SPOON STORIES

An everyday object as an anchor for personal memories

by Magdalena Oxfort

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Photo credit: A spoon made by a prisoner of war, one of the exhibits featured in the exhibition. Adrian Beck / Kulturreferat für Westpreußen, Posener Land und Mittelpolen, Free access - no reuse

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What do you take with you when you are forced to flee your home empty-handed? Which object will be indispensable in everyday life and vital for emergencies? An exhibition project by the consultant for cultural affairs Magdalena Oxfort shows the role that spoons, of all things, can play in people's lives when they face exceptional circumstances and also in their memory of these events.

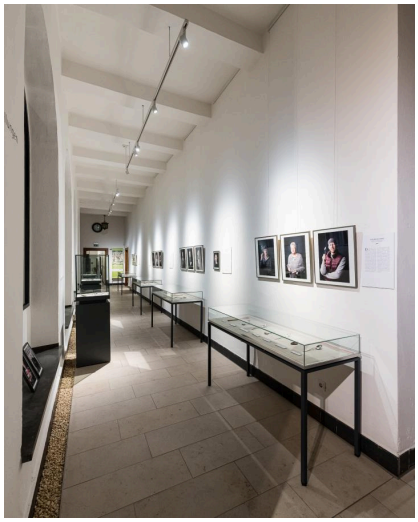
Public remembrance and reappraisal of the political history of the 20th century continues to shape the collective European memory to this day and can be particularly strongly felt on the anniversaries of key events – in Germany, in Poland and in the other countries of Eastern Europe. In recent years, commemorations of major anniversaries have become more frequent: in 2018, the one hundredth anniversary of the end of the First World War was commemorated, followed, in 2019, by the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War. 2020 marked the 75th anniversary of its end.

These anniversaries always bring into focus other historical contexts that are inextricably linked to them. These include migration processes, especially the forced resettlement, expulsion or flight of entire population groups during and after the world wars. They have inscribed themselves in countless biographies on both sides of the borders, shaping the memories of the lives of parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. Even today, stories of and mementos from this not so distant past circulate in many families.

"Spoon stories": A piece of cutlery as a lasting memento

The fact that such mementos can include not only personal records, letters or old photographs, but even everyday objects and utensils such as spoons, is shown by the exhibition project "Wir löffeln Geschichten" (Spoon Stories), which Magdalena Oxfort, cultural affairs consultant for West Prussia, Posener Land and Central Poland in 2019 and 2020 organized in collaboration with designer and goldsmith Katja Bremkamp-Leenen and designer Nicole Aufmkolk of the Warendorf artist community "Die Bunte Kuh".

The exhibition at the Westpreussisches Landesmuseum (West Prussian State Museum), which is located in the former Franciscan monastery in Warendorf. Kulturreferat für Westpreußen, Posener Land und Mittelpolen, Free access - no reuse



Another view of the exhibition. Kulturreferat für Westpreußen, Posener Land und Mittelpolen, Free access - no reuse

The spoon as a symbol of conviviality and peaceful togetherness at a laid table: The exhibition was accompanied by other events, including the vernissage with a joint soup supper. Kulturreferat für Westpreußen, Posener Land und Mittelpolen, Free access - no reuse

Few people are aware of the important cultural and historical role that this usually rather inconspicuous piece of cutlery can play – especially, but not only, for the socially underprivileged classes of the population. The spoon, which was often carried clipped onto the belt, could be one of the most important personal possessions that somebody could own. Being an indispensable household object, it was often gifted as part of a dowry and was passed down from generation to generation, long before the advent of our current culture of single-use and disposable products. As an essential utensil for food preparation and eating, the spoon also stands for the convivial gathering at mealtimes – incidentally, also in the case of the Warendorf project, which included a communal soup meal at a festive table in the West Prussian Regional Museum, where the exhibition was shown from November 14, 2019 to January 13, 2020.

Private memory culture made visible

For this exhibition, many people from Warendorf and the surrounding area gathered memorabilia and collectibles from among their private possessions. In addition, reports about the objects and their owners' personal connections to them were documented and recorded.

These narratives also include stories about flight and expulsion, about the post-war period and war captivity, or the significance that the individual objects had for people's memories of relatives, friends or phases and events in their own lives. The exhibits come from a wide variety of countries and cultures; some were and are still in use, despite their great age. They all represent very personal forms and practices of individual memory and of a private culture of remembrance that is, in most cases, invisible to the outside world, but which – thanks to this project – has been carefully uncovered, curated and made visible for a short time in the museum.

Incidentally, Warendorf, where the exhibition took place, also has a close connection to the migration processes in the aftermath of the Second World War. A considerable number of expellees found refuge in Westphalia and Lippe after 1945. More than 43,000 of them, mainly from Silesia, were given temporarily accommodation in the transit camp at Warendorf, a state stud farm, before being resettled in surrounding villages or in the towns and villages of Münsterland. The most recent migration story featured in the exhibition, where a spoon also plays an important role, is only a few years old and tells of an escape from the Syrian civil war.

