffered the fate of expulsion by projecting numerous silhouettes behind the showcases. However, this was discarded because of its similarity to Holocaust iconography. The scenographic solution that was ultimately chosen shows the outlines of individual people or small groups that can be made visible through the activation of the audio guides. They are sketched in the style of the popular genre of the graphic novel. The projected images originate from the available and exhibited source material and is intended to be comprehensible. No additions to the images are made. In general, there is no unreflected adoption of photography, as it is the case in many *Heimatstuben* and museums. For example, pictures of the winter escape from East Prussia, which usually stand for “flight and expulsion”, are not to be found. The motif of the trek is even critically examined and deconstructed by using iconic example pictures to prove that they show something other than what is usually attributed to them. The fact that the iconography from the flight left far more powerful traces in the collective memory than the one from the expulsion is mentioned and questioned. Photographs are predominantly left in their original format (e.g. as passport photos) and not exhibited larger than life. The reduction to suffering and victims is also avoided, as it is not the primary aim of the exhibition to emotionalise.

### A Visible Sign, But With a Quiet Gesture?

In summary, it can be said that the way the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation deals with negativity is strongly influenced by the debates about the means with which to present violence and negativity of the

national socialist (and communist) pasts and the practice of and debates about memorial exhibitions (like the prohibition of overwhelming the visitors), but without adopting their aesthetics.<sup>47</sup>

This approach is not least due to the curators' experiences and training with memorial pedagogics and didactics, and to the interim directorship of Uwe Neumarker, the director of the Memorial for the murdered Jews of Europe, at the time the exhibition was drafted (2015/2016) and stands in stark contrast to the monumentality of the architecture and the grand announcements of a “visible sign” by politics. As Gundula Bavendamm, director of the foundation, explains in an interview podcast with the Kulturstiftung der Länder (Möck 2021), in dealing with the themes of suffering and loss, the gesture of her institution is a “quiet gesture, a withdrawn gesture” that makes it possible to remember violence without feeding the spiral of violence that is so typical of population transfers. However, violence and injustice are neither euphemised nor avoided. For it is precisely this conscious renunciation of a striking treatment of suffering and emotionalisation that makes it possible to exhibit and thematise them. This is done directly on the first floor in the areas of “Flight from War”, “Cleansing, Deportation and Expulsion”, “Sexual Violence” and “Genocidal Violence”. But on the one hand these topics are dealt with there in general terms and on the other hand the exhibits are presented by means of a wall of cabinets whose drawers have to be opened, i.e., which are initially concealed. The negative experiences of the German refugees and expellees are in turn clearly mentioned in the audio accounts of contemporary witnesses on the 2nd floor.

In the restraint and care of its permanent exhibition, the Documentation Centre forms a new approach to the memory of “flight and ex-

47 The tradition and museum practice linked to the Holocaust was certainly the most fertile and productive in the realm of reflections on how to exhibit negativity. It had a great influence on the staff of the Documentation Centre, who were trained in it. However, one could point to the lack of reflections on what this specific negative past characterized by displacement/movement would require as a museography.



Figure 13: A wall cabinet dedicated to war and violence on the first floor of the permanent exhibition (photo: Catherine Perron, 2015)

pulsion”. With its withdrawn gesture and its treatment of the objects, it in fact comes close to the documentation principle, typical for the exhibitions in memorials dedicated to the National Socialist crimes in Germany. However, its historically very constraining narrative framework stands in contradiction to it.

This new approach has nevertheless the potential to transfer the topic from German communicative memory to cultural memory and to level the “fissured landscape of memory” in relation to flight and expulsion (to use the words of historians Eva and Hans Henning Hahn (2002)). In this way, the goal of memorialisation and reconciliation, namely that of the Germans with themselves, could be achieved. This said, one must mention that it is much less certain that this Documentation Centre contributes a great deal to the historical understanding of the phenomenon of forced migration in general and German forced migration in particular. The existence of the 96 Regional museums has been completely overlooked in the discussion about the necessity to erect “a visible sign” in Berlin. Of course, their location in Greifswald, Ulm, Görlitz, Lüneburg, etc. does not ensure the same media exposure as the location at the Anhalter Bahnhof in Berlin and their focus is much broader than the sole episode of “flight and ex-



Figure 14: An opened drawer of the wall cabinet dedicated to sexual violence. In the way of a trigger warning, the drawers have to be opened before accessing to the depiction of violence (photo: Catherine Perron, 2015)

pulsion”. However, precisely because they are not focused solely on the flight and expulsion process, and because their approach is rooted in the long-term history of a particular territory with its different population groups, they are in a better position to give an account of the complexity of the process and provide a more detailed understanding of the mechanism that led to the expulsions.

