

The narrative of migration and the example of DOMiD, Cologne

A case study by Leonie Meyer

1. Introduction

The association DOMiD – *Documentation Centre and Museum of Migration in Germany* was founded in Essen in 1990, in the year of the German reunification, by three former guest workers from Turkey. The goal of the founders was to keep alive the memories and the contribution of so-called guest workers to German post-war history, especially in the course of a newly forming all-German culture of remembrance. This was accomplished: today, DOMiD has the largest collection of objects and documented memories on the history of immigration to Germany since 1945 (cf. No. 1).

Since 1990, the association has consequently expanded its field of collection: It no longer focuses only on the heritage of Turkish guest workers, but also on any immigration heritage, regardless of a specific origin. In order to convey this material and immaterial to German society, the association cooperates in its program work with various German cultural and educational institutions, including cultural offices, museums, universities and schools. In addition to its archival and educational work, the association has also been planning its own house, the Central Immigration Museum, since 2003. The idea was approved by the state of North Rhine-Westphalia in 2019 as part of space conversions. The museum is to be opened in Cologne in 2023 with a permanent exhibition (cf. No. 2).

Conceptually, DOMiD pursues the goal of a change in perspective: migration is to be conveyed as a normal case in history, not as its exception. Thus, DOMiD tries to communicate 'migration as the normal social case' to a wider audience, and for this, it uses the instruments mentioned above: research and collecting, lectures, publications, media-tion programs, special exhibitions and, soon, an own museum. With the help of this variety of "fragment(s) of a complex, diverse and transnational migration history" (Kolb/ Vacca 2016, p. 194), the association wants to create a new consciousness of identity concepts and, if possible, a sensibility for transcultural identity concepts.

Based on this situation, my Case Study poses the following question: How can this be achieved from the perspective of DOMiD? To approach this question, I will look at DOMiD and its narrative of migration in the archive. This archive being built to preserve

the immigrant heritage in Germany points out so-called 'blind spots' in the memory culture of the majority society. As an institution in its own right, DOMiD does not want to relinquish sovereignty over the interpretation of this heritage. For what reasons is this necessary from DOMiD's point of view? This question should also be answered. Methodically, I rely mainly on the website and secondary literature. A request for an interview with the management of the archive was initially granted, but this was cancelled again, which is why the analysis cannot be based on further first-hand information.

2. Historical Context: Immigration to Germany and guest work

In the 1950s and 60s, Germany was characterized by an economic boom that was accompanied by an enormous expansion of the labor market. The reason for recruiting foreign workers was an insufficient domestic labor force. In 1955, the Federal Republic concluded its first agreements with Italy and, in 1960, with Greece and Spain on the recruitment of workers from these countries. Corresponding agreements followed with Turkey (1961), Morocco (1963), Portugal (1964), Tunisia (1965) and Yugoslavia (1968). From the end of the 1950s until the "recruitment stop" in 1973, about 14 million foreign workers came to Western Germany, of whom about 11 million remained in the country only temporarily and returned to their home countries. Due to the oil crisis and rising unemployment, the recruitment of so-called "guest workers" was terminated in 1973. The background to this decision was also the increasing settlement of foreign workers in the self-declared "non-immigration country" of Western Germany (cf. Hanewinkel/ Oltmer 2017).

After the recruitment stop in November 1973, family reunification became increasingly important - 53 percent of residents of Turkish origin came to Germany this way. Planned as temporary labor migration, guest work now developed a momentum of its own and led to permanent immigration, largely detached from labor market needs. In the case of guest workers from Turkey, the recruitment stop reinforced the tendency to settle and to be joined by family members. Once they left, they had little chance to return. The legal situation after the recruitment freeze made it almost impossible to take up work again after a previous employment relationship had ended. For this reason, the group of Turkish nationals was the only one to grow in the years after the recruitment stop until 1980 - from 1.0 million in 1974 to 1.4 million in 1980. The proportion of women increased by around 21 percent between 1974 and 1979, and the number of under-15s from Turkey doubled to around 420,000 in the same period (cf. Luft 2014). As political and economic

conditions developed increasingly negatively especially in Turkey – civil war, a military coup and hyperinflation characterized the situation in the late 1970s and early 1980s, along with high unemployment among the Turkish rural population – guest workers' doubted more and more about the opportunities that would be offered by a possible return to the homeland. Reintegration into the domestic labor market was further complicated by high population growth. Turkish workers and their families were concentrated in individual neighborhoods in numerous cities. As a result, although the number of foreign workers decreased after the end of the recruitment period - from 2.6 million in 1973 to 1.6 million in 1989 - the foreign resident population grew from 3.97 million to 4.9 million due to family reunification during the same period (cf. Luft 2014).

3. Immigration as a topic of the social collective memory

As mentioned above, DOMiD's goal is to affect the collective memory of the mainstream society and to integrate the perspective of migrants as a minority into the public discourse on culture and history in Germany – a perspective that is still missing in many narratives of exhibitions or museums on cultural history until today (cf. Baur 2009).

