

Sabina Giergiel

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5706-5679>
Institute of Slavonic Studies, Jagiellonian University

Katarzyna Taczyńska

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8540-4132>
Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Science

**HERITAGE WITHOUT HEIRS:
THE GERMAN LEGACY IN SERBIA.
THE CASE OF THE MUSEUM
OF DANUBE SWABIANS***

Abstract

This article focuses on the first historical museum in Serbia, established in Sombor in 2019 (the Museum of the Danube Swabians), with an exhibition devoted to the presence of Germans in Vojvodina. The artefacts presented at the exhibition, left behind by the Germans who used to live in Vojvodina, have been recognised as part of Serbia's difficult heritage (the term coined by Sharon Macdonald). The article analyses the permanent exhibition and the museum's efforts to involve the local residents in creating said exhibition. The article also asks whether the museum in Sombor can shape the collective identity of Serbs and undermine its ethno-nationalist character.

Keywords: Serbia, Danube Swabians, Germans, Sombor, museum, difficult heritage

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INTRODUCTION

The history of Germans in the territory of present-day Serbia (in Serbian, the population is referred to as *Podunavski Nemci/Švabe*, in English as Danube Swabians, and in German as *Donauschwabern*) dates back to the turn of the seventeenth century and is connected with the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire from Pannonia. At that time, the Habsburg state began establishing settlements in the areas abandoned by the Turks. The settlement of German newcomers took place in specific social and political conditions and had its own dynamics, which will be discussed later in this text. However, the history of the German community's presence in Vojvodina almost disappeared from official memory in Serbia after the Second World War.

This article focuses on the first historical museum in Serbia with an exhibition devoted to the history of Germans in Vojvodina (a region in Serbia). The institution in question, the Museum of the Danube Swabians [Muzej Podunavskih Švaba],¹ a branch of the Municipal Museum in Sombor, was established in 2019 but has not yet had its official opening. Nevertheless, the museum hosts a permanent exhibition and is already open to visitors, many of whom tour it in organised groups. The institution plays a unique role in the region, primarily focusing on preserving the memory of the German presence in Vojvodina. Its activities are centred around addressing the challenges associated with this heritage, particularly the German heritage, through which the institution indirectly contributes to the ongoing discussion about the region's identity.

In this article, we explore whether the recently established Museum of the Danube Swabians (referred to in this article as the Museum) can be classified as an institution that tries to break with the traditional and official way of presenting the past in Serbia.² The field of new museology is rich in critical interpretations of the history

¹ See <https://ddm.gms.rs/o-nama> [Accessed: 24 July 2023].

² See e.g. Donald Garfield and Ralph Appelbaum, 'The Next Thing Now: Designing the 21st-Century Museum', *Museum News* (Jan.–Feb. 1996), 35–4; Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'The Museum as Catalyst', Keynote Address, Museums 2000: Confirmation or Challenge, organised by ICOM Sweden, the Swedish Museum Association and the Swedish Travelling Exhibition/Riksställningar in Vadstena, 29 Sept. 2000, <https://silo.tips/download/the-museum-as-catalyst> [Accessed: 28 Nov. 2023].

of museums and their narratives.³ Reflection and criticism on how to effectively engage modern-day audiences have led to several changes in exhibition design. The changes have mainly affected exhibition strategies, the new narrative through which museums emphasise exhibitions' performative and theatrical aspects, e.g., the incorporation of interactive tools. These changes have shifted the understanding of education from a passive process to a learning model based on the active participation of learners. There has also been a shift from presenting great historical narratives (understood as closed periods without any connection to the present) to focusing on microhistories and the stories of previously ignored groups.⁴

To illustrate how the Museum incorporates a previously marginalised or deliberately silenced element of the past into contemporary narratives about Vojvodina's uniqueness, we analyse its permanent exhibition. We also reflect on what strategies it uses to represent regional history. With the Museum examining a dissonant or difficult heritage, various conflicts arise, each inherently disharmonious and perceived differently by different social groups. The difficult heritage can create divisions in society and challenge the community's positive image in the area.⁵ From this point of view, the very idea of creating a museum devoted to Germans can be considered an act of curatorial courage. As we demonstrate in this article, its creation was motivated by the belief that it is necessary to highlight the repressed or at least marginalised elements of the culture which had contributed to the development of the region. Our analysis aims to describe the narrative model used by the Museum, as well as the Museum's potential function in constructing the identity of the multi-ethnic inhabitants of Serbia.

³ Piotr Piotrowski, *Muzeum krytyczne* (Poznań, 2011), 15.

⁴ Anna Ziębińska-Witek, 'Muzea historyczne w XXI w. Transformacja czy trwanie', https://www.nck.pl/upload/archiwum_kw_files/artykuly/8_anna_ziebnska-witek_-_muzea_historyczne_w_xxi_wieku.pdf [Accessed: 20 Dec. 2022]; Anna Ziębińska-Witek, 'Wystawianie przeszłości, czyli historia w nowych muzeach', *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość*, xii, 2 (2013), 77–92.

⁵ Sharon MacDonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond* (London, 2008); see Roma Sendyka, 'Co widać z góry. Inne miasto i jego trudne dziedzictwo', *Widok. Teorie i praktyki kultury wizualnej*, 4 (2013), <https://www.pismowidok.org/pl/archiwum/2013/4-ruinacja/co-widac-z-gory-inne-miasto-i-jego-trudne-dziedzictwo?getPdf=1> [Accessed: 28 Jun. 2022].

