

Stories of Justification – Stories of Absolution: How Families in Liberec Came to Terms with Post-Displacement Heritage

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Abstract

The article focuses on how residents of the north Bohemian town of Liberec deal with the property they acquired as a result of displacement. The objects they use were confiscated from the German-speaking minority in the aftermath of World War 2. The text provides an overview of narratives of this event in the Czech public discourse and discusses how these are reflected in family stories. The study is based on three family histories collected during ethnographic fieldwork and the analytical framework is informed by memory studies and theories of hauntology.

Key words

expulsion, post-displacement, hauntology, family history

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“Just by chance, the couple came across a small treasure in Krnov. When they were looking for the water flowing from the roof, they discovered several suitcases in an ingenious hiding place.” On April 15, 2023, the Czech Television broadcast a report about objects found in Krnov, a small town in the northeastern region of the Czech Republic. The suitcases were apparently left there by German Bohemians,¹ a German-speaking minority who used to live in Czechoslovakia until 1946, when, in the aftermath of World War 2, most of them were forcibly displaced. The whole TV report portrays the discovery of the suitcases full of clothes, as well as photographs and documents, as a fascinating historical discovery and emphasizes the fact that the found items will be placed in the local museum.

Even almost eighty years after the end of the War, it is not uncommon to find items that German Bohemians either left behind in the chaos at the end of the War or deliberately hid as their displacement took place. However, the attention and care given to the objects left behind by the German Bohemians is not universally supported now nor had it been supported in the past. In a discussion on the Facebook page of the Czech Television, where the report on the found suitcases is still available, many voices do not share the idea that such objects should be placed in museums. Some explicitly link German Bohemians with Nazis: *“Are you f-ing kidding me? An exhibition for fascists?”* or *“These pictures say it all, the suitcases were owned by Nazi pigs.”* (Objev 2023)

This introduction is intended to show how difficult it remains to come to terms with post-displacement heritage, in this case with material German heritage in the form of everyday objects. On the one hand, there is a fascination with the things that were owned by the former inhabitants who had to leave more than seventy years ago. On the other hand, these things and their stories, the stories of the previous owners present in them, irritate many people.

In this text, I call the material remains that remind the Czech society of the population of German Bohemians “post-displacement materiality” and I focus on how it is treated by families who incorporate these objects in their everyday lives. To do so, I present three studies from my ethnographic research in the North Bohemian town of Liberec, formerly known

1 In this text, I use the term German Bohemian as an English translation of *Deutschböhme* because it expresses the relationship of German-speaking inhabitants to the Czech territory. But my interview partners use an emic term “Germans” in their accounts, so I use it in direct quotes from the interviews. For a discussion on various aspects of labeling German-speaking Bohemians see Seidl (2020).

as Reichenberg² where the majority of pre-War German-speaking inhabitants were expelled from. I was searching for people who still have things confiscated from the German Bohemians i.e. post-displacement heritage in their households, and I spoke with them about these objects.

This article is not only a case study of a particular city and extends the knowledge of local history, but it is also a case study of property issues in post-displacement regions, which include not only the post-German regions of Central and Eastern Europe but also other regions that have experienced drastic population and economic shifts.

Reichenberg was the cultural and economic centre of the German Bohemians, and after their expulsion, it became a highly desired destination for new inhabitants. These newcomers lived in furnished apartments and houses left by the German Bohemians. Often, they and their descendants still live in these apartments and use furniture and other items originally confiscated from the previous owners. In my research, I explored the relationship that different generations of current residents of Liberec have with the belongings of the original residents and what stories are passed down about them in the families. In what follows, I first explain the complex development of the perception of the expulsion of the German population in Czech public memory, then I develop a theoretical framework based on the existing literature on haunted heritage, and finally, I present three families that own and use confiscated objects and their stories. Furthermore, I focus on my role as a historian and ethnographer in creating categories such as “post-displacement materiality” and introducing them to conversations with my interview partners.

The Expulsion and Its Memory

Besides the polarizing nature of social media, the heated debate about the aforementioned luggage found in the attic also shows different opinions about the expulsion or the legacy of the German Bohemians. Since 1946, the debate about these topics has been politicized and its various aspects were emphasized or suppressed depending on the current political, cultural, and social development of the Czechoslovak state. The vast body of literature on the topic of memory of expulsion illustrates the traumatic nature of this event and its memory (see, for example, Hahnová – Hahn 2023).

I identify two basic narratives on the event but focus on the role of materiality and property in them. Although these two narratives have been

2 Therefore, I use the term Reichenberg when referring to pre-War history and the name Liberec when referring to the post-War history of the city.

dominant at different times, they cannot be clearly separated in time. Additionally, I do not claim that they are always in opposition, many texts or events could bear traces of both and to some extent, both have always coexisted in the Czech public debate. These narratives “do not in any way equate with ‘material reality’”. They can be described as “relationships between facts, that is to say, the interpretation of events and of collective, as well as individual, experience of reality. Historical interpretations thus consist of narratives about events from different perspectives” (Wodak – Heer 2008: 1). Therefore, these two narratives are different interpretations of the past or – in this case – different interpretations ascribed to material objects, that both consist of and shape individual experience.

