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“Wartime” Ephemera from the Family Home in German and Austrian History Museums: A Counterexample to the British Case

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Abstract: When discussing “wartime ephemera”, of the kind that has been passed down through families since the Second World War, Germany and Austria could be considered as a counterexample to Britain. In German and Austrian historical memory, “wartime” cannot be separated from pre-war Nazi society (beginning in 1933 and 1938, respectively). Moreover, what we might loosely call the “Antiques Roadshow experience”—discussing family objects from the Second World War in a sympathetic public forum—has never been open to the majority of Germans and Austrians, who were rather inclined to hide and forget such objects in the family home. Even so, mundane Nazi-era objects survived in their millions and this essay discusses their display in German and Austrian history museums. There, they serve to illustrate a history of mentalities during and after the Nazi regime. Austrian museums are currently playing a proactive role in the transfer of objects from the private, family archive to public, cultural memory. This article considers how notions of “family” are constructed in museum discourse and asks how the millions of German and Austrian citizens and residents with no family connection to the Second World War can be included in a form of national family storytelling that arguably “re-ethnicizes” memory.

Keywords: Germany; Austria; National Socialism; museums; cultural memory; family memory; ephemera; migrant memory; *Nazihintergrund*; translanguaging



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1. Introduction

This essay is concerned with ephemera that survived within German and Austrian homes after the end of the Second World War. Objects of little material value such as badges, flags, and photographs were passed down to children and grandchildren, sometimes with stories attached, often without. Some objects bore a clear Nazi stamp such as a swastika; some had no visible trace of the society that produced them. Their survival is the result of what Aleida Assmann terms “passive cultural forgetting”, whereby objects “fall out of the frames of attention, value, and use” but are not destroyed, allowing them to be “discovered by accident at a later time, in attics and other obscure depots” (Assmann 2010, p. 98).

It may not be immediately apparent why we should approach these family mementos through the lens of the history museum. The family and the museum are, after all, two discrete civic spheres. The explanation lies in Germany’s and Austria’s troubled relationship to the Nazi past after 1945, which has made the post-war family home a site of social and cultural negotiation (Reiter 2006; Welzer 2006; Fuchs 2008). Put simply, family memory transmission is understood to have been a key element in the formation of German and Austrian society after 1945 and this has earned otherwise mundane objects from the family home a place in the museum.

In my 2018 study of German and Austrian history museums, *Exhibiting the Nazi Past*, I identified patterns in the display of this type of object. Firstly, the attic and cellar, though real enough spaces in a typical German or Austrian house (as indicated by Assmann, above), are also invoked metaphorically as spaces analogous to the subconscious, where memories

lie half hidden, half accessible (Paver 2018, pp. 58–59, 181–83). Second, family memory transmission is sometimes explicitly discussed in captions (Paver 2018, pp. 177–78). Third, museums sometimes display objects in the containers in which they were stored between 1945 and the 2010s, an unconventional tactic given that for Krzysztof Pomian and other museum scholars the museum object points from the present day back to its use phase, blanking out the irrelevant years in between (Paver 2018, p. 175). By drawing attention to practices of “passive cultural forgetting”, German and Austrian history museums have been able to make family mementos stand for the *national* failure to face up to citizens’ complicity in social exclusion, persecution, and murder during the Nazi era.

Several factors make it worthwhile to pursue this phenomenon past the end of the research phase of my monograph, in 2017. Most obviously, the practice of donating Nazi-era family mementos to German and Austrian museum collections continues. Second, despite the fact that—or indeed perhaps because—Austria has been slower than Germany to address its Nazi past, its museums have recently developed a self-reflective approach to soliciting and accessioning family-held objects. To museums’ reflection on what families thought they were doing in keeping hold of these objects long after 1945 (Paver 2018, pp. 173–92) has been added a new layer of reflection on what a younger generation thinks it is doing in giving up these items to the museum now, and what museums think they are doing in collecting and displaying them. Of course, there are limits to any museum’s self-questioning, not least because visitors want to see an exhibition, not a treatise on museum practices. It is at just this limit that scholars must take up the baton. Following a discussion, therefore, of recent museum initiatives involving family ephemera, this essay goes on to consider whether the family psycho-drama of the attic full of repressed memories may be approaching its final act at the very moment when museums are putting it most explicitly on display, not only because fewer and fewer such objects remain in the home but also for genealogical reasons. How long, scholars are beginning to ask, can the national family be figured as mono-cultural—as a configuration of ancestors who accommodated themselves to National Socialism and descendants who make amends—given Germany’s and Austria’s increasingly diverse multi-cultural genealogies. It will become clear that more is at stake than just a general desire for inclusivity in German and Austrian society, since recent debates about inclusion and exclusion, involving Michael Rothberg, Esra Özyürek, and Dirk Rupnow, amongst others, have themselves deployed a rhetoric of family inheritance or responded to that rhetoric.

Before embarking on the core analysis, two distinctions need to be drawn: between different national understandings of “wartime”, and between “victim objects” and “majority objects”. In the UK, the term “wartime ephemera” denotes a discrete and well-understood group of objects. The term makes less sense for Germany and Austria and for the history museums that preserve their national stories. It is not simply that, in point of historical fact, the NSDAP took power in 1933 and 1938, respectively, in the two countries, with the Nazi Party operating illegally in Austria well before 1938. More importantly, no German or Austrian history museum would begin the story of the Second World War in September 1939, without first explaining how the Nazis laid the foundations for territorial expansion, persecution, and genocide.