HISTORY: GERMANS IN SERBIA

Representatives of various nationalities began flocking to the territory of northern Serbia, namely, the area of present-day Vojvodina, in the seventeenth century, with Serbs making up one of the largest settler groups. They were brought to the region by their religious leaders at the end of the century. It is estimated that about 35,000 Serbs, originating from Prizren, Peć, Novi Pazar, Priština, and other parts of Ottoman Serbia, led by the Peć Patriarch Arsenije III Crnojević, followed the retreating Austrian forces into the Habsburg territory. They settled in the areas between the rivers Tisa and Drava, as far as Baja, Buda, Saint Andrew (Szentendre), and Komarno.⁶ Other groups which moved to Vojvodina from Habsburgs' lands around that time include Aromanians, Greeks, and Albanian Catholics (the so-called Kelmendi). They were followed by settlers from other regions: Šokci, Bunjevci, and Croats arriving from the west; Catholic Bulgarians and Romanians coming from the east; and Germans, Catalans, French, Italians, Czechs, Slovaks, Ruthenians, Hungarians, Jews, and Roma arriving from the north.⁷ As a result of these migrations, Vojvodina became a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-confessional region in which Germans constituted a significant minority.

The Museum of the Danube Swabians operates in Sombor, a city in the northeastern part of Serbia, near the border with Hungary and Croatia. Just like the entire Serbian part of Vojvodina, Sombor used to be a multicultural and multi-ethnic place. The numerous groups that made up its population also included Germans, for whom the city had a particular historical significance. German settlers, who began reaching the territory of today's Serbia via the Danube at the turn of the eighteenth century, would come ashore in Apatin – a town located about 20 km away from Sombor, which today hosts the Danube Germans' Church Museum [Podunavsko Nemački crkveni muzej]. The Heritage House [Zavičajna kuća] in Sremski Karlovci, which houses an ethnographic exhibition devoted to the everyday life of Germans,

⁶ Vassilis Petsinis, *National Identity in Serbia: Vojvodina and the Multiethnic Society between the Balkans and Central Europe* (London–New York, 2019).

⁷ Tomasz Kwoka, 'Etnotopografia Nowego Sadu – o dziedzictwie narodów osiedlających się w Nowym Sadzie', *Balkanica Posnaniensia. Acta et studia*, 24 (2017), 129–8.

is another institution that commemorates the history of Danube Swabians in Serbia.⁸ For the newcomers (the Germans), Sombor was the second stop on the journey, where they received information on where they would be able to ultimately settle.

However, the German population in Serbia (and Croatia) decreased significantly after the Second World War. It was a result of both voluntary emigration and post-war anti-German repressions. For many post-war decades, these events remained a taboo subject in Yugoslavia. The historical narrative in socialist Yugoslavia did not distinguish between German civilians and soldiers and assigned all representatives of this nation the blame for the outbreak of the war and the suffering it caused. In a way, the post-war repressions against civilians (especially the elderly and children) were thus seen as justified. The negative image of Germans was reinforced by the Yugoslav culture.⁹ This was not conducive to accepting their contribution to the development of Vojvodina, and it thwarted any and all discussions about their own suffering. It should also be noted that members of the German minority often hid their roots in socialist Yugoslavia. Even today, Serbian society remains mostly unwelcoming to any attempts to commemorate the post-war civilian German victims.¹⁰

The unification promoted by the authorities of socialist Yugoslavia led to the erasure of the memory of the two nations' past coexistence in the region from the consciousness of Serbian citizens. There was no place for the Germans' contributions to farming, industrial development and the industrialisation of Serbia in the country's official historical narrative. The awareness of this part of the country's history began

⁸ Since 2002, Sremski Karlovci has also been the home of the German Society for the Support of Good Neighbourly Relations 'Karlowitz' [*Nemačko udruženje za dobrosusedske odnose "Karlowitz"*], which focuses on activities supporting reconstruction and renewal of the ethnic and cultural identity of Germans in Vojvodina. See Александар Крел, 'Ревитализација етничког идентитета Немаца у Сремским Карловцима', *Гласник Етнографског института САН-у*, 1 (2009), 71–91.

⁹ Весна Цидилко, 'Судбина Немаца у Војводини као тема новије српске књижевности', in Станиша Тутњевић (ed.), *Фолклор. Поетика. Књижевна периодика. Зборник радова посвећен Миодразу Матицком* (Београд, 2010), 110–97; Carl Bethke, 'Ponovno otkriće povijesti Nijemaca u zemljama bivše Jugoslavije – prva bilanca poslije 15 godina', in Vera Katz (ed.) *Revizija prošlosti na prostorima bivše Jugoslavije. Zbornik radova* (Sarajevo, 2007), 255–64.

¹⁰ See Sabina Giergiel, 'Rywalizacja o pamięć. Spór wokół upamiętnienia niemieckich ofiar w serbskim Vršacu', *Teksty Drugie*, 5 (2021), 223–39.

to grow only in the 1990s.¹¹ Even though Germans had been present in Vojvodina and had facilitated the development of Serbia for more than two hundred years, their role in the region has only recently begun to be reflected in the country's institutions (associations, museums),¹² which include the Museum of the Danube Swabians. Its establishment is an interesting and symptomatic example of Serbian culture's increasing openness to historical facts that can be uncomfortable for the national community. The Museum focuses on integrating marginalized memory into the national memory and preserving the cultural heritage¹³ of Germans, as one of the ethnic minorities of Serbia. A minority which, it should be noted, had practically disappeared from the country in the second half of the twentieth century, and whose members, until recently, tended to remain silent about their own roots and the post-war fates of their ancestors and relatives. That is why, in this article, we use the phrase 'heritage without heirs'. Our analysis will focus on the above-mentioned attempts to commemorate the German past of the region, including the degree of their success or lack thereof.

