

A place at the table?

Food in museums as an “*Ersatz* politics” of difficulty

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Introduction

This chapter explores three political uses of food and cuisine in museums and discusses the paradoxical relations between them.¹ In each case food is a kind of proxy for politically based desires connected to difficult histories, as well as an indicator of different forms of nostalgic remembering and reimagining using a phenomenological approach (Farrar 2011). The first of these desires is for a “happy multiculturalism” in a present shaped by difficult issues of migration; the second is for a return to a mythic past of “how things were” prior to the perceived problems of the present day; the third is for public understanding of difficult times from the past and mourning for futures that never were. In each one, food is used as a means to argue for the significance of having, or in order to offer a “place at the table”, where the politics of difficult issues can be revealed or hidden through the media of food or culinary objects. Holtzman (2006) analyses the deep connection between food and memory on multiple levels, and shows how it can be used for multiple purposes when addressing themes of ethnic and diaspora identity, sensuous memory, invented traditions and nostalgias, gender and agency, transformation through time and processes of remembering and forgetting. Indeed, despite the fact that Holtzman does not address museums in his article, the museum might be the ideal location within which to analyse all of these themes.

As this chapter shows, museums can use food to prompt, play on or touch on some kind of desire about the sociocultural order. Its everyday, appealing nature can enable the articulation of social values, culture, demographics and identity in a way that is subtle yet simple, so that visitors may understand complex or otherwise “difficult” political issues in recognizable and emotive form. The three issues examined in this chapter each respond to or play on a sense of nostalgia (Arnold-de Simine 2013, 54–67; Boym 2001), differentiated in each case according to the underlying political perspective of the museum. This could be the presumed nostalgic longing of migrants for a home far away or their processes of making new homes, epitomized by the sharing and exchange of food, its preparation and its consumption. Or it might be the overtly nostalgic

remembering of bygone times as idealized places and moments (Farrar 2011) to which food and the senses might return us. Both of these forms of nostalgic remembering relate to notions of fabricated or reproduced authenticities within “a nostalgia for the past that is blind in some ways to structural inequities and forms of difference” (Mannur 2007, 15). Or it could be the difficult memories of food hardship and suffering, where nostalgia may be brought in as an oppositional device to draw attention to what (and who) existed before the hardship, and the unjust conditions of hardship.

Fieldwork for this chapter was conducted at museums around Europe between 2016 and 2018, as part of the European Commission Horizon 2020–funded CoHERE project. This chapter analyses museums both in depth and in breadth – with key museums acting as primary field sites for in-depth analysis of specific issues, combined with insights from a broad survey of museums across Europe. The museums included in this analysis cover a variety of locations across Europe as well as a range of museum “types”, including historical museums, ethnographic museums, open-air museums, a food museum, a city museum, a migration museum and a Holocaust museum. This plurality is indicative of the somewhat hidden or incidental nature of food in most museums, where it is usually simultaneously not a specific focus of the museum, and yet also an intrinsic part of it. Only very few “food museums” exist, and yet as both an essential element of human existence and a constituent part of much of our social, cultural, political and economic lives, food might seem to be an ideal medium through which to address multiple and often difficult histories. This is comparative with the ways in which other thematic issues, such as migration, are addressed in and by museums of varying types and in different places. The methodology used in this chapter therefore follows the approach taken by the author during previous work on migration in European museums (Whitehead, Eckersley and Mason 2012), which enabled a balance of broad and deep analysis of case studies, where each museum site was inevitably unique as a result of the varying histories, contexts, collections, audiences and socio-political and cultural conditions within which each museum operates. In this way, the approach to food in museums taken by this chapter addresses some of the concerns raised by Sutton in his review of food and the senses, in that it is crucial to focus on “everyday life and the multiple contexts in which the culturally shaped sensory properties and sensory experiences of food are invested with meaning, emotion, memory and value” (Sutton 2010, 220).

While food itself is not easy to put on display or to add to a collection, nevertheless from the wide range of museums visited and analysed for this chapter it is clear that many museums use common strategies to focus attention around food, its preparation and its enjoyment – often as part of an engagement with or subjugation of the politics of social difference and difficult histories. Museum displays and objects relating to food – its preparation, its consumption and its absence – were analysed using display analysis techniques from museum studies (Whitehead 2016a, 2016b). Museum activities and events relating specifically

to food were researched online from museum websites and through semi-structured interviews with three museum staff members. Due to the “object-poor” nature of many difficult histories (Arnold-de Simone 2013, 10), and the inherent challenge of displaying actual foodstuffs in museums, the analysis covers a mixture of food-related objects, such as utensils, packaging, recipes and their presentation in museum displays and on online media platforms used by museums, as well as events connected with preparing, eating, cooking and sharing food. Food-focused events, whether festivals where food can be bought and eaten, demonstrations where visitors watch, learn and sample foods, or cookery classes where participants learn different, new – or old – recipes and share the results feature in many museum activities. Recipe books themselves can be used by museums to engage visitors or new audiences, even when the recipes are based on experiences of hardship and food scarcity. The notion of collective belonging – whether through past hardships or in present social and political circumstances – becomes somehow tangible through the intangible *idea* of food, or even through objects highlighting its absence.