Granted, whole categories of material ephemera were created, or proliferated, during the Second World War in Germany and Austria, just as in other combatant countries, but most objects bearing a swastika crossed the boundary from peacetime to war and no history museum in Germany or Austria would want to imply that Nazi-coded objects appeared on the market suddenly in the autumn of 1939, as if Nazism were an identity forged in wartime. In this way, facts of manufacture and design mesh with the democratic agenda in today’s history museums. For Axel Drecoll, a core aim of these museums is to propose explanations “für die Zustimmungsfähigkeit zum verbrecherischen Regime und für die breite Beteiligung an den Massenverbrechen” [for the population’s willingness to accommodate themselves to a criminal regime and for the broad participation in mass crimes] (Drecoll 2017, p. 112). This means rewinding the war story to the regime’s beginnings in the

1930s, with corresponding objects—often from the family home—to illustrate this context. This essay therefore discusses “Nazi-era ephemera”, keeping the descriptor “wartime” at arm’s length.

Turning to the second distinction, between “victim objects” and “majority objects”, the owners of the objects discussed here were not persecuted by the Nazis. They belonged, by virtue of their ethnicity and political conformism, to the national in-group or “Volks-gemeinschaft”. They are sometimes referred to, even in scholarship (e.g., [Bangert 2014](#)), as “ordinary Germans”, though the term “the non-persecuted majority” is more precise, reminding us of their relatively privileged status within the dictatorship and of the fact that they made up the majority of Germans and Austrians after 1945. In as much as war made victims of even these previously protected citizens, we can speak of the “primary victims” of National Socialism—those the Nazis persecuted—and “secondary victims”—victims of a war that the Nazis unleashed. Taken as a whole, German and Austrian history museums give far more space to objects that tell the stories of the primary victims. They also treat them with visual respect, setting them in vitrines, leaving blank space around them, and lighting them clearly, just as they would more conventional museum treasures. Wherever possible, museums tell the story of the previous owner, restoring some of the individuality that the Nazis attempted to eradicate. In contrast, the majority-owned objects studied here, which survived in great numbers, are generally displayed in the museum in a way that emphasizes their typicality, either in groups or with no individual story attached. Where there is a possibility of their exerting an auratic effect on the present day viewer, they are framed in ways that discredit or devalue them ([Sommer 2011](#); [Paver 2018](#), pp. 98–107). Curators of two exhibitions discussed below speak explicitly of de-auratizing objects that they collected from local families by declining to set them on pedestals or spotlight them. In one case, they placed them in semi-transparent plastic storage boxes in the exhibition space so that they appeared only in ghostly outline ([Stadtmuseum Dornbirn 2023c](#)); in the other, they placed them in tightly fitting vitrines, with little blank space around them ([Benedik et al. 2021](#), p. 14).

Sharon Macdonald reports similar ethical discussions among curators in an essay, currently in press, that gives important new impulses to the study of this category of objects ([Macdonald 2024](#)). Macdonald’s article takes as its starting point Nazi-era objects donated by local people to the Dokumentationszentrum Reichsparteitagsgelände in Nuremberg and broadens the discussion out to the term “awkward objects”, the topic of the Special Issue to which she is contributing. For Macdonald, “awkwardness” does not inhere in the object, since visitors’ experience of technologies and their relationship to the “real” evolve over time. This thinking could usefully be applied to the consciously low-tech strategies of the Austrian exhibitions studied here. Rather than pursue that avenue, however, I propose to follow up another issue touched on by Macdonald: language. Macdonald notes the difficulty of translating “awkward” into German, even though she is applying it to a German case study. “Each language”, she writes, “is likely to reveal different possibilities, different linguistic phenomenologies” (*ibid.*). In my analysis of exhibition texts and paratexts, I find that the difficulties involved in translating the relational words “Sie” (you) and “wir” (us) help expose the linguistic construction of a white Austrian national family. Meanwhile, an analysis of an artwork by Japanese performance artist Yoshinori Niwa suggests that “translanguaging” (using multiple languages in a single communication situation) can unsettle the conventionalized memory discourses of Germany and Austria.

1.1. “Schnell noch mal den Dachspeicher durchforsten” (“Have Another Quick Rummage through the Attic”): Calls for the Donation of Objects from the Family Home

German and Austrian history museums sometimes issue a public call for donations: a “Sammlungsauf Ruf”. Though these can relate to any topic, some ask specifically for objects from the Nazi era. Such calls invoke the family home—and specifically attics and cellars—as the place where objects might lie dormant ([Gedenkstätte Breitenau 2020](#); [Dokumentation Obersalzberg n.d.](#); [Städtische Museen Landsberg am Lech 2019](#); [Öztaler Museen 2023](#)).¹

Some calls allude to the storage function of the family home, which helps museums to fill gaps in their collections ([Gedenkstätte Breitenau 2020](#); [Städtische Museen Landsberg am Lech 2019](#)). Others invoke the family as a transmission route for narratives about the past, as told by or through objects ([Museen der Stadt Landshut 2023](#); [Öztaler Museen 2023](#)). Some calls for objects offer anonymity, in implicit acknowledgement of the shame that might attach to family involvement in National Socialism ([Museen der Stadt Landshut 2023](#); [Marktgemeinde Lustenau 2018](#)).