OVERVIEW OF THE PERMANENT EXHIBITION

The Museum of the Danube Swabians is located in a restored tenement house owned by the city and covers an area of 300 square meters. The building itself (the so-called Grašalković Palace, Serbian: Grašalković palata) is of particular importance for the history of the

¹¹ Zoran Janjetović, *Nemci u Vojvodini* (Beograd, 2009), 35 ff.; Helena Rill and Marijana Stojčić, *On the Trail of the Danube Swabians in Vojvodina*, transl. Ulvija Tanović (Sarajevo–Beograd, 2017).

¹² German associations began to spring up only in the 1990s (the first one, *Die Donau*, was established in Novi Sad in 1992). Janjetović, *Nemci u Vojvodini*, 364. Describing the state of the German minority up to the 1990s, Aleksandar Krel called it an "ethnic hibernation". Крел, 'Ревитализација етничког идентитета Немаца у Сремским Карловцима', 73.

¹³ In this text, cultural (and natural) heritage is understood as defined in the UNESCO Convention adopted in Paris in 1972, <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/convention-en.pdf> [Accessed: 25 July 2022]. The definition of intangible heritage was undefined until 2003 at a conference in Paris, see the term 'heritage' in Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska and Robert Traba (eds), *Modi memorandi. Leksykon kultury pamięci* (Warszawa, 2014), 106–11.

Germans of the region. In the period between 1840 and 1880, it housed the Immigration Centre for the Planning and Distribution of the German Population [Imigracioni centar za planiranje i doseljavanje nemačkog stanovništva]. It was a gathering point from which German families were sent by tsarist officials to places scattered around Bačka, a land which covered part of Vojvodina: northern Serbia and southern Hungary.¹⁴ The Museum was established as a joint project of the city of Sombor, the City Museum, and the National Council of the German Minority [Nacionalni savet nemačke nacionalne zajednice]. The Museum was officially established in 2019 but work on the permanent exhibition was not completed until 2020.

The exhibition was authored by Milka Ljuboja, a historian employed at the Museum, with the involvement of curator and historian Miroslava Rasić. The Museum was created in cooperation with the Danube Swabian Central Museum located in the German city of Ulm.¹⁵ The idea of creating a historical museum in Sombor came from the members of Serbia's most active German association, the Humanitarian Germans' Association 'Gerhard' [Humanitarno Udruženje Nemaca 'Gerhard']. Founded in 1999, the Association's primary aim is to preserve and strengthen German identity in Vojvodina. Its activities primarily revolve around educational initiatives for both students and teachers. Additionally, its members are actively engaged in providing humanitarian aid to elderly individuals of German descent living in challenging economic circumstances. The association also plays a role in promoting the German culture of this region.¹⁶

The exhibition is a way of presenting the past that offers an alternative to official Serbian historiography. The historical exhibition focuses on the presence of Germans in the territory of Vojvodina. The founders of the Museum of the Danube Swabians stated that the institution aims to present a comprehensive history of Germans in Serbia. Peter Mraković, former director of the City Museum in Sombor,¹⁷ declared:

¹⁴ See <https://www.ravnoplov.rs/zgrada-iz-koje-je-naseljena-backa/> [Accessed: 25 July 2023].

¹⁵ <https://www.dzm-museum.de/en/about-us/museum/> [Accessed: 22 Sept. 2021].

¹⁶ <https://www.gerhardsombor.org/> [Accessed: 24 July 2023]. All translations from Serbian to English have been made by us – S.G., K.T.

¹⁷ Since July 2022, David Firanj has been the director of the City Museum (and, therefore, also its branches, such as the Museum of the Danube Swabians).

“Their [the Germans’] tradition, culture, and migrations will all be shown [in the exhibition]. We want [it] to include various traces of their presence in these areas, from their arrival to the present day”.¹⁸ As a comprehensive presentation of the life of the German minority in Vojvodina, the permanent exhibition can be referred to as a narrative exhibition.¹⁹ In general, a narrative exhibition’s specificity is defined by a clear narrative achieved through framing objects (artefacts, visual and textual elements) in their historical context. Such exhibitions also feature a distinct axial structure, aiming not only to impart knowledge but also to evoke emotional responses in the audience.²⁰ The Museum’s exhibition follows a realistic approach, with the narrative developing in a linear manner and the events presented in chronological order. The exhibits are accompanied by texts (in Serbian, German, Hungarian and English) placed on hanging and illuminated boards. The objects are showcased within their historical contexts, and the narrative itself seems to be impartial and objective. This mode of artefact presentation tries to ensure that the message of the exhibition can be fully comprehended by the visitors.²¹ Subsequent rooms are filled with exhibits creating a multidimensional story which culminates in the disappearance of the German minority from

¹⁸ http://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/vojvodina/backa/muzej-podunavskih-nemaca-u-somboru_1062465.html [Accessed: 5 Oct. 2021].

¹⁹ The typology of the exhibitions we reference here was proposed by Anna Ziębińska-Witek (narrative, reconstruction and simulation-based, and participation-based exhibitions). See Ziębińska-Witek, *Historia w muzeach. Studium ekspozycji Holokaustu* and the term “museum” in *Modi memorandi*, 246–51. Writing about the meaning of a “narrative” in the Polish museum discourse, Joanna Wawrzyniak and Łukasz Bukowiecki emphasize the importance of the exhibition’s form, which is perceived as modern, in contrast to the manner in which the exhibits are presented in traditional museums. See: Joanna Wawrzyniak and Łukasz Bukowiecki, ‘Rzeczy i opowieści. Muzeum Warszawy wobec modelu muzeum narracyjnego’, *Teksty Drugie*, 4 (2020), 235–36. If we try to define the place of the Sombor Museum within the framework of the so-outlined opposition (between the narrative exhibition and the exhibit-focused one), it becomes clear that the institution houses a hybrid exhibition in which the story and contextualisation are as important as the exhibits.