Settlers in the Nationalist Narrative

After the War, the expulsion of the German Bohemians was interpreted as a solution to a “century-old conflict” (Spurný 2011: 31). The perception of a conflict between two separate groups became dominant only during the Czech national awakening (especially after 1848) when ethnic communities living side by side for centuries began to divide politically and culturally (King 2002). Moreover, this narrative was dominant in the interwar period in the First Czechoslovak Republic. Although this state was the home of the German Bohemians, it was politically dominated by ethnic Czechs (Heimann 2009).

The nationalist narrative was further developed under the communist regime. During the Cold War, the danger of “German revanchism”, i.e. that the armies of the Western bloc would seek to reverse the results of World War 2, and thereby endanger the lives of the newcomers, was emphasized (Kratochvíl 2015).

In this narrative, the newcomers are *settlers*, those who have a long-term rightful claim to German property because Czechs and Slovaks belong naturally to Czechoslovakia and suffered during the Nazi occupation. With their hard work, they would use the property for further development of Czechoslovakia. On the other hand, the German Bohemians were depicted regarding their class, i.e. as stereotypical “rich Germans” who enriched themselves at the expense of the Czechs for centuries, and their loss of property was a levelling of not only the ethnic but also the class order.

Gold Diggers in the Liberal Narrative

The public debate on the expulsion opened up after 1989 and the establishment of liberal democracy in Czechoslovakia – and later in the Czech

Republic – created space for another narrative: this time, a liberal one. It became dominant, especially in liberal post-dissident media and popular culture such as in the novel *Vyhnání Gerty Schnirch* (“The Expulsion of Gerta Schnirch”, Tučková 2009) or movies such as *Habermannův mlýn* (“The Habermann’s Mill”, Juraj Herz 2010) or *Krajina ve stínu* (“Shadow Country”, Bohdan Sláma 2020). It acknowledged the suffering of the German Bohemians and also presented the expulsion as a loss to the Czech society – not only economically, but also culturally and morally.

This narrative also evolved for decades and developed especially in dissident circles as another negative feature of communist regimes (Feindt 2015). Also, the liberal narrative with its emphasis on loss and neglect created a shared image of borderlands as a decaying and deprived region where new inhabitants do not have a deep relationship with the region and the property they acquired.

Furthermore, this narrative challenged the meaning of property confiscation. As it gave voice to the German Bohemians (who were depicted as hard-working common people mostly from rural or small-town settings), it focused attention on feelings of loss and emotional attachment to mundane objects that they needed to leave behind. Also, the image of resettlement or of newcomers themselves darkened. The label “wild west” became used to describe the period and newcomers were therefore described often as *gold diggers* – those who take property from the German Bohemians and often destroy it and who have no relations with both the property and the region.

At the same time, this new narrative has always been challenged and it did not replace the nationalist narrative and the confiscated property also played a role in these disputes. The fear of German claims was such that it played a role in the Czech Republic’s accession to the European Union (Domnitz 2007). In 2013, in his presidential campaign Miloš Zeman argued that if his opponent Karel Schwarzenberg (a descendant of a Czech noble family who spent a significant part of his life in exile in Austria) wins, he will allow the confiscations to be abolished and the descendants of the German Bohemians will demand the return of their property. This claim was understood as playing a role in his subsequent victory in the election (especially in the borderland) (Holub 2013). In her case study, Wyss describes why the current political representation of the Silesian town Opava (in the northeastern Czech Republic) refuses to install a monument to the expelled Germans in the city, and how her research partners describe the current residents’ fear of loss of property (Wyss 2023). All of this proves that the debate about the role and consequences of the expulsion of the German Bohemians in Czech history was and remains highly political, and at the same time, materiality played an important role in competing narratives and the remembrance of the expulsion.

Throughout this debate, people lived their daily lives alongside confiscated belongings and in houses originally occupied by the German Bohemians. The original nationalist narrative that the Czechs had suffered and were therefore entitled to German property was challenged by the liberal narrative that depicted Czechs as gold diggers. If the expulsion in this new narrative was wrong and caused suffering to the German Bohemians – what is the status of things that draw attention to this historical event?

In what follows, I focus on three family narratives, the positions in which place their families in these narratives, and the strategies they use to explain their role in these historical processes. I am interested in how they explain the ownership of post-displacement objects their role in their family narrative and their family's place in the history of Liberec.

Theorizing Post-Displacement Heritage

Liberec after World War 2 could be seen as “void”, a term promoted by Anna Wylegała (2021) as a new concept to describe post-War reality in Poland and Ukraine, but also in other regions in Central and Eastern Europe that lost ethnic or social communities during the Holocaust, and experienced ethnic cleansing, displacement or forced migrations of the 20th century.

The German Bohemians (but also German-speaking Jews or Sinti from Reichenberg) also disappeared as a result of these events, and these voids were to be filled by new communities (Czechs, Slovaks, and other newcomers) in a process that included property changes (both legal and illegal) and filling the social positions of the disappeared communities (Wylegała 2021: 430). It resulted in an emergence of “no neighbours lands”, which the author defines as a “land of communities deprived of certain groups of people through radicalized ideologies, such as nationalism and communism, as well as occupation and war” (Wylegała – Rutar 2023: 4).

