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Stiftung Flucht Vertreibung Versöhnung:

the concept of action and permanent exposition

Created by virtue of the amended act of 14 June 2010, the Council of the Escape, Expulsion, Reconciliation Foundation (*Stiftungsrat der Stiftung Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung*) began its activity on 25 October 2010 under the supervision of Bernd Neumann, the plenipotentiary for culture and media. During a meeting on 22 November 2010, the Council appointed a new circle of science advisors (18 votes for, one against), which included: Dr. Peter Becher (Adalbert Stifter Verein), Prof. Marina Cattaruzza (Universität Bern), Dr. Alfred Eisfeld (Institut für Kultur und Geschichte der Deutschen in Nordosteuropa, Lüneburg), Prof. Raphael Gross (director of the Jüdisches Museum in Berlin), Prof. Frak-Lothar Kroll (Universität Chemnitz), Prof. Piotr Madajczyk (Polish Academy of Sciences), Prof. Hans Maier (Prof. em., Monachium), Prof. Norman Naimark (Uniwersytet Stanford), Prof. Krzysztof Ruchniewicz (University of Wrocław), Prof. Joachim Scholtyseck (Universität Bonn), Prof. Michael Schwartz (Universität Münster), Prof. Matthias Stickler (Universität Würzburg), Prof. Stefan Troebst (Universität Leipzig), Dr. Kristian Ungvary (Budapest), Prof. Michael Wildt (Humboldt Universität, Berlin). Bernd Neumann expressed his satisfaction that he managed to gather a body of esteemed and experienced experts in the field. He said: "It is even more pleasing that this circle will include three scientists from Eastern Europe: Prof. Krzysztof Ruchniewicz, Prof. Piotr Madajczyk, Dr. Kristian Ungvary and the director of the Jewish Museum and Fritz-Bauer-Institut (Frankfurt am Main) Prof. Raphael Gross".

Prof. Tomasz Szarota assessed the participation of the Polish historians in a different way: „The statement that their involvement in the work of the Council will have a purely scientific dimension, with the lack of regard for its political aspect, is in my opinion exceptionally naive. I have no illusions that the Germans still consider the expulsions to be a strictly political subject. This is the way to get the votes of 2 million expellees. This is why I left the Council after the first official meeting with the director of the Foundation, Manfred Kittel. I did not want to add credibility to this political idea, I did not want to be a fig leaf. Professors Ruchniewicz and Madajczyk will be such leaves. (...) I suspect that the Polish point of view will be reduced to the statement that Poles were expelled as well, for example from Poznań or Gdynia to the General Government and from Lviv and Vilnius to Siberia (...). If professor Ruchniewicz claims that the current Council is more professional or apolitical than the one I resigned from, I have to consider this opinion insolent. I joined the Council at a direct invitation from Germany and worked in it without any political instructions or even suggestions, just like the other Polish representatives. Having familiarized myself with Prof. Kittel's scholarly achievements and especially after his meeting with us, I realized that the project is not about reconciling the Poles with the Germans, but only the Germans with the expelled, who still constitute a large electorate.”¹

The role of the circle of advisors was to provide professional advice to the Council of the Foundation and its Director (Manfred Kittel). First of all, however, they were supposed to refine the concept of action of the Foundation, including the permanent exposition. This last element was problematic since the very beginning. It caused disputes as harsh as the influence of the *Bund der Vertriebenen* on the museum of 'expellees'. The works over the concept were long and tedious. At the beginning of 2010, a decision was made that it was to be presented before the end of the year, together with the amendment of the act establishing the Escape, Expulsion, Reconciliation Foundation. The new Council of the Foundation was constituted on 25 October 2010 and, at the same time, Manfred Kittel presented a preliminary action project for the Foundation and a scenario for the permanent exposition.² Formally it referred to the government document from 19 March 2008, which outlined the challenges that the future museum of 'expellees' would face. In comparison, the content was not much different. Many issues were presented as concise entries and left a lot of room for interpretation. The Council approved the document with satisfaction and commissioned several advisors to continue working on it. This work was supposed to be finished in summer the following year. However, it took much longer and there was no public debate. The scientific advisors presented the Council of the Foundation with a revised version of the concept almost exactly a year later. It was adopted on 25 June 2012 and made public shortly



after.³ Because the project to adapt the Deutschlandhaus for the center of the “expellees” was accepted earlier, there are no more obstacles preventing the initiation of the undertaking in 2016.