²⁰ After Anna Ziębińska-Witek, ‘Estetyki reprezentacji śmierci w ekspozycjach historycznych’, in Małgorzata Fabiszak and Marcin Owiński (eds), *Obóz-muzeum. Trauma we współczesnym wystawiennictwie* (Kraków, 2013), 36.

²¹ Jeshajahu Weinberg and Rina Elieli, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington* (New York, 1995), 49, quoted after: Anna Ziębińska-Witek, ‘Estetyki reprezentacji śmierci w ekspozycjach historycznych’, 36.

the territory of Serbia. By focusing on the comprehensive presentation of the history of Germans who began settling in the territory of present-day Serbia in the eighteenth century, the Museum aims to raise awareness of this minority's contribution to Serbian culture and its economy. As indicated by Milka Ljuboja, in the future, the Museum intends to become a research centre devoted to the history of Germans in Serbia (or even more broadly, in the former Yugoslavia). Currently, however, the exhibition seems to be the top priority for the creators of the Museum. It owes its unique character to the richness of the Museum's collection, only part of which is presented to the visitors. This aspect will be analysed in the latter part of this text.

We discuss the permanent exhibition in the order established by its creators, which follows traditional chronology, starting from the early days of German settlement to the eventual decline of the German minority in Vojvodina. It's important to note that we are not analysing all sections of the exhibition; our focus is on elements that contribute to a new perspective on the history of Germans in Vojvodina.

All visitors entering the hall of the Museum are greeted by the sight of a wall-mounted board with an enlarged photo of a child. As they can learn from a first-person statement accompanying the image, it is a childhood photograph of Eduard Grolinger, who was born in 1939 (see Fig. 1). Such an opening creates a clear impression that little Eduard will act as a guide for the visitors exploring the exhibition. The image of a few-year-old boy evokes innocence, but also naivety and defencelessness, and its presence at the entrance creates emotional involvement in the visitors, who proceed expecting the narrative to be presented from the perspective of a German boy who was born just before the outbreak of the Second World War in Yugoslavia. Still, the place of his birth is also meaningful: Gakovo, the site of a camp to which the German population was resettled between 1945 and 1948. In journalistic texts and historiography, the site is often referred to as a concentration camp. It is debatable whether the place could really be described as such, but there is no doubt that the hygienic and nutritional conditions there were disastrous, which resulted in relatively high mortality rates. In the curatorial texts on the anti-German repressions at the exhibition, it is often mentioned as one of the worst camps. Following the example of curatorial texts and Serbian historiography, we use the term "camp" when referring to abandoned, post-German villages to which Germans began to be moved in 1944.



Fig. 1. Photo of Eduard Grolinger at the entrance to the rooms housing the permanent exhibition.

Photo by Katarzyna Taczyńska.

However, it turns out that our first impression was misleading, and the figure of the child was not employed in a purposeful manner in the narrative. In our opinion, the opportunity to use this guide to the world of Vojvodina Germans was wasted. The figure of a little boy (mentioned by name) is one of the devices that could break apart the collective entity (Germans) in order to present the individual and personalize the story. Such a figure would allow the authors of the exhibition to enrich the narrative with elements typical of a child's perspective, such as flexibility, imagination, curiosity and a desire to explore the world. As we mentioned, the exhibition's storytelling is impersonal and seemingly neutral. It is not personalized, and the visitors follow the chronological narrative, that is, simply read about the successive stages of the German settlement and establishment in Serbia.



Fig. 2. One of the rooms of the permanent exhibition presenting artefacts related to the everyday life of the Danube Swabians.

Photo by Katarzyna Taczyńska.

Let us get back to the exhibition. Its first part is a historical introduction, which presents the reasons for the Germans' arrival to the area and describes their journey. Subsequent sections are devoted to various aspects of German life in Vojvodina (religious observance, traditions, professions, everyday life, culture, etc.). Typologically, in the first rooms of the Museum, the visitors interact with everyday objects and learn about their use. The narrative focuses on depicting the specifics of the life of the first German settlers in Serbia (see Fig. 2).

The section showing the everyday life of Germans in Serbia during the interwar period is particularly noteworthy. In this space, visitors are confronted with the aspects of Danube Swabians' lives that were concealed by the official Serbian narrative about Germans in Vojvodina, and are dominated by two main topics. The first one relates to the very beginnings of the German presence in the region and highlights the fact that before the arrival of Germans, the Pannonian Basin was

sparsely populated, waterlogged and therefore dangerous for potential residents on account of being conducive to the proliferation of various diseases. The Museum's narrative stresses the fact that Germans arrived in a territory which was not suited for habitation.²² "Death for the first [generation], suffering for the second, and bread for the third [*Prvoj smrt, drugoj patnja, trećoj hleb*]" was the common saying describing the fate of three successive generations of Germans who began arriving in the region at the turn of the eighteenth century.²³ This saying is also indirectly related to the belief that Germans brought technical solutions previously unknown in Serbia, and thus contributed to the economic development of the region. The second topic which dominates the history of Swabians in this territory in official historiography is the question of their collaboration with the Nazis during the Second World War and the subsequent persecution of the German population. This issue will be discussed in more detail in the later part of the article.

It is clear that the two above-mentioned topics cast a long shadow on the Museum's exhibition. A relatively large amount of space is taken up by artefacts related to the Germans' arrival in Vojvodina and the work which was traditionally performed by the early settlers. A similarly significant part of the exhibition focuses on political issues (the room presenting the interwar activity of German cultural and political organisations, the beginnings of Serbian Germans' collaboration with the Nazis and the post-war repressions).

There is also a completely different section sandwiched between the parts devoted to the abovementioned big issues – one which

²² Janjetović, *Nemci u Vojvodini*, 41.