Nevertheless, the topic of the "musealization of migration" (Baur 2009, pp. 15, my translation) has gained more attention in recent years. This is not only about temporary exhibitions or museum educational programs, but also about the fact that separate museums are founded around the complex of "migration" (Baur 2009, p. 15). The German museologist Joachim Baur cites DOMiD as an example of this development. The musealization of migration is increasingly becoming the focus of social discourse; in this context, it can be seen as a sign of change at both the local and the national level. The impetus for this redefinition comes not least from migrants themselves, who are more vehement in demanding their claims and representations in society (cf. Baur 2009, p. 16).

Crucial to this new social consciousness is also a historical re-perspectivization of West German postwar history and labor migration since the 1960s. The revision of two firm convictions contributed to this: on the one hand, migrant workers had long been marginalized by the majority society; on the other hand, many had considered their stay itself only short-term. Only gradually did awareness grow that this would not be the case, and with it came the demand for appropriate historical representation. Migration as a subject is therefore a product of society as a whole, taking up the impulse toward the greatest possible inclusivity and attempting to make visible long-neglected aspects of

social history. In the public debate about the museumization of migration, there has long been a dispute about whether Germany needs a migration museum (cf. Baur 2009, p. 16).

Aytaç Eryılmaz, board member of DOMiD, answers the question of making immigration visible as a social issue with the necessity of a museum of one's own. For him, only DOMiD itself comes into question as the operator of such a museum because none of the already existing German institutions of remembrance culture "specializes in the topic of migration" (Eryılmaz 2012, p. 45, my translation). In addition, for him, German post-war immigration has often been presented in a one-sided way from the perspective of the majority society. Despite the numerous special exhibitions since the 2000s, there is a lack of a multi-perspective presentation of immigration history. An institution like DOMiD, which has expertise and a large collection of objects related to migration history, can help make the historical memory of the immigration society visible and tangible. "For in the vision of the migration museum lies not only the cultural-political mission (...), but above all to recognize the relevance of migration for society as a whole" (Eryılmaz 2012, p. 47, my translation).

Thus, DOMiD as an institution offers new opportunities and perspectives, especially in terms of "creating space for the hybridity of cultural lifestyles and transnational lifestyles" because in an immigration society, identities are based more on "heterogeneity, border crossings, and intercultural exchange" (Eryılmaz 2012, p. 47, my translation). An exhibition of personal stories and biographies makes it possible to transfer "family stories that lie dormant in the hidden" to public discussions and to create a new cultural-political discourse. In this way, a new place is created where Germany can "discover and learn to understand itself" (Eryılmaz, 2012, p. 47, my translation) as a country of immigration. But such a place is also important for migrants, as it provides them and their second- or third-generation children with the space to experience their own history.

4. Hidden stories: the collection as a storage of memory

Like the museum, the archive is a highly complex institution concerned with the "acquisition, indexing, preservation, research and mediation" (Lepper/ Raulff 2016, p. VIII, my translation) of cultural heritage. DOMiD's archive collects documents as well as objects of immigrants in Germany in order to preserve the heritage of so called guest workers; most of these objects are personal-memorabilia. By offering them for research and

education, the archive is committed to create a shared memory of a post-migrated society. DOMiD also offers a selection of literature that deal with the topic and the change of German narratives. It can be ordered or downloaded free of charge (cf. No. 3).

Thus, the archive is also connected to the original intention of the Documentation Center: It is to document the personal and the community memory and to bring it to life by means of memorabilia. This collection has grown 'from the bottom up': almost all objects do not represent precious items, but entered the collection due to personal value for their owners (often as permanent loans). DOMiD thus preserves an archive of everyday testimonies of migrants that is unique in Germany (cf. No. 1).

The collecting activity had its beginning in the private environment of the first members of DOMiD, "with special emphasis on building trust with the lenders (...)", according to Eryilmaz (Eryilmaz 2012, p. 34, my translation). The first loans came from the founding members themselves and their acquaintances and relatives. Moreover, the "decision of lenders to give us materials (...) is usually very much influenced by the fact that DOMiD presents migration history from the migrants' perspective" (ibid., my translation). This is linked to the expectation that DOMiD does not present stereotypical images. The researchers also come from migrant communities and are familiar with their language and culture (cf. ibid.). Thus, there have already been requests to transfer these objects to municipal and state archives, but DOMiD hesitated, precisely because of Germany's long-standing refusal to see itself as a country of immigration and the frequent stereotypical portrayals of migrants in the media of the majority society (cf. Eryilmaz 2012 p. 35).

Over the past twenty years, DOMiD has thus been able to assemble a diverse collection of social, cultural and everyday historical evidence of the history of immigration to Germany. The thematic focus is in particular labor migration since the 1950s, policies on foreigners, social discourse on migration, everyday culture, and the cultural production of migrants. The collection includes a wide variety of object categories such as photos, objects, documents, books, newspapers, magazines, film and audio documents, and posters. The multitude of materials not only allows for multi-perspectivity and insights into the lifeworld of migrants, but also provides an important supplement to official sources.