In Austria, such calls to “rummage through the attic” for Nazi-era objects have recently become more performative, as a series of examples will show.² Working on a commission from the Tiroler Landesmuseen, the artist Esther Strauß published a call for Nazi-era objects in 2022, inviting respondents to place them in a container in front of the Kaiserjägermuseum ([Strauß 2022](#)). Rather like the boxes used by the police for knife amnesties, Strauß’s white box anticipates feelings of shame that might be mitigated by anonymity. One of Strauß’s donated objects—a Nazi-era police helmet—was subsequently exhibited in Innsbruck (at an exhibition discussed more fully below). In their accompanying text, Innsbruck’s archivists reflected that this method of collecting, with no system for recording object data, contravenes professional archival procedure, though they allowed that artists are entitled to reflect on society in more abstract ways ([Stadtarchiv/Stadtmuseum Innsbruck 2023](#)).

The historical amateurism of the artist (as perceived from the standpoint of the museum professional) will play a part in my fuller analysis of a similar piece of performance art by Yoshinori Niwa. Here, however, my interest lies in the language of Strauß’s project. In a blog post, Strauß notes that many local families still have objects from the National Socialist era: “Oft liegen sie vergessen am Dachboden oder werden bei der Auflösung von Verlassenschaften entdeckt” [Often they lie abandoned in the attic or are discovered when a house is cleared by the people who have inherited it].³ Addressing the reader as “Sie”, the formal version of the second person “you”, the artist invites them “Zuhause auf Spurensuche zu gehen” [to go hunting for traces at home] ([Strauß 2022](#)). The family home is brought into focus by omitting other places of object survival such as flea markets and online marketplaces. Strauß then envisages a “we” (a Tyrolean or Austrian collective), which has a moral duty to preserve objects from the home because otherwise “we” will lose the opportunity to take responsibility for this part of “our” history ([Strauß 2022](#)). Similar language is used in a brochure advertising Strauß’s installation ([Tiroler Landesmuseen 2022](#)). By addressing the public both directly—this time with the familiar second person plural “in eurer Familie” (in your family)—and indirectly, as “alle Tiroler*innen” (all Tyroleans), the author figures the addressee as both a family member and a responsible regional citizen. The text continues:

In vielen Familien wird bis heute über diese Zeit nicht gesprochen. Manche Erinnerungstücke sind jedoch im Verborgenen aufbewahrt. Esther Strauß beschäftigt sich in ihren Kunstprojekten mit dem Nationalsozialismus und mit der Frage, wie wir damit umgehen können, dass unter unseren Eltern, Großeltern und Urgroßeltern viele Täterinnen und Täter waren. (ibid.)

[Many families still avoid talking about this period today, though many mementos are kept out of sight. In her work, Esther Strauß addresses National Socialism and the question of how we can cope with the fact that there were many perpetrators among our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents].

In all these texts, a “we” and a “you” masquerade as self-explanatory, all the while constructing a majority white Austrian family experience, which, it is implied, is the national experience. Jennifer Kapczynski argued in 2016 that the continued figuration of a generation of Nazi parents as the originators of today’s German citizens, long after this construct of a *Väter- or Elterngeneration* is biologically feasible, not only prevents younger generations of citizens from taking mature democratic decisions but excludes those who arrived in the country later as migrants ([Kapczynski 2016](#), pp. 27–28). Here, the call for “all Tyroleans” to search the family attic, together with the assumption that their ancestors

stayed silent about their role under National Socialism, excludes the 18% of Tyroleans with a migrant background.

Need this be a problem? Surely nobody will feel left out for *not* having a family legacy of involvement in National Socialist society, for *not* having *Mein Kampf* in a box in the cellar? Possibly so, but scholars have pointed out that citizens from non-German and non-Austrian backgrounds are expected to take part in national memory work as a prerequisite for social acceptance (Rupnow 2023, p. 295). If some aspects of that memory work make white German or Austrian ancestors a prerequisite, then the expectation to participate—which already comes with rules attached “that are harsher for them than for white Germans” (Özyürek 2023, p. 209)—is arguably even harder to meet.

This tension, to which I will return, makes it worthwhile to examine two further examples. An initiative at the Stadtmuseum Dornbirn echoed Strauß’s rhetoric. In 2022, the museum issued the standard call for Nazi-era objects, but went one step further in setting up the “Büro für schweres Erbe” or “Office for Difficult Legacies”, where local people could relinquish their objects and tell their stories. While this service was not notably different from that offered by other museums, its outward form was unusual. By presenting the initiative as something other than a museum, the Stadtmuseum countered the threshold anxiety felt by those who are intimidated by museums. It gave this imagined “office” a faintly absurd name that overturns decades of euphemism by speaking openly about the emotional burden of National Socialism. By using the word “Erbe” (legacy, inheritance), it tapped into majority Austrians’ felt experience of learning about the Nazi past through inter-generational material transmission and family narrative. Advertising texts conceded that donors might experience the objects they were bringing forward as “belastend—möglicherweise auch ‘belastet’” [burdensome—and possibly also as burdened with guilt] and offered help in interpreting their family history (Stadtmuseum Dornbirn 2023a). In this way, the museum positioned itself as an institution that was stepping past liberal judgment of an older, Nazi generation and placing itself on the side of the donor, who would be helped to deal emotionally with what had been passed down to them.

In 2023, this collecting initiative resulted in an exhibition at the Stadtmuseum Dornbirn: “Tatsachen: Das materielle Erbe des Nationalsozialismus” [Artefacts: The Material Legacy of Nazism]. The exhibition website invokes the conventional pairing of “cellar” and “attic” (“Keller” and “Dachboden”) as the places where donated objects were found (Stadtmuseum Dornbirn 2023c). Alongside these donations, eight videos of between 10 and 20 min in length were shown. In these, donors spoke of their difficult relationship to their parents’ or grandparents’ past and noted that their children and grandchildren responded less emotionally. The videos showed that the “Office for Difficult Legacies” was no gimmick, since emotion and after-shocks were visible and audible (Stadtmuseum Dornbirn 2023d). In all but one case—a young student who had become interested in National Socialism and who illustrated the section on “Youth”—the ethnic whiteness of the interviewees was a product of historical fact rather than curatorial choice.