²³ Stjepan Seder, a descendant of German settlers, social activist, promoter of knowledge about Vojvodina's Germans, and founder of the Danube Swabian Culture Centre, who lived in Sremski Karlovci, used this saying as the title of his book. Stjepan A. Seder, *Prvoj smrt, drugoj patnja, trećoj hleb* (Sremski Karlovci, 2002). It remains popular among people of German descent. It was often used by representatives of the German minority in the conversations conducted in March 2020 (the interviews were conducted in February and March 2020, as part of the research for the project 'Memory of the post-war experiences of the Banat Swabians in transgenerational oral transmission' financed by the National Science Centre [2019/03/X/HS3/00128]), as a short and brief description of the first decades of German settlement life in Vojvodina. This poignant phrase is also used in the Museum in Sombor, in the exhibition section devoted to the beginnings of the German settlement.

engages the visitors' sight and even hearing in a most direct manner; it can even move the visitors' entire bodies. This section of the exhibit resembles a living room and functions as the stage for a social gathering. It is not only adorned with enlarged photos of women and men in elegant costumes but there is also interwar music coming from a horn gramophone and even a dance-step pattern marked on the floor, which invites visitors to follow along. These simple elements affect the visitors' perception and cause them to involuntarily switch their focus from challenging and complex issues to everyday problems. The goal of this section is to provide visitors with experiences rather than plain knowledge; it reveals the performative potential of the exhibition, characteristic of narrative museums that strive to transform the audience into active participants.²⁴ This technique successfully breaks the visitors out of their established thought patterns by highlighting the parts of German life they had probably never considered. Entertainment, an expected component of everyday life, becomes a surprising element in the Museum's narrative, disrupting its flow. In this room, imagination and impressions prevail most clearly over the intellectual reception of the past.²⁵ Visitors engage with this part of the exhibit differently than they do with sections concerning the war period. Their engagement is driven by a sense of connection with the people from the interwar years. The impact of this section is not only intellectual but also emotional. Though the visual dimension is the dominant aspect of the exhibition, some of its fragments engage several senses at once. In the analysed room, visitors get to listen to the music that was played in German homes. They are then guided by footsteps glued to the floor, along with arrows indicating the direction in which the feet move, allowing them to dance to the music and thus experience a simulated connection with the past. It is clear that, in this case, visitor experience is prioritized over passing along

²⁴ The described fragment of the exhibition corresponds to new exhibition techniques which focus on the human senses and create the illusion of travelling back in time, Ziębińska-Witek, 'Wystawianie przeszłości', 84–5.

²⁵ Monika Heinemann, 'Między Wschodem a zachodem: pytanie o specyfikę narracji muzealnej w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej', in Robert Kostro, Kazimierz Wóycicki, and Michał Wysocki (eds), *Historia Polski od-nowa. Nowe narracje historii i muzealne reprezentacje przeszłości* (Warszawa, 2014), 47, quoted after Maria Kobielska, 'Muzeum narracyjne-muzeum doświadczeniowe. Uwagi terminologiczne', *Teksty Drugie*, 4 (2020), 20.

historical knowledge. Moreover, this way of presenting the past adds multidimensionality to the story of Germans in Serbia, painting a more comprehensive picture of their lives than the one provided by popular knowledge.

One of the last rooms of the exhibition focuses on the political activity of the interwar and war periods.²⁶ It is worth noting that one of the information boards is devoted to the activity of *Kulturbund*, presented in chronological order. Founded in Novi Sad, in 1920, *Kulturbund* was an organisation established to preserve and foster the development of German culture. After some time, i.e., after an internal split in 1938, its alliances shifted towards the National Socialists and it transformed into a para-military entity similar to the Hitler Youth. The authors of the exhibition also highlight the activities of Adam Berenz, a Catholic priest who publicly opposed the Danube Swabians' association with Nazism. In our opinion, this juxtaposition contributes to a fuller portrayal of this historical period.

It should also be emphasized that another of the didactic panels at the exhibition provides information on the 'Prinz Eugen' Division, which was active between 1942 and 1945. Established at the beginning of 1942, the unit was transferred to the front in the fall of that year (see Fig. 3).²⁷ In the former Yugoslavia, the name of the division is a symbol of the cruelties perpetrated by Germans in this region during the Second World War. "The atrocities committed by 'Prinz Eugen' against Serbian civilians, in combination with the fact that the *Volksdeutsche* never felt compelled to actively protest at the exploitation that they suffered at Nazi hands, rendered Banat Serbs extremely hostile towards the German community".²⁸ Historian Zoran Janjetović claims that the unit had become "a symbol of the betrayal and crimes committed by the *Volksdeutsche*". This symbol, metonymically transferred to all representatives of the German minority, became a convenient justification for the post-war repressions.²⁹ Visitors receive very brief

²⁶ In the interwar period, or to be more precise, in 1921, Germans were the third most numerous ethnic group in Vojvodina. They represented 22 per cent of all inhabitants of the region, while Serbs accounted for almost 35 per cent of the population, and Hungarians for just over 24 per cent. Petsinis, *National identity in Serbia*, 44.

²⁷ Janjetović, *Nemci u Vojvodini*, 310.

²⁸ Petsinis, *National Identity in Serbia*, 53.

²⁹ Janjetović, *Nemci u Vojvodini*, 312.

information about the division. This observation is not intended as criticism, as this brevity is probably a result of the information boards' design, the structure of the narrative, and the concept of the Museum. Visitors are to learn about various aspects of German history in the region, and no single topic was elevated as the dominant one. The exhibition represents a multiplicity of aspects or manifestations and does not focus on a central theme that could overshadow other elements. Visitors learn that the unit was created to fight anti-fascist guerrillas. Initially, its ranks were filled by volunteers, but later, all German men fit for fighting were subject to mandatory conscription.³⁰ The exhibition clearly states that during the war, the 'Prinz Eugen' Division committed crimes against the civilian population (women and children are indicated as victims) of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Croatia.