The dispute over the concept resulted from the strive of the *Bund der Vertriebenen* to make the expulsion of the German people the greatest crime of the last century after the Holocaust. Since the open presentation of the suffering of the Jews and Germans as equal was a risky marketing action, if not an openly insolent one, the expulsion of the German people from the very beginning was presented in a larger context of other forced population transfers and ethnic cleansings. As a result. The 20th century was supposed to be the witness not only to the unprecedented murder of the Jews, but also an exceptional “century of expulsions” – with the Germans presented as the greatest victims and Poles and Czechs as unparalleled perpetrators. In general, the source of all evil (equally the Holocaust and the “expulsions”) was nationalism, which caused the breakdown of multinational empires, the strive for nationally homogeneous states and the persecution of national minorities (were they not persecuted during the imperial times?). The Second World War, triggered by “Hitler”, which even Erika Steinbach (the leader of the *Bund der Vertriebenen*) admitted herself, allegedly was only a catalyst providing the opportunity for the Poles and Czechs to implement their eternal plan to get rid of the German people. The problem of interpretation related to the War and expulsions is solved by the slogan propagated by almost all German politicians, that one “infringement” does not justify another “infringement”. Not only does it make incomparable events seem equal and disregard the international authorization for the expulsion of the Germans, but also places the victims on the same level: the Poles suffered, but the Germans suffered as well, both were victims and perpetrators at the same time.

Putting the German “expulsion” at the same level as other population transfers and the far-reaching weakening or even disregard of the course and aftermath of World War II, which overturned the European order and forced people to think about means of protection from possible future German aggression, aroused many reservations. The fact that not all decisions were pleasant for the Germans is rather obvious, but could it have been any other way? A group of historians rightfully demanded in a document from 9 September 2010⁴ to “present World War II as the basic context for forced migration” and to take into consideration the “categorical difference between the expulsions and the systematic mass crimes committed against the Jews and other groups.” However, the project of Kittel from 25 October 2010 still held to the idea of blending the relocation of the Germans into the wide current of different population transfers of the past century. He searched for the genesis of the German “expulsion” not in the situation created by World War II, but in the appearance of national states on the ruins of the empires destroyed in World War One. Tomasz Szarota,



who had some access to Kittel's project, assessed it in the following way: "Having learned about the preliminary concept of the exposition, in which the expulsion of the Germans will basically be displaced from its cause and presented as equal to other European migrations, relocations and expulsions, I still maintain my opinion expressed in "Der Spiegel": one cannot equate the expulsion of the Germans from their homes with the expulsion of the Poles from their lives. This is not the way to Polish-German reconciliation."⁵ Reconciliation, which appears in the name of the Foundation, sounds encouraging, but in practice it contains the condition, sometimes openly expressed, for the Polish side to recognize the unprecedented nature of the "infringement" and "harm" which the German fugitives and expellees experienced.

The concept accepted on 25 June 2012 by the Council of the Foundation contains well known premises, but it tries to neutralize at least some reservations of its opponents. On the one hand, it evokes the fact that the European history of the 20th century was characterized by the "attempts of national uniformization, wars, authoritarian regimes and totalitarian dictatorships", which led to "mass expulsions and genocide". On the other hand, it is stated that the Germans were "expelled as a consequence of national socialist policy, its crimes and the resulting cruel war." The same is stated further in slightly different words: "to account for the demands to create a national state without the Germans" it is necessary to take into consideration both "short-term and decisive causes" ("the War started by the Nazis and the ensuing occupation") as well as mid- and long-term ones" ("the vision of an ethnically homogeneous national state"). Moreover, on the one hand "the crimes of the national socialist regime of anarchy" are mentioned and "the downgrading of the extent of the national socialist crimes" is rejected, on the other, a worn out thesis is maintained – "In relation to the expulsions of the 20th century it is necessary to say: one infringement in history often led to another. The previous infringement, however, does not provide a moral or legal justification for the new one, despite its enormous extent. This also applies to the expulsions of the Germans taking place after 1945 in Eastern Europe." The next sentence quickly and solemnly states that "the responsibility of the Germans for the criminal policy of the Nazis is not relativized by this statement."