The “Tatsachen” website sums up the exhibition with a single object: a small jewellery box painted by the donor’s grandfather as a love token for his fiancée, with the year 1936 and a swastika motif (Stadtmuseum Dornbirn 2023b). In the exhibition space, the jewellery box is deliberately obscured in its opaque plastic container, though a small image can be called up on the visitor’s phone via a QR code. On the website, however, it is pictured in the conventional museum manner, with white space around it and one of the swastikas on show. The 400-word text attached to this picture is written as an address to the museum visitor, using the formal “Sie”. It asks the visitor to imagine that they (that is, “you”) have found this object among their grandfather’s effects and takes them on an emotional journey in this persona: they think fondly of their grandparents’ harmonious marriage and are sad at the grandfather’s untimely death in 1945 but when they “notice” the (perfectly visible) swastikas they are filled with an unspecified emotion implied in an exclamation mark: “Am Deckel sind kleine Hakenkreuze!” (“There are little swastikas on the lid!”). The reader is required to stay in their role as it is elaborated further:

Ihre Großeltern waren Anhänger der Nationalsozialisten, das wussten Sie bereits, das wurde in der Familie auch nie verschwiegen. Auch nicht, dass beide bereits vor dem Anschluss Österreichs an NS-Deutschland mit Begeisterung über die Grenze blicken. Die Verwendung des Hakenkreuzes auf einen so privaten Gegenstand erzählt aber mehr: Ihre Großeltern hofften auf eine glorreiche Zukunft im NS-Staat: Sie teilten ihre Weltanschauung—sie war ein wichtiges Band zwischen ihnen. (ibid.)

[Your grandparents were supporters of National Socialism, but you knew that already: it was never hushed up in the family. Nor did anyone hide the fact that even before the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany the two of them looked across the border to Germany with enthusiasm. However, the use of the swastika on such a personal object tells you rather more: your grandparents hoped that a glorious future awaited them in the National Socialist state. They shared this world view; it constituted an important bond between them.]

The text goes on to probe what exactly the role of “your” grandparents might have been once the Nazis annexed Austria in 1938.

The rhetoric of an imaginary “you” places the institution, as the assumed author, on the side of the Austrian majority. It is normal to have a Nazi grandparent and normal to be troubled by questions about what they might have done. Moreover, the museum knows that not everything was hushed up after 1945; instead, there was a mixture of speaking and not speaking. This nuanced understanding (which corresponds to scholarly work by [Reiter \(2006\)](#) and to the video testimony given to the museum ([Stadtmuseum Dornbirn 2023d](#))) is a step forward from earlier discourses, in Germany especially, that tend to condemn the grandparent’s generation for its dishonest silence. At the same time, the Dornbirn text *does* condemn the grandparents for their actions before 1945, choosing to display online the one donated object that speaks of an especially deep personal investment in National Socialism and carefully unpicking that investment lest it be lost on the reader/viewer.

Unlike other texts on the website, this one is not translated into English. Grammatically, the statements are “deictic”, since the meaning of “you” is generated through its relation to an “I”. More specifically, however, an Austrian “ich” addresses an Austrian “Sie”, and that intra-national deixis cannot cross a language barrier. A translator would have to alter the personal deixis from second to third person and supply a storytelling frame (“Imagine an Austrian person discovering this object. Their grandparents were supporters of National Socialism”). A brochure for Strauß’s project *was* translated into English, producing the rather odd question, in English: “Do you know of any items from the Nazi era in your family?” ([Tiroler Landesmuseen 2022](#)). I judge these examples neutrally: museums produce translations in line with institutional translation policies and if, conversely, a museum decides not to translate a text, this need not necessarily imply that deep thought has been given to the untranslatability of the national addressee position. Additionally, I argue below that in exhibition practice, a mismatch between the speaker and addressee need not be a barrier to engagement. Nonetheless, like Macdonald’s realization that “awkward” only really works in English, glitches in museum translation can be revealing. Here, they show how challenging it is to hold a mono-cultural conversation amidst the buzz of multi-culturalism.

A similar exhibition at Vienna’s Haus der Geschichte Österreich (House of Austrian History) built a rhetorical “you” into the exhibition itself, while also pushing back tentatively at assumptions of a white Austrian “you”. The exhibition “Hitler entsorgen: Vom Keller ins Museum” [Disposing of Hitler: Out of the Cellar, into the Museum] opened in December 2021 at Vienna’s Hofburg. I visited it in 2024 at its second showing, at the Stadtarchiv/Stadtmuseum Innsbruck. As its title suggests, “Hitler entsorgen” discusses the role of the museum in helping Austrians to “dispose” of Nazi-era objects, whether that means literally throwing them away, offering them for sale, or donating them to a museum. Whereas exhibitions from the 2010s tended to use such objects suggestively, to imply that family members hid their involvement in the Nazi past, “Hitler entsorgen” rests

on a clear foundation of social research, drawing the objects back from metaphor to fact. Nazi-era objects, the exhibition tells us, are not necessarily found by family members: they may come to light during house clearances, or they may appear at flea markets, on online marketplaces, in a dumpster, at one's workplace, or among the belongings left behind by a previous house owner (Beckershaus et al. 2021, pp. 18, 20). At the same time, a video interview with a charity worker who organizes house clearances reveals that far fewer such objects now emerge than in previous decades (Sommer 2021, pp. 43–44). Even when family members bring Nazi-era objects to the Haus der Geschichte, these do not, the curators tell us, expose “gut gehütete Familiengeheimnisse” [closely guarded family secrets] as they might do in a novel (Benedik et al. 2021, p. 12). Rather, they express Austrians' unease about having tainted objects in their home, an unease that is sometimes tinged with fascination. The exhibition thus focuses on the feelings of a younger generation that has no personal emotional attachment to objects from the Nazi era and that has a range of attitudes towards their family's and their nation's past.