The activity of Father Berenz serves as a counterpoint to what we consider to be the prevailing Serbian belief in German large-scale support of the Nazis during the Second World War. This more nuanced approach to history is conducive to introducing some ambiguity into the well-established message. A visitor to the exhibition is confronted with lesser-known facts, transforming them from a passive recipient of knowledge into an active subject whose goal is to collect information, think things through, gain deeper understanding, and, finally, draw their own conclusions.³¹

The exhibition culminates in a space devoted to the post-war repressions that befell the Yugoslav Germans; in the context of the narrative, it functions as an epilogue. As was mentioned at the beginning, awareness of these events is still not widespread in Serbia, and there is some resistance to accepting this knowledge. Presentation of the scale of suffering of the German civilian population that had remained in Yugoslavia is meant to be foremost educational. However, the goal is not education in the traditional sense – understood, in a simplified

³⁰ One of the women who spoke to one of the authors of this text in 2020 explained this fact by saying that the initial enthusiasm of young Germans clearly decreased once they saw that the division was not sent to fight on the front line. Its primary goal was to dispose of the partisans who often hid in the vicinity of civilians' dwellings, which resulted in civilian casualties.

³¹ For Ziębińska-Witek, visitors' active participation assumed by creators of historical exhibitions is one of the characteristic elements of new (narrative) museums. Ziębińska-Witek, 'Muzea historyczne w XXI w.', 110.



Fig. 3. Fragment of the exhibition devoted to the 'Prinz Eugen' Division.

Photo by Katarzyna Taczyńska.

way, as an increase in knowledge – but influencing visitors in a manner that makes them change and grow mentally, emotionally, and morally.³²

By emphasising the Germans' contribution to the modernisation of Serbia, the exhibition indirectly indicates the long-term impact of their presence in the areas where they used to live. Even today, when there are few members of this ethnic group left in Serbia, its impact on the country's development cannot be overstated. The presence of Germans in Vojvodina, and, above all, its consequences, are therefore perceived in terms of the *longue durée*, which means that history is not seen as a closed period without connection to the present.

In this context, it is worth paying attention to the exhibits that represent the period immediately preceding the outbreak of the Second

³² The phrase used by Jeshajahu Weinberg in reference to the concept of a narrative museum, exemplified by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Weinberg and Elieli, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington*, 49, quoted after Kobielska, *Muzeum narracyjne-muzeum doświadczeniowe*, 26.

World War and the gradual shift in the focus of the activities of German organisations (in Vojvodina), from cultural to political. This part of the exhibition includes, e.g., photos of young boys in uniform and during sports activities. The accompanied texts placed on the wall panels add contextual information on the circumstances of the photos, explaining the reasons which motivated the pro-Nazi sympathies of the Serbian Germans just before the invasion of Yugoslavia.³³ The texts function as an objective commentary authored by a historian. This meta-level, which coexists with individual voices (represented by, i.e. personal letters and postcards) throughout the exhibition, is intended to ensure that the narrative is comprehensive and multifaceted, providing room for both objective distance and personal experiences.

The Museum is clearly involved in the public debate on the presence of Germans in Vojvodina, touches upon weighty and controversial issues, and challenges the tradition, even though, formally, it does so in a rather standard way. It seems that the goal is to create an exhibition with a comprehensive narrative understood as a many-sided presentation of German activities in Vojvodina. Undoubtedly, such attempts to reconstruct and rebuild the regional identity should be praised. Initiatives aimed at showing the presence of various cultural groups in the region are linked with the dominant group's responsibility to local heritage and constitute part of the *longue durée* process. The authors of the exhibition want to convince visitors that if multiculturalism is to be a point of pride for Vojvodina, something which is openly referenced by various institutions in the region, the presence of Germans in this area needs to be positioned as a constitutive experience for the identity of both the city and the region.

However, here is where the expectations of the authors of the exhibition and the Museum's potential clash with each other. As we noted at the beginning, the official opening of the exhibition, attended by representatives of the state authorities, has not happened, so the Museum has never explicitly received the Serbian state's seal of approval. Thus, the narrative about the German history of the

³³ In this context, see: Carl Bethke, 'Nemci u Vojvodini 1918–1941', in Vladimir Mitrović (ed.), *Zavičaj na Dunavu. Suživot Nemaca i Srba u Vojvodini* (Novi Sad–Ulm, 2009), 196–206; Vladimir Geiger, 'Njemačka manjina u Kraljevini Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca/Jugoslaviji (1918–1941)', in Hans-Georg Fleck and Igor Graovac (eds), Friedrich Naumann, *Dijalog povjesničara-istoričara 2* (Zagreb, 2000), 429–45.

region has not been officially introduced into the public discourse, which would have legitimized it from a position of power, earning it the political right to be remembered and recognized. Nevertheless, the exhibition can be visited, and the Museum is open to the public. Created for external use, the narrative does not inspire conflicts within the local community, although it may provoke resistance from Serbian residents. In the common perception, the narrative about the Germans in the former Yugoslavia still often focuses on the issue of the nation's responsibility for the Second World War.³⁴ Can the exhibition, existing in this form and operating on the fringes of the dominant narratives, shape the collective identity of the people of Serbia or, more narrowly, Vojvodina? Does it have a chance to influence the production and reconstruction of local identity? It seems doubtful. And will the knowledge generated by the Museum reach recipients who have been unaware of these issues? In other words, will people who are indifferent to the fate of Germans visit the Museum? For German heritage to be deemed significant, it is necessary to first accept it as an integral part of the culture and traditions of the inhabitants of the region.