More information about the exhibition at the West Prussian State Museum in Warendorf is available in the Copernico research database. You can also read a small selection of stories from the exhibition here. They show how everyday objects – things we often take for granted – can play a key role in people's life stories and in their personal experiences and memories of historical events.

"This is how I see her before me" - memories of the post-war period and the flight experiences of the parents' generation

"Our mother's day always began early. Her first steps led her to the kitchen. We were a big family with eight small children, so there was a lot of work, a lot of caring for each other, a lot of duties, and a great many fears about the future in the post-war years. Things went slowly. Our mother had become a widow much too early. After the death of our father, our grandmother immediately came to live with us and ended up staying for good. So every day there were 10 people at the table, or 11, because at that time it was common to take in a young girl as a household help to assist with the housework, and she would be treated as one of the family.

Beate Bisping. Adrian Beck / Kulturreferat für Westpreußen, Posener Land und Mittelpolen, Free access - no reuse

Among my earliest memories is the image of my mother, dressed in a white nurse's apron, standing in front of our stove with a wooden spoon in her hand. My wooden spoon is the only remaining one from her kitchen. Right next to the wood stove stood a new post-war electric stove. 'Just to be on the safe side,' she used to say, 'in case there's another war, so we can cook and heat if coal and electricity supplies fail.'
'We can also burn our furniture if necessary,' she added. I shuddered at the idea. I imagined her dismantling the beautiful bookcase and burning it for us, piece by piece. I didn't doubt for a second that she would do it. Our mother was a lioness and she would fight for us. So we could rest easy. A quarter of a century later, the wood stove was moved to the basement – it took her that long to fully trust that peace was here to stay. The stove remained down there until the house was cleared out after my mother's death. Stories of flight and expulsion, of people at war, of the years of hardship after the war accompanied us throughout our childhood years. We knew some of our mother's stories so well that we could join in when she told them.

When she began to cook, she would relax, and cheerfully and calmly tell us about home, about the large hotel kitchen

in the 'Brauner Hirsch', about the smells of cigars and good food, about the hustle and bustle of her mother who ran the hotel kitchen and her Bohemian cooking, about the stick of butter that was thrown onto the embers in the kitchen stove, so that the aroma of browning butter spread throughout the kitchen and got everyone in the kitchen in the mood for cooking. She told us about the parties in the hall and about her father pouring beers downstairs at the restaurant bar where he served his guests.

I can still see her now, standing there in front of me, stirring away in a small iron pan with the little wooden spoon. She would melt good butter in it, add flour, and heat the mixture until it combined, stirring it with the spoon into a wonderfully fragrant buttery roux. With ease that came from years of practice, she would then pour the mixture into the large saucepan to give it a creamy consistency. Standing there, she also told the other stories and her face would change. She told of the war years, of the food shortages, described people's desolate and desperate circumstances, recalled bombed-out Münster, where she and our father had first lived. She told of Freckenhorst, of her first apartment above the stable at Niemerg on Warendorfer Strasse and the practical lessons my father held there in the taproom. She talked about the many refugees who, like herself, had found a new home here and recalled the castle and the count's family, who helped where they could, even by accommodating people in the castle's rooms. She told of the Wolff-Kreimer family of entrepreneurs, who alleviated need where it was greatest by providing work and donations, of her silent longing for her Protestant church in the deeply Catholic Münsterland. We felt her burning longing for her homeland, we, her Catholic Freckenhorst children.

Being able to prepare food in her kitchen every day, again and again, with unwavering routine, kept alive the images in her memory and an awareness of having survived those hardships. She described her successful escape from Silesia on the very last train before the advancing Russian troops, and the arrival in Görlitz, which still lay there peacefully. She spoke of the horse-drawn wagons that gradually filled the city, spreading great chaos and bustle. She told of a train of prisoners trudging through the bone-chillingly cold winter night, on their way somewhere, of a herd of “Trakehner horses“

“Trakehner horses“

Trakehners are a breed of riding horse that dates back to the Trakehnen stud farm in East Prussia, founded in 1732.

coming from East Prussia, probably seeking their salvation in the lands further south. We

loved the story of their arrival in Münster after a four-week escape to the West. When the doors of the train car were pushed open after her arrival in Münster, she saw a city completely in ruins. "I could see all the way from the train station to the castle". Deeply exhausted and filled with despair, she sat down on a stone in front of the ruined station and wept without restraint. Then an angel approached, in the form of a woman wearing a dark-coloured traditional Westphalian dress. Her white hair was braided into a wreath around her head and she carried a basket on her arm. "Wein ma` nich Mädken," (Don't cry, my lass) she said, pulling out a thick sandwich of light fruitcake, butter, cheese, and dark rye bread on top. My mother always said that when she saw the bread she assumed it must be the "Westfälischer Himmel" ("Westphalian heaven"), a local speciality she had heard about.