This emotional and psychological complexity is encapsulated in the object chosen for the exhibition's advertising and for the cover image of its catalogue: an old lightbulb box in which Nazi-era charity badges have been stored and on which the donor to the museum—a grandchild who inherited the objects—has scrawled “Nazi-Dreck” (“Nazi crap”) (Sommer 2021, cover). The scrawled label suggests a reluctant owner who condemns the Nazi era unequivocally and sees its material residue as worthless and embarrassing, though nevertheless not yet ready for the bin. It is a moot point whether all Austrians think like this, and whether all have the educational capital needed to invent the category of “Nazi-Dreck”. It becomes clear in the exhibition texts that the museum is as much trying to propagate this critical thinking as to document it.

The improvised storage box for “Nazi-Dreck” also points to a slight tension in the exhibition's approach. On the one hand, the curators want to broaden out the discussion of Nazi-era objects from the clichéd grandparents' attic to the many real arenas in which these objects actually circulate in the 2020s; they also want to move beyond the notion of “closely guarded family secrets”, with its implication of post-war denial, to the more commendable—if complex—unease felt by younger generations. Pulling against this nuance is the fact that the exhibition still centres on the scenario of an Austrian national family passing down a legacy of the Nazi past within the home. It has chosen the domestic location “Keller” [cellar] for its title; the iconic lightbulb box evokes the home, where used retail packaging is repurposed as storage containers; the catalogue opens with objects inherited within the family; and the starting point for another catalogue essay is “die Dinge, die Menschen auf dem Dachboden, im Keller, in der Verlassenschaft finden” [things people find in the attic, in the cellar, or among effects that they inherit] (Heindl 2021, p. 26). Six of the fourteen objects chosen for display tell familiar stories of family members' involvement in Nazism and exhibition texts indicate that keeping or re-purposing Nazi-era objects was a form of familial denial. Indeed, the objects served as prompts for telling children sanitized stories of the Nazi past that left out violence, racism, and the victim perspective (Sommer 2021, pp. 80–82, 86–88, 100–2, 118–20, 128–30, 140–42). Evidently, the majority Austrian family story of guilt and inheritance remains powerful even as the exhibition-makers seek to move beyond it.

As visitors enter the exhibition space of “Hitler entsorgen”, they are given one of ten variations of a postcard-sized pro forma. Each imagines a scenario in which the visitor comes across a Nazi-era object and has to decide whether to keep it, sell it, or destroy it. The text on the cards addresses the visitor with a formal “Sie”. For instance, “Sie kaufen am Flohmarkt verschiedene Teller. Zu Hause stellen Sie fest, dass einer davon einen Reichsadler-Stempel auf der Rückseite trägt”. [At the flea market, you buy various plates. Back home you notice that one of them has a Nazi eagle-and-swastika stamp on the back.] (Stadtarchiv/Stadtmuseum Innsbruck 2023). There is space on the card for the visitor to justify their decision (to keep the object, sell it, or destroy it) and they are asked to pin the card to a board for others to read.

In the catalogue, the exhibition-makers state that family inheritance is not a prerequisite for dealing with Nazi material legacies. Today's Austrians might chance upon Nazi-era objects "unabhängig von Alter, Herkunft und familiärem NS-Bezug" [regardless of age, where they are from, or whether they have a family connection to National Socialism]. Consequently, when drafting the ten imaginary scenarios, the team paid attention to "die gesellschaftliche Diversität von Lebensrealitäten in Österreich" [the social diversity of lived realities in Austria] (Beckershaus et al. 2021, pp. 18, 20). Though the word "Diversität" is rather vague, Austrians with a migrant background are at least notionally included as equal partners in the national project of reflecting on the National Socialist regime's legacies in the current day. This remains the aim even if five of the ten scenarios relate to family inheritance from the Nazi era. One scenario, exemplifying the model Austrian family that did not hush up its Nazi past, reads: "Sie räumen die Wohnung Ihrer verstorbenen Großmutter aus. Sie wissen schon lange, dass im Nachtkästchen noch deren Mutterkreuz liegt" [You are clearing out your late grandmother's house. You have known for some time that her Mother's Cross (the medal for motherhood awarded in the Nazi era, CP) is still in her bedside table] (Stadtarchiv/Stadtmuseum Innsbruck 2023).