Both “void” or “no neighbour's land” are new concepts in the field of study of the ethnically diverse past of Central and Eastern Europe that otherwise has been studied for decades. Attention was paid to the topic of ethnic identities and their (in)stability in the period before World War 2 (Zahra 2010; Judson 2023), as well as to the problem of why these multi-ethnic communities disintegrated during and after World War 2 (Burzlaff 2019; Snyder 2010). One of the reasons for such large-scale violence in the communities that might have seemed idyllic before the War was a desire for property. Therefore, property changes became the topic of research interest in the last decade, with prominent attention being paid to Jewish property and the reluctance of authorities to return it to survivors (Dean 2010; Klacsmann 2016; 2020). It was precisely this reluctance to restore the pre-War order that

was also identified by scholars researching property changes in different contexts such as formerly German ones (Kończal 2017; Zborowska 2019).

However, the so-called memory turn gave another impulse to research these topics after 2000. Scholars made efforts to understand how various “voids” – using Wylegala’s term – are understood, forgotten, or remembered nowadays (Törnquist – Plewa – Petersson 2009; Amosova 2011). A possible combination of these two streams (memory of the past and property changes) was demonstrated by Kurpiel and Maniak who interviewed Polish families that possess objects left by German-speaking inhabitants of the now-Polish cities of Szczecin and Wrocław. In turn, the researchers claim that these objects could be understood as “adopted heritage” (Kurpiel – Maniak 2024).

The question of Czech-German coexistence has been a fundamental axis of modern Czech historiography since its beginnings. It was already František Palacký in his *Dějiny národu českého v Čechách a v Moravě* (“The History of the Czech Nation in Bohemia and Moravia”) (Palacký 1968–1973, first published 1848–1876) who established its understanding as an eternal conflict between Slavdom and Germandom, this framework discussed and attacked since then was changed only in the second half of the 20th century (Křen 2013). Furthermore, more recently, even the idea of two separate ethnic groups existing in the Czech lands has been questioned (King 2002). Research on the expulsion of German-speaking communities as the final chapter of this topic is a large area of research that was established especially after 1989. In Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, this topic was largely overlooked or politicized, and therefore in the 1990s historians had to describe even the basic contours of this process such as the scale or number of deaths of the Germans. In this sense, the work of *Vyhnání Němců z Československa* (“The Expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia”) is seminal (Staněk 1991). Staněk continued his work and his multi-volume edition *Vysídlení Němců a proměny českého pohraničí* (“Forced Resettlement of Germans and Changing Borderlands of Czechia”) written with Adrian von Arburg that described the expulsion in depth on national as well as local levels (Arburg – Staněk 2009; 2010; 2011; 2020). When Czechoslovak archives became open, the topic was studied by international authors as well, and from different perspectives such as Glassheim’s studies about the environmental devastation of the borderlands (Glassheim 2006) or Gerlach’s focus on property changes (Gerlach 2017).

Gradually, ethnographic memory studies (Spalová 2017; Wyss 2023) and oral history approaches (Nosková – Kreisslová 2018) were used to describe the expulsion and especially its lasting consequences on communities, families, and individuals.

Less attention has been paid to the process of resettlement in recent decades although this stream of research has a longer tradition. To ensure the integration of newcomers, their demography has been studied since the 1970s, attention has been paid especially to ethnic minorities, such as Roma (Grulich – Haišman 1986) or Slovaks (Nosková 1984; 1989). The continuity of this trend is manifested in the books by Spurný (2011) who focused on Roma and ethnically different newcomers in post-war borderlands or by Nosková (2007) who collected stories of ethnic Czechs from Volhynia and Nosková, Kreisslová, and Pavlásek (2019) who talked with families of Czech newcomers from Yugoslavia.

In general, Czech research has focused on the event of expulsion and its memory, and the research on resettlement has concentrated on ethnic minorities and mostly in rural areas while both streams omitted property changes as a crucial factor in population changes.

My text also focuses on memories – public/collective and individual/familial. It is not my aim to add to the ongoing methodological discussions about the exact relationship between these categories, but I use them as working categories to understand the stories I collected. I consider the narratives described above as collective memory and stories I collected as individual memories. They influence each other in a way described by Rosenthal: “A significant assumption happens to be the practice of remembering generated over and over again, and thus changes the collective memories of various societal groupings in diverse historical and institutional contexts. The process of remembering is determined by the now of remembering and its influential discourse and collective memories, especially those belonging to the established grouping. However, it also interacts with the experienced past of those who remember and those who communicate it, as also with the collective stocks of knowledge established and internalized over generations.” (Rosenthal 2015: 32–33) Therefore, the personal stories I have collected are taking place in a social world shaped by collective memory and its larger narratives.