ARTEFACTS AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

The institution clearly indicates that a complex narrative about the Danube Swabians in the region can be introduced and supported by additional initiatives. In spite of the difficult political situation, the Museum has not ceased conducting many activities, one of which deserves a special mention.

The collection of the Sombor Museum consists of items which have been donated by individual contributors. Initially, the shortage of artefacts was an objective obstacle to the creation of the Museum. This is why the representatives of the City Museum published an appeal to the public for help in completing the collection, addressing all those who were in possession of items related to the history of Germans in Vojvodina. In February 2019, the already mentioned historian and curator, Milka Ljuboja, stated the following: "We don't have

³⁴ The use of the phrase 'nation's responsibility' is meaningful in itself, as one which, by means of metonymy, places the blame not so much on an individual as on an anonymous community.

enough exhibits to create an entire Museum dedicated to the Danube Swabians”.³⁵ The inhabitants of the city and the region, as well as people from abroad, responded to the call by sending their artefacts.³⁶ The creation of the Museum has thus become a community action, with the institution as the community’s focus. The decision to donate something to the Museum as a potential exhibit (often a personal item related to one’s family members) can be interpreted not only as a willingness to contribute to the creation of the exhibition but also as involvement in the process of “dispelling” the negative image of Germans. Such decisions are probably motivated by a sense of connection with the region or town (as the place is influenced by the Danube Swabians’ history), as well as a sense of obligation towards and kinship with one’s ancestors.

Only some of the donated objects have been showcased at the exhibition. Unused artefacts have thus become part of a potential archive that is still waiting to be properly used and displayed. All donated items are catalogued by the Museum’s employees. As a result of this wide-ranging campaign of collecting objects related to the history of Germans in Serbia, the Museum’s collection grew to include unique documents and valuable items. During the creation of the collection, the employees of the Museum did their best to show great care for the heritage of each family and reinforce the donors’ belief that each donation is truly unique. At the same time, many documents, photographs, letters, and broadly defined mementoes remain hidden and inaccessible because of the lack of necessary exhibition space – waiting to be discovered, analysed, and presented to the public.

Involving ordinary people in the creation of a museum’s collection is one of the activities typical for institutions which open themselves up to local communities, encouraging their members to take action and gain a sense of agency. In implementing this approach, the Museum began cooperation with an extraordinary older woman, a German born in 1940 in one of the villages of Vojvodina inhabited by Germans and Hungarians, who, as a four-year-old child, together with her brother and grandparents, had been interned in several

³⁵ https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/vojvodina/backa/uskoro-muzej-podunavskih-nemacu-somboru_995183.html [Accessed: 5 Oct. 2021].

³⁶ https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/vojvodina/backa/uskoro-muzej-podunavskih-nemacu-somboru_995183.html [Accessed: 26 Oct. 2021].

camps for Germans (including the ones in Knićanin and Gakovo). The woman cooperates with both the Sombor Museum and the ‘Gerhard’ Association. In an interview, she explained that she is motivated by the desire to “present the good side of Germans – even though we [people involved in the work of the Association] do not deny their evil deeds – so that it would be understood that it’s not about the nation as a collective, but about individuals who have committed crimes; people who have specific names and surnames”. To achieve this goal, she provided the Museum in Sombor with a unique document – the war diary of her uncle, Nikolaus Barbier, who served in the already-mentioned ‘Prinz Eugen’ Division during the Second World War.

The content of this diary certainly deserves a separate discussion, for which there is not enough space in our article. However, the review of materials collected by the Museum shows that the institution doesn’t shy away from addressing uncomfortable aspects that challenge the affirmatory narrative of the region’s multi-ethnic history. In this context, heritage serves as a key to mutual understanding and building political, economic, and cultural relations in Vojvodina.³⁷ We believe this exhibition serves as an impartial and objective example, which is significant because the narrative surrounding Germans in Serbia during the second half of the twentieth century had predominantly focused on their responsibility for the Second World War. The exhibition in question doesn’t neglect this issue and offers a more nuanced and comprehensive portrayal than previous representations in official historiography.

CONCLUSIONS

Without a doubt, some elements of the permanent exhibition (especially the room devoted to the post-war fate of the Germans of Serbia) convey a message critical towards the historical narrative sanctioned by tradition and ideology. The turn of the Museum of the Danube Swabians in Sombor away from the so-called grand narratives towards the experiences of a group that for many post-war decades had been overlooked by Serbian historical museums³⁸ helps to classify it as a new

³⁷ Ljiljana Gavrilović, *Muzeji i granice moći* (Beograd, 2011), 50.

³⁸ The historical museums’ most frequently stated goals include promoting education, developing historical awareness, and shaping collective memory. Therefore,

type of museum. The inclusion of difficult topics in the exhibition indicates that it has “shift[ed] from the private into the public sphere, and provoke[s] discussion, which ultimately affects the society’s sensitivity and awareness”.³⁹

The Sombor Museum has clear democratic potential. It is especially important in the face of Serbs’ changing perception of their country’s past. In recent decades, in Serbia the discourse (in the public, museum and scientific spheres alike) has been marked by the demonisation of the period of socialist Yugoslavia and, thus, the activity of communists as well. One of the side effects of this tendency is the emergence of a right-wing narrative in which Serbia is presented as a victim of history. In the so-constructed historical narrative, the communists were identified as enemies of the nation. The system of anti-German repressions was created by representatives of the communist authorities, with the active participation of the partisans (whose members were recruited from all republics of the former Yugoslavia, including today’s Serbia). Therefore, there is a danger that the difficult topic of the post-war suffering of German civilians in Serbia will only be selectively absorbed into the collective consciousness, and the blame for the atrocities will be simply placed on the communists. Thus, the positive image of Serbs, preserved in nationally oriented collective memory, will not become tarnished.