We should not take the second person address on the scenario cards too literally. The exhibition was fully bilingual, with texts in German and English, and at Innsbruck, visitors to Austria (writing in English and occasionally Italian) wrote the same kind of comments on the cards regardless of whether they were given a scenario involving family inheritance or not. The colleague at reception confirmed that the cards are given out at random, that is, without national or racial profiling. Those who filled out a card in English or Italian (and who were therefore most likely tourists) knew the discourse and its expectations, since nearly all wrote variations on "We must learn from history". It is therefore possible that Austrians with a migrant background (who are not identifiable by language alone) also understood the invitation to adopt momentarily a majority position, or, indeed, rejected it without penalty as there was no compulsion to participate. Empirical research would be needed to reach a conclusion on this. Özyürek (discussed in more detail below) takes a more critical view, questioning whether migrants' ability to align themselves with majority memory positions, of which she has found plenty of proof, is socially useful or just an added burden (Özyürek 2023, p. 129). "Hitler entsorgen" at least gestures towards a non-Austrian, post-colonial perspective with one object: an army tent used by the donor's father in the North African campaign. This allows the museum to give the lie to the popular idea that Austria is free of colonial guilt. The captions acknowledge the racist violence inflicted on Africans during the campaign (Sommer 2021, p. 142).

1.2. Academic and Artistic Responses to Migrant Memory: Envisaging Non-Genealogical Relationships to the Nazi Past

So far, I have questioned in broad terms what a "nation-as-family" model might mean for the 26% or 29% of the population (in Austria and Germany, respectively) who come from a migrant background and whose grandparents likely had none of these objects in their home (Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Wirtschaft and Bundesministerium für Inneres n.d.; Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung n.d.). Exactly such exclusions are being debated in wider discussions about migrant heritage and histories in Germany and Austria. In her study of German Holocaust education, Özyürek argues that while citizens and residents of migrant (and especially Muslim) heritage are expected to acknowledge the Nazi past as a precondition for their integration into the German collective, they are simultaneously suspected of having attitudes that will make them unable to meet this requirement. In a choice (but not necessarily representative) anecdote from Özyürek's fieldwork, the white German grandparent-grandchild relationship is quite literally performed to a group of young people from migrant backgrounds and they are expected to applaud the white grandchild's performative remorse while also recognising that they cannot bodily share in it (Özyürek 2023, pp. 122–28). In her concluding chapter, Özyürek discusses Moshtari Hilal and Sinthujan Varatharajah, who caused a stir by coining the phrase "Menschen mit

Nazihintergrund” [people with a Nazi background] in a live online discussion about their experiences as, respectively, a migrant and a child of migrants, subsequently discussing their aims in an interview with *Die Zeit* (Monecke 2021). Though I have used it as an unproblematic term in this essay, “Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund” [people with a migration background] has, argue Hilal and Varatharajah, been used to impose all kinds of disadvantages on the group it purports to describe neutrally, while allowing “the usually unmarked majority population” (Rothberg 2021) to silently hoard advantages that date back to 1933–1945.

In his defence of Hilal’s and Varatharajah’s intervention in German memory culture, Dirk Rupnow remarks that his adoptive home of Austria has yet to initiate a discussion about the “Nazihintergrund” of its majority (Rupnow 2023, p. 297). This needs some qualification, since Rupnow’s home department, the Institute for Contemporary History at the University of Innsbruck, was involved in setting up the “Office for Difficult Legacies” at Dornbirn. Besides, if anything, the exhibitions discussed here make it explicit that “Menschen mit Nazihintergrund” are the norm. Indeed, they offer this assumed majority (“wir”/“ihr”/“Sie”/“alle”) emotional assurance that the inheritance of Nazi-era objects is bound to be difficult but can be dealt with, given outside support and an appropriately critical spirit. This same approach, however, necessarily excludes those with a “migrant background”, even if the exhibition “Hitler entsorgen” tries to think its way out of this impasse.

Rupnow also argues that any errors of historical detail that Hilal and Varatharajah made in their internet dialogue should be forgiven. It is precisely their outsider position, as people who were not schooled in the assumptions and practices of German memory culture, that enables them to shake up a discourse that “has become ossified in routines and rituals” (Rupnow 2023, p. 295). It follows, therefore, that German commentators should judge them on the overall quality of their ideas and not nitpick in order to discredit them (ibid.). Arguably, a similar approach is needed to respond fairly to Yoshinori Niwa’s 2018 performance art piece “Withdrawing Adolf Hitler from a Private Space”. Niwa’s artwork is linked to the foregoing discussion because the curators of “Hitler entsorgen” included photographs of it in their exhibition, adjudging it a creative example of how to engage Austrians in a discussion about the material remnants of the Nazi past (Sommer 2021, pp. 41, 100–5). The original performance, in 2018, worked rather like Strauß’s Tyrolean initiative, appealing for donations that could be placed in an amnesty box, in this case, a standard recycling container placed on the main square in Graz. Niwa destroyed the deposited objects at the close of the project (Niwa 2018). In later iterations of the project, the recycling container appeared on the streets of Cologne, Dortmund, and Düsseldorf (Niwa 2021). In what follows, I discuss the written and spoken languages of the project, which are documented in the videos that Niwa routinely produces as an archive of his work (Niwa 2018). As before, I focus on the language used to imagine family and nation and on the trials of translation.

On the project website, Niwa (or possibly a team member) writes: “Austria was a part of Nazi Germany from 1938 to 1944” (Niwa 2018). At an Austrian school, that error—which implies that Austria went over to the Allies before the end of the war—would receive a stern reprimand from the history teacher. But Niwa went to school in his home country of Japan and has travelled for his work ever since, basing himself in Vienna relatively recently. His internationalism is also expressed linguistically in the rather opaque non-native English of the artwork’s title, “Withdrawing Adolf Hitler from a Private Space”. The linguistic situation is complicated because Niwa’s appeals for donations, which were handed out as flyers and printed on the recycling container, seem to have been written by a native speaker of German, who helped Niwa to parody a sales patter: “Verkaufen zu peinlich, Verbrennen zu schmerzlich? Dann habe ich DIE Lösung für Sie!” [Too embarrassing to sell them, too painful to burn them? Then I have the perfect solution for you!] (Niwa 2018).