To add a new theoretical framework to this field that has been studied thoroughly, I use hauntology as developed by Jacques Derrida who used the term first in his work *Spectres of Marx* (Derrida 2006). Hauntology is an alternative ontology of hidden phenomena that has then been developed into a full-scale theoretical and research framework and this development can be called spectral turn (Pilar Blanco – Peeren 2013: 2). Hauntology gained prominence as a theoretical framework that focuses on phenomena that are hidden, suppressed or omitted from mainstream perspectives. Post-displacement spaces that usually have a hidden layer of memory or forgotten violence are phenomena that were studied extensively within this

framework, such as places of Soviet terror (Etkind 2009) or mythologies connected with World War 2 (Traa 2020).

During my fieldwork, I had many encounters when my research partners tried to pronounce how they feel like something in the borderland is not right, and sometimes the language of a ghost story offered concepts for describing those feelings. “This is not a nice region, the locals told me that those who came after the War seldom find their luck here...” (from the field notes, fall 2023). Thus, to some extent, I follow Ćwiek-Rogalska, who proposed hauntology as a research framework for the study of the Czech borderlands. She understands the entire region as a haunted landscape because it is a region that has undergone drastic social changes and since then “bears traces of uncanniness” (Ćwiek-Rogalska 2020: 32). Her thesis, however, is based on an analysis of interviews collected by Czechoslovak ethnographers in the 1980s, where newcomers in Silesia described the houses they had inhabited after the War and where they had to cope with reminders of the previous inhabitants’ lives. My research, in turn, describes this relationship after several decades and in different social and regional contexts. I used the concept of a “ghost” which is a reminder of the repressed past (e.g. German past) and I consider the post-displacement objects ghosts because of their ability to trigger memories or feelings connected with the post/War expulsion and resettlement. Thus, these objects were the starting points of my interviews.

Methodology

The objects and stories that this text introduces were encountered during my fieldwork in Liberec in the spring of 2023.

This case study complements existing research not only on displacement from Czechoslovakia but also from other Central European countries and adds a specific local perspective. How settlement took place in the individual regions is determined not only by each country’s legal regulations but also by geographic location (peripheral versus central), and ethnic composition (predominantly German, predominantly Czech, mixed, multi-ethnic) and these features differ also within one country. Peripheral areas were settled later and less successfully, and in ethnically mixed areas, for example, where a larger proportion of the pre-War population remained, the position of newcomers and their relationship to materiality may have been different. I have chosen Liberec as my field because it does not fit the dominant Czech idea of the borderland and as such it enables me to introduce another important factor: class. Most research has focused on rural areas in currently deprived Czech regions (Váně – Stočes 2016), and

Liberec has largely retained the economic and cultural status of Reichenberg. As an industrial centre, Liberec had properties that were attractive to Czech newcomers. Major cities were at full capacity relatively soon after the War (Wiedemann 2016: 81). In my research, I focus directly on the neighbourhoods where well-off Germans lived, which conformed to the stereotypical image of “rich Germans” whose possessions could be used by the newcomers. It should be kept in mind that both their wealth and Germanness could have been newcomers’ illusions – people who lived in the Czech borderlands and had to leave could have different ethnic and linguistic identities (Wyss 2023: 361) and the all-encompassing label “Germans” could only be attributed to them after the War, and in the same way the non-Germans could only guess about the original inhabitants’ class affiliation.

The traditional and dominant expectation in the field of ethnography is that the researcher is coming from “outside” and trying to get “inside” (community, locality, topic) (Alvesson 2009: 157). But I have chosen the field where I was an insider from the beginning because Liberec is my hometown. I always wanted to find out how people thought about things that were not talked about publicly here. I began my research by asking my childhood friends a question that was not asked during our teenage years, “Do you still have some German stuff?”

Therefore, I conducted what Alvesson calls ethnography at home, i.e. “a study and a text in which the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a ‘natural access’ and in which s/he is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants” (Alvesson 2009: 158). I was on equal terms with other participants because we shared stories rather than me listening to them. But it meant that I also had different roles than a researcher – a friend, child of a friend, or friend of a child. I illustrate this existing embeddedness in social networks in my ethnographic writing by focusing on the details of my relationships with interview partners, which have a history before my research and will continue after it. By focusing on details that are not necessarily related to the primary research question, I give the reader a glimpse into the depth of these social relationships.

Gradually, my first interview partners gave me contacts to other families, where I did not have a previous relationship. Apart from that, I was also simply going around the older districts of Liberec and addressing people who entered the houses that I identified as “post-displacement heritage”. I worked in the neighbourhoods built pre-War, especially in the residential quarter with villas built at the time of the German-Bohemian Exhibition.

Even without a previous relationship with these groups of interview part-

ners, I still consider myself an insider because we shared some knowledge about the space and the history of the city. The position of a researcher is always influenced by the context of research and he or she is ascribed certain roles based on gender, class, or age. In this respect doing ethnography at home is one of these contexts that cannot be eliminated, only reflected. I also believe that ethnography at home is a way to communicate and give back to the community and therefore is more productive than traditional ethnography or anthropology when the position of outsider was connected with exploitation and othering of cultures (Sillitoe 2007).