Stories of escapes, of human relationships in unusual times, of deprivation, of sympathy and compassionate deeds, of 'keeping silent' on the subject of one's fate, as she would say, accompanied me through my childhood years. Whenever my gaze falls on the wooden spoon, I hear those stories of my mother in our kitchen back in Freckenhorst, where I grew up.

Today, her story seems to be repeating itself, appearing 'in a new guise' that so resembles those old tales I have known forever. It leaves me stunned: have we really learnt so little from all that has befallen humankind?"

Beate Bisping

A spoon as a lifesaver

"When he was a prisoner of war, my father, Theo Schwartze, was given a spoon to eat his thin broth."

In terms of its material value, the spoon is barely worth anything, and, aesthetically, with its visible solder joints and traces of rough handling, it is not exactly what you would call a piece of treasure.
Michael Schwartze carefully takes the spoon in his hand, almost as if it could crumble into dust at any moment. His special appreciation of this object is expressed in how carefully he handles the little piece of sheet metal, which weighs only a few grams. "The spoon probably saved my father's life during his captivity in the war," Schwartze says thoughtfully, recalling the few details that his father, Theo Schwartze, who died on February 24, 2014, once recounted about the difficult years in Russia. His father was at war on the Eastern Front and was taken prisoner in Borissow near Minsk in 1944. Most of the time only a thin soup was provided, which his father had to eat using a can full of holes. "A fellow prisoner of my father was assigned to a workshop in the labor camp. As far as I know, he came from Ahlen. And he made my father this spoon so that none of the precious food was spilled anymore," Schwartze

reports. "It was freely given – a gesture my father could not reciprocate at that moment."

His father, he says, who weighed only 45 kilograms at the time, returned from captivity in 1948 together with the kindly spoon-maker. As they parted on home turf, the man from Ahlen said to Theo Schwartze: "You're a rich baker. Please, would you give me your shoes?" – "And my father was happy to hand them over."

Michael Schwartze, recorded by: The Bell, Jürgen Edelkötter

Back of the spoon of Theo Schwartze. Adrian Beck / Kulturreferat für Westpreußen, Posener Land und Mittelpolen, Free access - no reuse

Front of the spoon of Theo Schwartze. Adrian Beck / Kulturreferat für Westpreußen, Posener Land und Mittelpolen, Free access - no reuse

A gift

"I have fond memories of my student days in Damascus. I studied there at the law school, where we had to learn an incredible amount. Six of us students shared an apartment on the university campus. Two people came from Latakia – which is on the coast – two others came from the rural area of Damascus and another one came, like me, from Daraa, which is in the south on the Jordanian border. The people from the coast and Damascus liked to drink mate. When we met at the apartment in the evening after lectures, we always made mate first and talked about the day. No matter how we felt, whether we were in trouble, stressed or under a

lot of pressure, this evening ritual with mate together in the apartment always helped and was always good. On the weekends, many students would meet in the beautiful grounds of the University of Damascus. Besides coffee or coke, there was always mate tea. I was given this new spoon as a gift from an Arabian guy here in Germany and now I drink mate here too. Mate tea was brought by people who migrated back to their countries of origin, mainly to Lebanon and Syria. In these countries, people now drink the tea as traditionally as in its South American homeland. The art of drinking mate tea has now also arrived in Germany, brought by the Syrian refugees. And with it came the elaborate bombilla. The bombilla consists of a suction tube with a spoon-like strainer at one end and a mouthpiece at the other. The glass is passed from one person to the next. It contains mate leaves swelling in lukewarm water."

Mohammed Elsmadi, born in Syria, was an asylum-seeker in Warendorf at the time of the exhibition.

Mohammed Elsmadi. Adrian Beck / Kulturreferat für Westpreußen, Posener Land und Mittelpolen, Free access - no reuse

The bombilla of Mohammed Elsmadi. Adrian Beck / Kulturreferat für Westpreußen, Posener Land und Mittelpolen, Free access - no reuse

Catalog

These and other stories about spoons as personal mementos can be found in the exhibition catalog. The objects and their owners were professionally photographed by Augsburg photographer Adrian Beck.

Cover illustration of the exhibition catalog. Adrian Beck / Kulturreferat für Westpreußen, Posener Land und Mittelpolen, Free access - no reuse

English translation: William Connor ↗

Literature

Oxfort, Magdalena/Bremkamp-Leenen, Katja: Wir löffeln Geschichten. [Katalog zur Ausstellung vom 14. November 2019 bis 13. Januar 2020 im Westpreußischen Landesmuseum]. Warendorf 2019.