In fact, it is the very idea of a single place in Berlin dedicated to a historical grand narrative about “flight and expulsion” in general that is biased. As historians around Martin Schulze Wessel (2010) had already argued in their counter project to the exhibition in 2010, “flight and expulsion” cannot be grasped outside a precise national, geographical, and historical context. They argue that “History takes place in concrete places” and advocate a topographical narrative principle rooted, for instance, in places like Breslau/Wrocław, or Usti Nad Labem/Aussig and der Elbe, or Vilius/Wilna/Wilno/Wilne, which “could be used to show exactly how interwoven the numerous migration processes were in the 20th century within a small area” (see also Völcker, 2011). It is at the local level and in the long-term view that the complex histories of ethnic identifications, assignments, coexistence and conflict can be grasped. Thus, at its present lo-

cation and with its current narrative, the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation is clearly a political project whose first and foremost aim is creating a memorial to satisfy the claims of the associations of expellees. That said, it might obtain social relevance in that its over-generalising approach through addressing the individual experience of loss, permits tying in with the currently highly relevant topic of migrations.

### Disclaimer

This contribution is an extended and modified version, based on upgrading of the research, of the article “Negativität ausstellen. Status und Funktion der Objekte und der Sammlung in der ständigen Ausstellung des Dokumentationszentrums Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung”, published in German in Natalie Reinsch, Frauke Geyken, Cornelia Eisler, Thomas Overdick eds., *Herkunft, Heimat, Heute. Musealisierung von Heimatstuben und Heimatsammlungen der Flüchtlinge Vertriebenen und Aussiedlerinnen*, Museumsverband Niedersachsen und Bremen e.v., 2023.

All translations into English are mine.

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### Summary

Starting from the analysis of the permanent exhibition of the newly opened Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation, this paper sets out to understand to what extent the Documentation Centre succeeds in offering a new approach to the place of remembrance “Flight and Expulsion of the Germans” and to situate it both in the federal German museum landscape and in the museum landscape around flight and expulsion (between the discontinued model *Heimattmuseum* and the newly founded §96 *Landesmuseen*).

It does so by examining the role of objects of the collection of the Documentation Centre, whose name already indicates a distancing from the classical museum - be it historical or ethnological. The analysis focusses on the special challenges that have arisen in the creation of the collection on the topic of forced migration: Can the loss be made visible? Can and should the experience of violence be portrayed? And if so, by what means and to what end? What status do the exhibited objects have and how are they incorporated into the exhibition narrative?

I suggest that the diverse and contradictory expectations placed on the Documentation Centre results in a permanent exhibition that meets the wishes of the memory milieu (expellees and their descendants) to address their suffering and responds to the government’s mandate to anchor the topic in the centre of society (also outside the memory milieu) and to create a space of reconciliation between memorial, museum, archive, and meeting place. However, this comes at the expense of understanding the specificity of the German flight and expulsion processes.

### Povzetek

Izhajajoč iz analize stalne razstave novoodprtega Dokumentacijskega centra za razseljevanje, izgon, spravo si v prispevku prizadevam razumeti, v kolikšni meri ta nova institucija uspe ponuditi nov pristop h kraju spomina na »beg in izgon Nemcev« in ga umestiti tako v kontekst nemških zveznih muzejev kot muzejev, posvečenih begu in izgonu (med ukinjenim modelom *Heimattmuseum* in novoustanovljenim §96 *Landesmuseen*). Analiziram vloge predmetov zbirke Dokumentacijskega centra, katerega že ime nakazuje distanciranje od klasičnega muzeja – naj bo zgodovinskega ali etnološkega. Analiza se osredotoča na posebne izzive, ki so se pojavili pri nastajanju zbirke na temo prisilnih migracij: Ali je mogoče izgubo narediti vidno? Ali je mogoče in ali je treba prikazati izkušnjo nasilja? In če da, na kakšen način in s kakšnim namenom? Kakšen status imajo razstavljeni predmeti in kako so vključeni v razstavno pripravo? V sklepu ugotovim, da raznolika in protislovna pričakovanja Dokumentacijskega centra rezultirajo v stalni razstavi, ki izpolnjuje želje spominskega miljeja (izgnancev in njihovih potomcev), saj naslavlja njihovo trpljenje in se odziva na nalogo vlade, da to temo zasidra v središču družbe (tudi zunaj spominskega miljeja) ter tako ustvari prostor sprave, ki je hkrati spomenik, muzej, arhiv in prostor srečevanja. A to gre na račun razumevanja specifičnosti procesov bega in izгона Nemcev.