What I consider a problematic bias of my research is that my methodology tends to reproduce my middle-class background with high cultural capital – as my childhood friends have the same background and when they connect me with other people, they also usually share this class position. It is also a group where family memories might be shared more often and people have the cultural capital to vocalize them in a shared language. For example, Roma migration to the borderlands was an important demographic stream that shapes Czech society until today, but the lower social status of the contemporary Roma population has consequences such as lower life expectancy, unstable family situation, or unstable housing. All these things lessen the possibility of having a family history to share or even have time to share it. To tackle this issue, I will employ different methodological strategies in the next phases of my research. This article gives a glimpse into the situation of specific families that do not represent the social situation of Liberec as a whole.

All in all, from ten robust family histories (that included more interview partners and complex inquiry) I acquired about a third of the research partners through previously existing contacts, a third were approached randomly, and the final third was introduced to me by my previous interview partners. In this article, two of the stories are those of families I partly knew from my childhood and the last one is someone who I met by chance in a local antique bookshop. The choice of stories is deliberate as I intend to show different aspects of my findings.

From Reichenberg to Liberec – Property, Confiscation and Distribution

The family stories that I collected are rooted in specific local and historical contexts. To enable their understanding, I describe what the expulsion and resettlement look like in northern Bohemia. Reichenberg gained importance in the last third of the 19th century as a rapidly expanding center of the textile industry and became the German Bohemians' political and cultural center. The event that celebrated the economic success of Ger-

man Bohemians was the German-Bohemian Exhibition (German *Deutsch-Böhmische Ausstellung*) in 1906. In the aftermath, the German-speaking bourgeoisie built a neighbourhood of ostentatious villas that represented their wealth and social class in the place where the exhibition took place. (Figures 1 and 2)



Figures 1, 2 Villas of the German-speaking bourgeoisie characteristic of Liberec were popular among Czech newcomers and are an example of post-displacement heritage. Photo by author.

After the First World War, the German Bohemians found themselves living in the new state, Czechoslovakia, and many of them did not choose to live in a state that was dominated by ethnic Czechs. Reichenberg was the capital of the short-lived Provinz Deutschböhmen that in the turmoil at the end of the First World War attempted to remain part of Austria or Germany, but the Czechoslovak army occupied the province already in December 1918.

During World War 2, Reichenberg once again played an important role as it became the capital of the new Reichsgau Sudetenland, part of the Third Reich Germany.

Already during the War, a plan began to emerge to prevent further conflicts between the national groups. Namely, in the event of the victory of the Allies, a goal that Czechoslovak troops in exile were also fighting for,

the German population was to leave post-War Czechoslovakia (Brandes 2009). This scenario played out after the War, as in other Central European states with a German minority (Prauser – Rees 2004). In Czechoslovakia, more than two and a half million people had to leave (Frommer 2005: 61). The borderlands where the majority of the German Bohemians used to live were to become the site of a social revolution, where ethnic Czechs (but also Slovaks, Ruthenians or Roma) could aspire to the jobs and properties of the expelled German Bohemians. In some regions, the German Bohemians were waiting for the expulsion transports in special camps. In Liberec, which attracted large numbers of newcomers, such a camp was set up near the villa neighbourhood (Bittnerová 2001).

Post-War months in the borderlands were also characterized by excessive violence. In Liberec, irregular armed groups called Revolutionary Guards (Revoluční gardy in Czech) that consisted of Czech volunteers investigated, captured, tortured, and often killed German citizens to the extent that their actions were stopped by establishing the Czechoslovak security forces, even at a time that otherwise ignored ethnic violence (Ryklová 2021). Unrestrained violence often came hand in hand with looting. People who were identified as “Czechs” could gain the apartments and houses (of which many were empty) of those labelled “Germans” and take their property (Kończal 2017: 112).

Amid the violence, Czech authorities made great efforts to redistribute the property of “Germans, Hungarians, and national traitors” that was officially confiscated by the Presidential decree nr. 108/1945 (Dekret 1945). In Liberec, those ostentatious villas were particularly in demand. Newcomers were allocated flats by the newly established authority called the National Committee (Národní komise in Czech). Tenants were also entitled to use furniture, crockery, or art objects, which in most cases were original inventory. Users were only able to buy the confiscated furnishings of their flats gradually in the late 1940s.

The furniture I am interested in is used daily, it is in plain sight every day, but people rarely think about it in depth and have only a vague idea of how and why it is in their family. The pieces of furniture are only pieces of a bigger story of why and how the family came to Liberec and these personal stories are narrated in accordance with larger public narratives of the expulsion that were re-interpreted several times in the post-War period.

First Story – Jan’s Family and Stories of Justification

I had not actually seen the first piece of furniture, it had just been described to me in detail by various people – a dark, round table, so sturdy

that it was fit for gatherings of the family through generations. I was first told about the table by a high school classmate of mine who used to play under the table in his grandfather's apartment. One day at our regular lunch together, when I told him about my new job, he said, "*It's a pity my grandfather passed away, his apartment was full of German furniture*" (from the field notes, October 2022). I was quite surprised because I had no idea that a young man working in IT still thought about the heritage of his family and his city as "German".