One of Niwa’s appeals for objects imagines an addressee worrying about “der Hut Ihres Nazi-Opas, der immer noch auf dem Dachboden liegt” [your Nazi granddad’s cap,

which is still up in the attic] (Niwa 2018) or, in another variation, “die Uniform Ihres Nazi-Onkels, die immer noch im Keller liegt” [your Nazi uncle’s uniform, which is still down in the cellar] (Niwa 2021). In each case, the word for the male relative is printed in the Tannenberg font associated with Nazi propaganda; this stands out against an otherwise modern sans serif font. Once again, the second person address envisages a mono-cultural society comprised of families who have stayed in one place and passed down objects from the Nazi era. Unlike in Strauß’s project, however, the “Sie” is being addressed by a foreign “Ich” and the address is deliberately unsubtle. Only ancestors who were unequivocally Nazis are imagined. This is expressed both in the lexical compounding of the words (“Nazi-Onkel”, “Nazi-Opa”) and the use of the font as a visual shorthand for Nazi culture. The contrast between the “anxiety”, “torment”, “pain”, and “embarrassment” anticipated in the texts (in the words “sich sorgen”, “quälen”, “schmerzhaft”, and “peinlich”) and the trivial objects “cap” and “uniform” make the emotions appear out of proportion. Finally, the instruction “Fragwürdige Vergangenheit? Einfach weg damit!” [A troublesome past? Just get rid of it!] is, as the curators of “Hitler entsorgen” correctly note (Sommer 2021, p. 100), an ironic comment on the dangers of throwing history away without proper consideration of its meaning—something the artwork aims to prevent, not encourage.

However we might judge the efficacy of Niwa’s ironic and sardonic methods, they tell us something about the strength, in Austrian memory discourse, of family imagery. If an outsider who is relatively new to Austria wants to poke fun at Austrian anxiety about how to deal with the Nazi past, they can quickly identify the key tropes: the perennial attic, the ubiquitous grandfather, and a simplified notion of inter-generational inheritance. As we have seen, museums that take a serious, non-ironic approach to the same issue also work with these figures, even as they try to probe and complicate them.

In the accompanying videos, Niwa talks to people who have contacted him because they have Nazi-era objects in their homes or offices, and also to passers-by. One young woman confirms that the project is rather late in time: “Ich habe nur Nazi-Uropas und die sind schon lange tot” [I only have Nazi *great*-granddads, and they’ve been dead a long time] (Niwa 2018). Another participant, Lejla, a former refugee from Bosnia, has recently moved into a new apartment, where she has found Nazi-era books and photographs belonging to the late tenant. She tells Niwa that when she telephoned the woman’s children to ask them whether they wanted to retrieve her belongings, they screamed at her. She therefore embraces Niwa’s offer to dispose of the objects, saying in English: “If that would be, let’s say, *my* past, I don’t know what I would do with it, but the thing is it’s not my past. I don’t want to know anything about it” (ibid.). This last comment is a literal translation of German “Ich will nichts davon wissen” meaning “I want nothing to do with it”. This example of a migrant who says, to paraphrase, “sort out your own mess, don’t dump it on me”, though hardly generalizable as a model of civic behaviour for those trying to get on in the dominant culture, might nonetheless be read as a fulfilment of Özyürek’s hope that migrants in Germany and Austria will in some way “flip the script” (Özyürek 2023, pp. 203–9).

Perhaps the most interesting element of Niwa’s project, however, is how scrappy the videos are, when compared with the slick and professional video testimonies at the “Tatsachen” exhibition in Dornbirn. This aspect can be discussed under the heading “translanguaging”. In Translation Studies, “translanguaging” denotes the way in which, in a multi-lingual situation, each speaker draws on their personal repertoire of languages. For Mike Baynham and Tong King Lee, the term has the benefit of figuring multi-lingual communication as “playful and creative and, at times, as speaking back [...] to [...] ideologies” (Baynham and Lee 2019, p. 32). They note that translanguaging may involve communicating through bodily gestures or objects and they acknowledge that there may be challenges in “interdiscursive translanguaging”, where the partners in a communication, regardless of their language competence, have unequal access to ideas and constructs (Baynham and Lee 2019, pp. 24, 26–27, 29).

Though it is unlikely that he knows the term, Niwa is interested in the creative potential of translanguaging: several of his works are based on deliberate mistranslation or non-understanding in multi-lingual situations (Niwa 2013, 2020). The more serendipitous, unscripted set-up of “Withdrawing Adolf Hitler from a Private Space” produces a clear case of “interdiscursive translanguaging”, with communicants possessing sharply different linguistic and discursive competencies and, as a result, often reaching dead ends or talking at cross-purposes. The participants speak in a mixture of German and English of varying proficiencies, with phrases imperfectly translated back and forth. Thus, one German native speaker, speaking English as a second language, renders the key locus “attic” as “on the rooftop”, while for another it is “on the top under the roof”. The meaning is accessible to a bilingual English–German speaker, who knows that “Dachboden” (attic) is literally “floor of the roof”, but probably not to Niwa, who often looks uncertain but ploughs on with his questions.⁴ At the level of memory discourses, many of those interviewed on the street are not especially interested in the project of throwing away Nazi bric-a-brac, which has to be explained repeatedly. Some have nothing to contribute beyond saying that it is a good idea, laughing at its absurdity, or saying (in English as a second language) “I don’t like Nazis”. Even where interviews have been pre-arranged and take place in people’s homes, the value of interviewing these particular people is not apparent. Their reasons for either keeping objects or for worrying about disposing of them are trivial, conventional, or unenlightening. In all cases, the objects—including Lejla’s few books and photographs—could have been put in the ordinary trash without comment or fanfare. Yet, the camera repeatedly dwells on Niwa or his conversation partners holding and showing the Nazi-era objects, with lengthy shots of Niwa performatively leafing through insignificant Nazi books, in one case not just for the camera that is recording the videos but for another camera that we can see in shot.