The archive works with the assistance of a database. Among other things, the following information is stored in it: object name, object history, description, dating, location, subject area, size and material. This database makes it possible to search specifically for objects for exhibitions. Furthermore, there are objects on the subject of internal migration

from 1945 to the present day and numerous other points of contact on the subject of flight, expulsion, racism, resettlement or multilocal lifestyles. This variety of topics shows the complexity of the migration society as well as the "constant struggle for the principle of 'equal rights for all'", as the website says (cf. No. 1).

5. Narrating migration experiences through objects

Munich main station, platform 11, 1963. A Turkish migrant worker gets off a train. The tiredness after the journey and the mustache makes him appear older than he probably is. Despite his long journey, he does not have much luggage with him: a stuffed bag, an umbrella and a plastic bottle. Concentrated, almost cautious, he climbs down the steep steps of the train door. It probably has to be done quickly. (Kolb/ Vacca 2016, p. 197).



Fig. 1: Turkish migrant worker, Munich Central Station, Selahattin Kaya / DOMiD Archive, Cologne

As Kolb and Vacca point out, in this photograph we see an almost inconspicuous looking bottle in the hand of the man in the foreground. Today the bottle is one of the collected objects in the archive of DOMiD. You can only speculate about how and why it ultimately ended up in the archive. Was the bottle kept because personal memories are associated with it? Was it simply forgotten in the cellar and then found again years later?

What mattered, and still matters today, is the backstory. When it was given to DOMiD, a new meaning was ascribed to this bottle. It was transformed from a everyday object into

a "relevant object" of migration history (Kolb/ Vacca 2016, pp. 197). With this object is connected a history, which can be revived by the memento in the collection of DOMiD. Mementos recall past events that they can neither fully represent nor capture, but which they can symbolize. Assmann speaks here of a "process of constant losing and creating" (Assmann 2006, p. 16). In characterizing these objects, Kolb and Vacca avoid the term "objects of migration" but speak of "testimony(s) of a particular time and history that can be interpreted differently by different people" (Kolb & Vacca, 2016, p. 197).

DOMiD strives to learn the stories behind objects, who they belonged to, what that person experienced with the object, where they worked, where they lived, what their hopes and expectations were. These everyday objects become symbolic mementos and sign carriers for subsequent generations in the archive. Through their inclusion in the collection, they are transferred from "private communicative memory to public memory" (Thiemeyer, 2010, p. 76). And this is how the process works in the archive of DOMiD: After the bottle is given to the archive, it is numbered, cleaned, measured, packed, and stored in the collection. All objects are free for visitors to the archive to examine. From the database we learn little about the meaning that migrants have associated with this bottle. From the historical context, the DOMiD team has learned the following: In the 1960s, the Munich train station was one of the central arrival points for Turkish migrants. At its peak, 1.000 migrant workers arrived there every day. This photo highlights not only the arrival of a human being, but also the arrival of an inconspicuous testament to material heritage: a plastic bottle. This plastic bottle was part of the luggage of the migrant workers on their journey from Turkey to Germany (cf. Kolb/ Vacca 2016, p. 197).

Similar stories of remembrance are also associated with the approximately 150,000 objects in the collection, all of which DOMiD describes as unique. These objects and the stories shared by the numerous guest workers are ultimately intended to change the German narrative and make migration comprehensible as an elementary part of German history (cf. No. 4). From the abundance of objects of this heritage arise a multitude of stories of individuals. This memory of German immigration, which shows itself in the collection of everyday objects, is kept alive by those who preserve and share it.

6. Conclusion: the archive regarding to the concept of shared heritage

The coexistence of people with different cultural, but also social backgrounds goes hand in hand with individual diverse memories. Often the memories of migrants are linked to

questions of identity and the search for belonging (cf. Assmann 2013, p. 17). In particular, the memory culture of the German majority society and its institutions representing it are often shaped by their perspective, which "usually assumes a valid 'German' history" (Fuchs/ Kolb 2017, p. 293). In conveying knowledge and shaping historical narratives of post-Crisis society, the representatives of DOMiD call on museums to enable as many people as possible to participate in history. This also influences collective self-representation. So it's also about looking at things critically and questioning them.

The aim of the DOMiD archive is to preserve the individual and diverse stories of individual objects, and to use them to establish a culture of remembrance of migration. In this way, the fact of migration is to be communicated, visualized and brought to the public. In this way, it also aims to contribute to initiating new inclusive narratives about German postwar history. After all, these memories are also a part of "German history" - one that DOMiD believes has been too little present until now. The goal of DOMiD is to make migration a self-evident part of German history and the present, in order to "turn the metanarratives, perspectives, institutions, and places of national self-understanding upside down and reformulate them, that is, [...] to postmigrantize them, so to speak" (Bayer 2014, p. 64, my translation). In summary, people with migration experience are given a space for their experiences and personal stories at DOMiD. At first glance, archiving may seem more like storing in a compartmentalized space, but at second glance, it can be seen that the archive serves as a storehouse of knowledge of individual experiences that contributes to collective memory. The archive thus forms a safe place to also pass on personal memories, a place that can also be used in the future. A place that makes migration history visible and tangible for future generations.

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