After a few weeks, I met with Jan's mum, who I think I only saw at our graduation ball, and she enthusiastically told me about the confiscated table she and, a few decades later, Jan played under. The table was in the apartment where Jan's grandfather had come as a young man with his parents from the Vysočina region in the centre of Czechia in the summer of 1945.

In fact, every family story that I have heard contains some explanation as to why this particular family had come to Liberec. In the case of this family, it was not only the necessity of their profession in the borderland (the father was a railwayman), but their love of outdoor life and skiing is now used as evidence of why these people belonged in the mountainous North Bohemian borderland. I call these elements justification stories, as they appear in every family story I listened to.

Jan's ancestors directly experienced the displacement and the violence associated with it – Jan's mother was the only person who, among my interview partners, mentioned that directly. According to her story, when the German Bohemians were leaving their apartments (it is not mentioned in the narrative, but it could have been directly to the train station or to the collection camps where the German Bohemians were waiting for transport), a neighbour of this family tore a gold chain from the neck of one of the Germans. Since then, Jan's great-grandmother "did not like this neighbour" but this dislike was not illustrated by any concrete examples or situated in time (Interview with H. F.). As in the liberal narrative, violence towards the German Bohemians is recognized and condemned in this family story, but it is done by "others", namely people who would fit into the category of "gold diggers" while this family would fit into the image of "settlers".

Yet, Jan's family have other ways of legitimizing their arrival in the post-War town that would fit into the nationalistic narrative – the German family who lived in the flat previously were, according to the interview partner (and she lowered her voice when she said the word): "Nazis". I asked (lowered my voice as well): "*How did you know?*" – "*There were various documents and photos.*" (Interview with H. F.) But these photos are long gone and the interview partner does not even know if she really saw them or just someone told her they existed. But still, the Nazi symbols or uniforms that presum-

ably were in the photos are a strong symbol of ultimate evil in the Czech culture. Here, they are also a symbol that justifies the expulsion or on an individual level a symbol that justifies that one family replaces another family in the flat. Nazi symbols, which can be just a sign that these people lived in a certain period, play the same role in the case of luggage found in Krnov because they would evoke the core of the nationalistic narrative that the German Bohemians equal Nazis and therefore it was right that they had to leave.

The table, the only object left from the German family, is hidden like a ghost in a garage, but according to my interview partner it is only because it is already so important to her family, it cannot be thrown away and is just waiting for the next generation to place it in their home.

Second Story – Pavel’s Family and Stories of Absolution

I was able to see the second piece of furniture up close – in a photo from the 1980s where extended family celebrates Christmas (Figure 3). The snapshot was taken after dinner, there are still dishes on the table but the family members are already unwrapping presents, showing them to each other and looking at them. In the background is a huge display cabinet with a glass top in which cups and vases are visible. This part of the furniture is also dark, historicizing, and bourgeois giving the whole scene a Biedermeier character.



Figure 3 Photo from a Christmas celebration in 1982 shows furniture left behind by the original German inhabitants, which became part of the newcomers’ family heritage. Photo from the family archive.

I met a member of this family in an antique book shop. It is a place that sells vintage books and when I was a kid, old books in German were displayed in a window facing the street, making it one of the few places that somehow reminded me of the city's German past. Today, crumbled German books are displayed for purchase in the furthest corner of the store. But I can spend hours there looking for messages and names in old books and postcards. This time, however, there were two of us digging through them. Driven by an innate obligation that the best research is, after all, the one with lots of interviews, I asked the middle-aged man: "*Are you interested in local history? I'm doing that kind of research and I'm wondering when did your family come to Liberec?*"

We met a few weeks later in a cafe for an interview and he brought me photos of his family celebrating Christmas in the 1980s. Pavel's grandparents had arrived already in 1945 and started living in a villa in the neighbourhood that was created after the German-Bohemian Exhibition. Pavel's grandfather was a lawyer, who had previously lived in Prague, where he was only an associate, while in Liberec he had acquired his own practice.

Pavel also told me that his grandparents did not choose Liberec by chance but had a relationship with it – they used to come here for summer camps even before the War. This is another version of the justification story, which although narrated as something unique, is an important part of all newcomers' stories.

However, Pavel's family also had a specific experience of the post-War borderlands – for several months they lived in the house together with its original inhabitants (Interview with P. Š.). Public and media memory is dominated by images of newcomers arriving in deserted villages and houses, this encourages the impression that the borderland was a "no man's land" needed to be cared for. But particularly in large cities that could not accommodate a large influx of newcomers in the first months after the War, newcomers often shared houses with the German Bohemians. According to Pavel, the Germans who lived in their house were an elderly couple. He evaluates this cohabitation as his family expressing mercy, they did not want these elderly people to be forced to join the camp where people gathered while waiting for transport (Interview with P. Š.). This element of the story is used to prove that his grandparents were not gold-diggers.

But there is another central motive that stands out clearly in their family story, and that is the return of the Germans after many decades, and that it is a peaceful return. The people who formerly lived in Pavel's family's house also came here after many years. Pavel does not remember when this happened but rather assumes from the context that it was after 1989. The German Bohemians were able to visit their former homeland shortly after

the expulsion. Kresisslová and Nosková call the fast development of this kind of tourism in the late 1950s a “boom” (Kreisslová – Nosková 2020: 447). Also, the story was told in such a way that these were the original inhabitants who left in 1946 and also came back – but later in the discussion, we conclude that it was more likely that they were their descendants. What is at the heart of the story is that they arrived, sat in the house, and enjoyed the visit.