Of the two sets of videos discussed here, those in the “Tatsachen” exhibition at Dornbirn will likely be seen by many more people, since online videos documenting a public art project do not enjoy the captive audience of an exhibition, and Niwa’s videos have little dramatic or narrative force. However, Niwa’s work, which trespasses on the territory of the professional historian and museum curator without the benefit of their training, helpfully reminds us that the authority of the Dornbirn voices results from compliance with professional standards for video testimony (to which de Jong (2018) remains the best guide). It also suggests that a non-German viewpoint and voice can achieve quite a lot of disruption with simple means. Whatever one thinks of Niwa’s videos, they are certainly not “ossified in routines”. Indeed, they hold up a mirror to the proficiencies that are necessary to produce cultural memory routines. They also offer access to the real-world muddle of insignificant, un-cooperative, facetious, or self-indulgent responses that we might think of as the “outtakes” of professional filmed memory in Germany and Austria. These may be of little use to museums but a sociologist would want to start from there.

2. Conclusions

Dirk Rupnow is downbeat in his conclusion that contemporary German Holocaust commemoration is “now being re-ethnicized” and “taking on a decisively exclusionary character” (Rupnow 2023, p. 297). In an earlier essay he expresses a more general regret that Austria shows a “paternalistic stance towards migrants, which demands of them an engagement with ‘our’ history while their own history, including the history of their migration, remains almost entirely invisible and shielded” (Rupnow 2017, p. 39). This may at first seem to match the situation outlined here, with an Austrian “we” struggling to include those who do not have a “Nazihintergrund”. Even the video testimonies at the Dornbirn exhibition, in which local people talk about how they have struggled with the truth of their parents’ and grandparents’ past, might be read as the kind of performance that Özyürek feels doubly burdens migrants, who must not only empathize with the primary victims of Nazism but also “acknowledge and then empathize/sympathize with Germans for the hard work they have done on the long and difficult road they have travelled since their World War II defeat” (Özyürek 2023, p. 129).

In the particular field of activity studied here, I see more room for optimism. It may be, for instance, that the story of the “long and difficult road” trodden since 1945—a story often told through objects preserved in the family home—is fading from view, even as Austrian museums suddenly turn the spotlight on it and even as Özyürek worries about its unfair demands. In 2015, the German museum Dokumentation Obersalzberg put out the conventional call for local objects from family cellars and attics, ahead of a major redesign of its permanent exhibition ([Institut für Zeitgeschichte München-Berlin 2015](#)). However, when the new exhibition opened, in the autumn of 2023, any such objects were used to tell the story of National Socialism, not the story of the attic, that is, the story of post-war attitudes. These were told in other ways and with rather less emphasis on the failure to acknowledge guilt ([Institut für Zeitgeschichte München-Berlin 2023](#)). Admittedly, the Dokumentation Obersalzberg has a narrower focus than other history museums, but looking back in ten years’ time, this may seem like the start of a new phase in which “great-grandad’s party badge” ceased to be interesting while the history of National Socialism continued to be. That will not solve the issue of how to make respectful and critical memory work function for all members of German and Austrian society, but it might allow thinking to move forward.

Finally, all scholarship has a tendency to place like with like, in a way that obscures reality’s more complex assortment. Even if the exhibitions and artworks discussed here—or rather, neatly lined up to show the repetition of certain tropes—undoubtedly construct a white majority family experience, exhibitions and performances are only a small and temporary contribution to a large and varied programme of activities relating to the National Socialist past in Germany and Austria. The same museums that show these exhibitions at some point also put on events that engage directly with fellow citizens/residents of migrant heritage. Inter-cultural and multi-cultural dialogue is also one of the declared priorities of the Jüdisches Museum Hohenems, a few miles down the road from Dornbirn. It may be that brief moments of “re-ethnicization” can play a useful part within a broader culture of commemoration. By using calls for objects and casting visitors as decision-makers, they can practice forms of co-production that will be valuable for those future projects that address diversity and inclusion more directly.

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Notes

- ¹ The injunction in the sub-heading (“Also schnell noch mal den Dachspeicher durchforsten”) comes from a video made by the Museum der Stadt Landshut to publicize its call for objects: <https://landshut.niederbayern.tv.de/mediathek/video/sammlungsauf-ruf-landshutmuseum/> (accessed 30 April 2024).
- ² The exhibitions discussed here build on thinking pioneered at the Jüdisches Museum Hohenems. Its 2016 exhibition “Übrig” reflected on the museum’s role as a place of disposal for a public made anxious by the material remains of National Socialism ([Loewy and Reichwald 2016](#)).
- ³ Translations into English are the author’s own unless indicated otherwise.
- ⁴ Though Niwa’s basic level of competence in German appears to have produced accidental rather than planned results, readers of this Special Issue may be interested in his project “Rebroadcasting of the Japanese Language Radio Program in Sri Lanka, 2022”, a reflection on silenced migrant histories that deploys translanguaging strategies ([Niwa 2022](#)).

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