The rule included in the concept that "the diversity of perspectives is a contribution to the European agreement and cultural memory" corresponds to this view very well. The authors of the project were aware of the controversy caused by the ideas of the *Bund der Vertriebenen*, the plans to create the Center against Expulsions and the Visible Sign. However, they do not see the reason for this controversy in the stance of the *Bund der Vertriebenen* and the supporting German politicians, but in the fact that "conflicting national narrators of memory shaped the view on the past", which resulted in "disputes and political



instrumentalization.” Hence, they offer “the diversity of perspectives to present divergent images of history, analyze their structure and document their processivity [sic!]” to enable “the analysis of the events from various points of view and the formation of one’s own judgment on that basis.” The final result is supposed to be an “agreement” and, in line with the official message of the Foundation – “reconciliation”. It was said that different stances will be taken into consideration when creating the permanent exposition, the starting point being the results of the most recent historical research. The question is: what will it look like? “Polish” footnotes to “German” descriptions? The “German” and then the “Polish” interpretation of the transfer of the German people? Even if certain gestures are made towards Poland, which is highly unlikely, everything will be overwhelmed by the narration presenting the great “infringement” and “harm” against the German people brutally “expelled” from the land where they had lived for centuries.

The concept of the permanent exposition is not much different structurally from the preliminary project of the *Bund der Vertriebenen*: first there is the prologue – nationally homogeneous states, then the War and “expulsions”, at the end there is the integration of the expellees in their new dwelling place. However, the distribution of stress (in the document, in reality – hard to say) reveals a certain shift; the project of the *Bund der Vertriebenen* put strong emphasis on evoking emotions, especially in younger generations. The project of the Foundation seems to distance itself from this approach and attach more importance to rational discourse. Moreover, the document clearly points to some basic differences between the German policy of extermination and the relocation of the German people; the expression “century of expulsions” does not appear, which can be considered a step in the right direction. From the point of view of the content, the policy of the Third Reich, War and German occupation is emphasized incomparably stronger. The “Stalinist ethnic regime of the Soviet Union” appears as well. It is also worth to mention two signaled themes: the Stuttgart Charter (1950) and “expellee” organizations. Judging by the discussion over the anniversary of the Charter, nothing seems to herald a more critical approach to the document praised for resignation from “revenge and retaliation”. However, one can expect a slightly more critical look at the activity of compatriots’ associations and the *Bund der Vertriebenen*, very often portrayed as organizations that rendered great service to the “reconciliation” with Poland. Still, the following statement appears: “In the Federal Republic of Germany, mainly the expellees and their descendants strive to achieve reconciliation with the Eastern neighbors.” In certain cases this is true, but in relation to the *Bund der Vertriebenen* it seems like a mockery.

The document appears to be tediously negotiated, with some elements forced in and others, those which raise understandable reservations, consciously dispersed. There is no



doubt that the German “national narrators of memory” forced through their own story, but in a slightly more palpable package. As a result, aside from the undoubtedly justified declarations (e.g. the basic difference between the murder of Jews and the transfer of the German people) there were opinions easy to falsify at their source, but still remaining in the canon of the German common memory (e.g. the bad national states trying to get rid of the Germans for centuries).⁶ The leader of the *Bund der Vertriebenen*, Erika Steinbach, had reasons to express her satisfaction with the concept presented by the Council of the Foundation: it did not disturb the basic narration presented by the “expellees” for a long time, it ensures the firm embedding of the fate of the relocated in the common memory of the “Berlin republic” and it opens real perspective for the introduction of the German “victims” to the canon of the European memory. What is even more important: the concept was finally legitimized by the Germans themselves and, in some sense, by the international community, when taking into consideration the fact that it was signed by two Polish historians. When it comes to details, the activity of the Foundation and the expositions, both the permanent and the temporary, may appear differently. There may even be certain concessions towards Poland. In the general account, however, everything depends on the Polish-German relations. The museum of “expellees” will remain an institution fighting for the common memory or – as it is described in German literature – fighting for the dominion over historical interpretation and cultural hegemony.

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Endnotes

1 Odszedłem, bo nie chciałem być listkiem figowym. Oni takim listkiem będą (interview with prof. Tomaszem Szarotą), „Rzeczpospolita” from 27-28.11.1010.

2 Eckpunkte für die Arbeit der Stiftung Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung und die geplante Dauerausstellung.

3 Konzeption für die Arbeit der Stiftung Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung und leitlinien für die geplante Dauerausstellung.

4 Polish version: Martin Schulze Wessel, K. Erik Franzen, Claudia Kraft, Stefanie Schüller-Springorum, Tim Völkerling, Martin Zückert, Rozważania nad koncepcją wystaw fundacji „Ucieczka, Wypędzenie, Pojednanie” (9 September 2010). The text was sent to the German-Czech Historical



Commission as well as German-Slovak and German-Polish Handbook Commission. It received positive feedback.

5 Odszedłem, bo nie chciałem być listkiem figowym...

6 Piotr Semka described that as the „German hybrid”. P. Semka, Niemiecka hybryda, „Rzeczpospolita” from 5.09.2012.

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