Similarly to justification stories, these “stories of absolution” are not as unique as they are presented. “Germans” also came to Jan’s family. In neither narrative do we know much more about the visit – for example, who in the family received it? Jan’s mother first told the story in which she was present at the meeting when the former residents’ descendants came to the place, however, later we talked about the fact that it was unlikely and that it was more likely someone else from the family was present (Interview with H. F.). She did not know when it happened (before 1989 or after), nor did she know too much about how it took place – the most important thing is the symbolic value of the visit. Someone from the past came and was welcomed into the house (symbolizing that the receiving families are not afraid, and have nothing to be ashamed of) and at the same time, the visit was not repeated or further contact lasted – the pleasant nature of the visit is a symbolic confirmation that the German Bohemians are happy, they did not come to reproach or demand anything.

These “stories of absolution” oppose the central motive of the nationalistic narrative that “Germans” will come back with force and demand their property and as such threaten the existence of “settlers.” The families that I spoke to in Liberec position themselves differently – because they do not see themselves as “gold diggers” but as people who have a relationship with the city and the region, they also see themselves as those who can open the door for the former inhabitants and their reaction is interpreted as a confirmation.

Pavel whose relationship to the city’s past is so strong that he calls himself a descendant of the German Bohemians and therefore his family’s possession of the display cabinet is seen as a kind of custodianship.

Third Story – Where Everything Gets More Complicated

I could already physically experience the third piece of furniture, comfortable armchairs with carved details (in dark wood and antique style, of course). I sat on them during a conversation that was not originally supposed to be about furniture. It was again an interview with the mum of my high school friend. I already knew the story of Tom’s family before my

research in Liberec. I had been close to Tom in high school and so I knew his family more. While other family stories are fragmented and people often do not know in detail about the pre-War lives of their families (like Pavel or Jan), Tom talked about his family history even during our teenage years and this history was firmly rooted in Liberec.

Usually, when I want to find out if a friend or even a stranger would be suitable for an interview, I first ask “*And when did your family come to Liberec?*” because the assumption is that the social history of the city began in 1946 after the biggest wave of the expulsion. Yet this question is not precise enough as many pre-War residents stayed in Liberec – anti-fascists, people from mixed marriages or professionals, Czechs, German Bohemians, or other ethnicities.

This is also the case of Tom’s ethnically Czech family who lived in Liberec at least since the end of the 19th century. During World War 2 when Reichenberg became part of the Third Reich, Tom’s grandfather with his parents left for the Czech interior and came back after the liberation. Because they knew the town before the War, Tom’s great-grandfather became an important figure in the distribution of property in post-War Liberec. Especially valuable objects were taken from confiscated houses and apartments to museums or other institutions and this selection was done by Tom’s great-grandfather who was a visual artist. I did not know this story in such detail but when I did archival research about property distribution, I came across the name of Tom’s great-grandfather. Since these are publicly available records, I shared them with him and asked if he or his family members knew more.

I went to see Tom’s mother in their apartment in a socialist high-rise building, which in no way resembles the German past of the city. I did not expect to talk about furniture, because this family were no “settlers” or were they? After talking for a while, it turned out that Tom’s mother did not know much about the activities of her grandfather, who to some extent oversaw the post-War property changes and passed away when she was still a child. So I asked about the beautiful antique furniture, which the apartment was full of and which was almost too big for the socialist modernism character of the apartment. The first answer was that it was her grandparents’. She had previously described their pre-War household as very poor and said that they lived in one room. Did they have all the vintage furniture from her apartment in that room, after all? We started talking about the house where Tom’s mother used to visit her grandfather, who, as it turned out, did not return to his previous home after the War, but to the villa of a fellow German artist. “*I think they knew each other and that maybe the painter would have been glad that someone who cared and understood*

the stuff got it”, she said referring to arts supplies left in the house as well (Figure 4). (Interview with K. T.)



Figure 4 Art supplies, which were left behind by a German painter in the house where the family moved after the War, are still on display in the home of interview partner. Photo by author.

So, even in this story, there was a basic distinction between those who deserved things and cared about them and those who did not – with the narrator’s family falling into the first category, this time because this family had a connection not only with the city but also with the former inhabitants.