The exhibition poses yet another question – to what extent can the regional identity linked to the territory of Vojvodina influence the general collective identity of Serbs and undermine its ethno-nationalist character? Until the end of the First World War, this area was part of Austria-Hungary. The post-war merging of Vojvodina and Central Serbia into one state constituted a fusion of regions with different traditions whose roots belonged to different culture circles. At that point, the Serbs, who began settling in today’s Vojvodina at the end of the seventeenth century⁴⁰ and were cut off from European influ-

their potential lies in the mission to shape the way we see reality (not only in its historical aspect), which constitutes an inherent part of their operations. Ziębińska-Witek, ‘Wystawianie przeszłości’, 83.

³⁹ Anna Ziębińska-Witek, ‘Przeszłość w muzeach-dwa modele reprezentacji. Analiza porównawcza Europejskiego Centrum Solidarności i Muzeum II Wojny światowej w Gdańsku’, *Teksty Drugie*, 4 (2020), 230.

⁴⁰ The key event in the history of these settlements is known in historiography as the Great Migration of Serbs.

ences as a result of the Turkish conquests, regained their place as part of European civilisation.⁴¹ The differences and consequences resulting from this fact remain noticeable to this day and are often manifested by the inhabitants of Serbia.⁴² We interpret the emergence of the Museum of the Danube Swabians as an articulation of the need to integrate the teaching of the history of the Serbian nation with a perspective that presents the past as a multicultural space. A space in which Germans play an important role and are essential for building (at least) the local identity. The permanent exhibition at the Museum in Sombor serves as an example of how contemporary exhibitions use new solutions in order to become more accessible to today's audiences. These innovative strategies for narrating the past in Sombor allow visitors to engage with a story that transcends the abstract and distant and instead becomes part of their local identity.

In the end, it is worth returning to the issue alluded to in the title of this article – the preservation of the heritage of the minority, which nowadays has almost entirely vanished from the region. Only 4,064 people self-reported as German in the last census (2011) conducted in Serbia, with 3,272⁴³ of them living in Vojvodina. In the 2022 census, 2,573 people declared German nationality.⁴⁴ In contrast, before the Second World War, there were about 500,000 Germans in Serbia.⁴⁵ Therefore, both people without any German roots and those with only indirect ties to this minority are involved in the preservation of German heritage.⁴⁶ This can be seen as an example of a broader phenomenon that has been observed in Central and Eastern Europe for several decades – i.e., an increased interest in activities aimed at the cultural renewal of forgotten and/or repressed heritages, which

⁴¹ Зоран Јањетовић, 'Значај Подунавских Шваба за историју Срба', in Габријела Шуберт (ed.), *Срби и Немци у XX веку – у сенци званичне политике* (Београд, 2016), 28.

⁴² See Sabina Giergiel and Katarzyna Taczyńska, 'A non-existent cemetery: the memory of Germans in today's Belgrade', *Memory Studies* 2023, [first online version], DOI: 10.1177/17506980231170349.

⁴³ http://media.popis2011.stat.rs/2012/Nacionalna_per_cent20pripadnost-Ethnicity.pdf [Accessed: 5 Jun. 2020].

⁴⁴ <https://popis2022.stat.gov.rs/sr-latn/5-vestisaopstenja/news-events/20230428-konacnirezpopisa/?a=0&s=0> [Accessed: 25 July 2023].

⁴⁵ Nenad Stefanović, *Jedan svet na Dunavu. Razgovori i komentari* (München–Beograd 2003), 125.

⁴⁶ They are or were married to a person of German descent.

can take various forms.⁴⁷ In the case of Serbia, this phenomenon is of particular importance, as it indirectly encourages the community to confront uncomfortable historical facts (repressions and expulsions of Germans) and, at the same time, question the image of Serbia as a “victim” nation which is promoted by some right-wing circles.⁴⁸ The message of the Sombor Museum aligns perfectly with such tendencies. It remains to be seen whether this kind of shift in how the past is presented – the shift from a grand narrative to the experiences of a previously ignored group – did not come too late. This question is resurfacing with particular poignancy in Europe as we write these words, with Ukraine still defending its statehood against full-scale Russian aggression. Europeans face the challenging task of dealing with this daunting event, which results in, among other ramifications, an exodus of the Ukrainian population and a new wave of refugees from East Slavic European countries.

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⁴⁷ Efforts in this field include e.g., literary activity (non-fiction books about the German identity of Silesia in Poland), grassroots activities focused on commemorating victims of violence that belonged to groups that have been marginalized in the past (a march towards the Austrian border organized in the Czech city of Brno to commemorate the post-war exodus of the German population), or legally sanctioned works aimed at building a memorial complex at the Sajmište concentration camp in Belgrade.

⁴⁸ See Marijana Stojčić and Katarzyna Taczyńska, ‘The culture of memory and remodification of the socialist heritage in contemporary Serbia. The perception of Goli Otok and of the persecution of Vojvodina Germans after World War II’, in Rigels Halili, Guido Franzinetti, and Adam F. Kola (eds), *Studying the Memory of Communism. Genealogies, Social Practices and Communication* (Toruń, 2021), 200–56.

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Sabina Giergiel – memory studies, Holocaust studies; translator, Slavist, and philologist specialising in literature of the former Yugoslavia; professor at the Department of Philology of the Jagiellonian University, Kraków; e-mail: sabina.giergiel@uj.edu.pl

Katarzyna Taczyńska – contemporary culture in the context of memory in Eastern and Southern Europe, Holocaust studies, literature and art created by Jewish women in the Balkans; assistant professor at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, and researcher at University College Dublin on the project 'When Nationalism Fails. A Comparative Study of Holocaust Museums in ex collaborationist countries'; e-mail: katarzyna.taczynska@ispan.edu.pl