In the case of Tom’s family, there were no German Bohemians who would return and sanctify the property change. But the need for a “story of absolution” has already materialized in popular culture. When talking about displacement in general, Tom’s mother mentioned the book “The Return under the Green Roof” (*Návrat pod zelenou střechu 2004*) by Isa Engelmann, a memoir written by a woman who had to leave her family home (the green-roofed Reichenberg villa close to Pavel’s family house) as a young girl and returned in the 1990s. In the book, she describes the gradual establishment of a relationship with the villa’s Czech inhabitants. Bringing this book into the conversation, Tom’s mother also brought a perspective that was missing in other family stories that overlooked the perspective of people who are characterized only as “Germans” – family or individual names never persisted in Jan’s or Pavel’s family histories. But Engelmann also describes feelings of loss or anger that were either not visible or were ignored during visits to former homes. With this ending “The Return under the Green Roof House” is part of a cultural production connected with the liberal narrative not only with its emphasis on the German perspective but also with the focus on com-

ing to terms with the past through dialogue. Eventually, Tom's mother cited the book as confirming her view that the expulsion was a negative thing but that the German Bohemians, or simply "Germans" today are happy to have someone looking after their heritage (Interview with K. T.).

The story of this family thus confirms the narratives I have described for previous families, but also problematizes them.

On the one hand, it blurs the line between the original inhabitants and the newcomers. Tom's family is more firmly established in Liberec and the framework of their narrative is older. On the other hand, this family participated in the transfer of property just as much as those who had no ties to this city and as such this story further distorts the idea of "gold diggers" who take property because they do not have a connection to the place. On the contrary, in this case, they got hold of property because they had a connection to the place.

Their antique furniture retains its mystery though. Tom's mother has concluded that it was indeed probably property confiscated from the German Bohemians, but she never thought about it before.

I illustrate above how families in general tend to soften their participation in the redistribution but in this case, we could not be sure if the furniture came from the house of the German painter after all. Maybe it belonged to Tom's family long before 1946, maybe they bought it in the 1960s.

Is my role as an ethnographer to point out the way the property was acquired? Maybe while looking for ghosts I am creating them instead. "*I'll never look at that furniture in the same way again,*" Tom's mother told me (Interview with K. T. 2023: 7). She referred to the fact that she is now seeing a layer of history she did not see before in an everyday object but that may not be real and is just imagined. "*It is like this book about a Jewish girl that I have read recently.*" It was the second time she reached for literature to frame or explain her own story. This time she added another possible layer, even if the furniture was from the painter's house, it could actually have been confiscated before from a Jewish household. All these ifs are layering and it is not only me as an ethnographer who is bringing them to the story but the storytellers themselves are bringing ghosts to life.

Conclusions

I was searching for post-displacement objects and found three complex narratives. Three families who still live with objects that were confiscated from the German Bohemians told me their stories. Although each is highly personal and passed down within the families as something unique, they all have a similar structure and contain elements with a similar purpose. Also,

the pieces of furniture are similar – historicizing and quality pieces. Only these were chosen to be preserved by families when other post-displacement objects were not interesting both in terms of function and aesthetics. In some ways, their preservation fulfils the premise of the national narrative – the social uplift promised to newcomers who could and wanted to aspire to the living standards of the German upper middle class.

But families that I talked to would in general share what I have identified as the liberal narrative. They evaluate the expulsion as an event that negatively affected the region. The liberal narrative poses a challenge to the family stories of newcomers because in general, it darkens the image of the resettlement process. Every family narrative contains a justification of why this particular family should have come to Liberec or why they had a relationship with it before the War to distinguish themselves from “gold diggers” who came randomly and just happened to get the property. These liberal family narratives do not deny the violence that was associated with the displacement, but they exclude their family from it. Any doubts about what took place in 1945–1946 are then resolved by another element of the narrative, which is absolution. This role is in turn played by stories about the return of the Germans (physical or symbolic) who confirm the current order of things. In this narrative, the materiality (furniture) is considered as an adopted heritage (Kurpiel – Maniak 2024) – families of former newcomers who are rooted in Liberec cherish the remaining post-displacement heritage as a reminder of their families or they see themselves as caretakers of longer tradition.

My methodology does not allow me to tell if this narrative has changed over time. Whether it has only developed in response to the dominance of the liberal narrative in the media and public memory and has inflated the nationalistic narrative? However, it is also possible that the people who directly experienced the expulsion (even as bystanders) had to create explanatory or exculpatory narratives that complemented the nationalistic narrative already in the 1940s.

During my fieldwork, I often questioned the hauntology framework I was working with as in general people were open to sharing stories of confiscated houses or furniture so it is not precise to call this memory suppressed. Once again, this can also be a methodological fallacy. I can describe in-depth only the stories that people were willing to share, not those that people felt uneasy to talk about or refused to talk at all and I had several encounters like this generally with people from older generations. But this post-displacement heritage can still be considered a ghost: hauntological research tends to describe a state of suppression of phenomena but it can also describe a process when a phenomenon is losing its ghostly nature. Ćwiek-Rogalska calls activities that enabled newcomers to feel at home

“exorcism” (Ćwiek-Rogalska 2020: 44). Stories of absolution are a kind of linguistic exorcism. The return of the Germans was the main fear that was utilized in the nationalistic narrative and when the Germans came back in various forms, inviting them over and getting their approval (at least in the Czech perspective) was like breaking the spell and this enabled post-displacement materiality to become part of some kind of a shared Bohemian German heritage.

March 2024

Interviews

Interview with H. F., 2. 4. 2023, Liberec.

Interview with K. T., 27. 3. 2023, Liberec.

Interview with P. Š., 13. 4. 2023, Liberec.

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