A guest at the table: multiculturalism, migration and intercultural contact

Firstly, I examine museum uses of food – in display and engagement activities – which address themes of multiculturalism, migration and intercultural contact. Focusing on culinary cultures and traditions in museum work might seem to offer a “safe space” within which museum publics can encounter social difference without antagonism. The universality of food, cooking and eating as a human necessity is seen as a means to bring people together, both literally in museum spaces and figuratively in terms of enabling museum visitors to develop an understanding of “others”. The shared nature of food as well as the active sharing of food are used as mechanisms by which to create understandings of a shared humanity and to try to overcome discrimination or racism, but often neglect to reflect the inherent politics of difference embodied within such acts themselves.

Museums which address migration, multiculturalism or issues relating to intercultural contact frequently use food as a means to explore issues of similarity and difference – to make links between different cultures and as a way to bring people together (both figuratively and literally). Food can “provide a focus for practices of communality, especially in collective eating, whether in private or public spaces” (Hage 2010, 424). The migration of ingredients, techniques, recipes and tastes, and the increase in cultural encounters within a place and in the mobility of people, ideas and foodstuffs between places, mean that different kinds of food have become more widely accessible. Simultaneously, familiarity with different cuisines, ingredients or cooking methods has become a way to experience some idealistic aspect of otherness, to signal a habitus of cosmopolitanism which people may find desirable.

The history of these changes can be seen in displays at the Culinarium Museum, part of the Domäne Dahlem in Berlin – an open-air museum of small-scale historical agricultural techniques – which focuses mainly on family and school audiences in order to educate young people within Berlin about the origins of the food they eat today, and how things were done in the past. One display in particular shows “how Berlin eats”, highlighting the wide variety of snack foods available within the city whose origins lie far beyond Berlin or even Germany. The German title of the display, “*so isst Berlin*”, includes a word play on “*isst*”, meaning “eats”, and “*ist*”, meaning “is” – words which are distinguishable from one another in the written form but not in the spoken form. In this case, the display and information make subtle connections between food diversity and population diversity, and how these contribute towards the city being what it is – without using images of people.

Taking food as a vehicle for addressing issues of migration, multiculturalism and interculturalism allows museums to depart from the use of people, which can create pitfalls connected to issues around supposed representativeness, the possibility of stereotyping, discrimination and prejudice (whether unconscious or otherwise). The notion of coming around one table, as a metaphor for communication across cultures, is also present in a tangible form within the Culinarium, where visitors are invited to sit at a table, with places set with cutlery, plates and teacups. The teacups are in fact audio speakers which visitors can lift to their ear to listen to. Each place setting provides information about eating habits and customs from around the world – making the familiar act as a vehicle for the unfamiliar.

The House of European History in Brussels has also used food as a means to address the issue of multicultural belonging: “Interactions”, the first temporary exhibition, included a section on “the kitchen, living room and bedroom” where the kitchen stood for the idea of different flavours as symbols of cultural contacts and exchange, of familiarity and difference (<https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/interactions>). The sense of representing, and perhaps also creating, a community where difference is celebrated rather than used to divide or to antagonize is key to these museums’ approach to food as part of multiculturalism, migration and diversity in contemporary populations. In order to achieve this, it is necessary for the museums to focus on the positives and to appeal to happy feelings or memories in their visitors. As the director of the Museum of European Cultures in Berlin says in relation to the core mission of her museum: “the mission really is to address a wider public, to different target groups. And, really, the wish is that people come into our house, and they should simply feel at ease there” (Tietmeyer 2017). She also describes her museum as based on the idea of cultural contact and encounter, using objects to illustrate specific ideas – such as “cultural hybridity and mobility [...] borders [...] via trade, via travelling migration [and] media”, as well as taking a strong role within public debates about refugees and society (ibid.).



Figure 6.1 CULINARIUM exhibition as part of Open Air Museum Domain Dahlem Berlin, display: “So isst Berlin”. Photo: Susannah Eckersley, with thanks to Open Air Museum Domain Dahlem



Figure 6.2 CULINARIUM exhibition as part of Open Air Museum Domain Dahlem Berlin: teacups and table setting display. Photo: Susannah Eckersley, with thanks to Open Air Museum Domain Dahlem

What does a large plastic doner kebab advertising sign tell museum visitors about Europe? The Museum of European Cultures (MEK) in Berlin uses a small number of large objects from its collection to act as symbols for, or pointers towards, the bigger issues of relevance to Europe today and in recent times. The

doner kebab is a case in point, representing not only the large Turkish communities of Germany, but also the wider history of migration to and within Europe, and how this has influenced the everyday surroundings, lives and habits of people and places (see also Macdonald 2013, 126–7). The director of MEK points out that when visitors during guided tours discuss culinary cultures and are shown the doner kebab as a key part of fast food, the fact that the doner kebab in bread was “invented in Berlin and not in Turkey” (Tietmeyer 2017) is an important means to unsettle their expectations and to create a learning moment.

So, while the plastic doner kebab appears to be a rather benign object, one which is perhaps even banal in its everyday-ness, and simultaneously humorous as a result of being placed out of context within a museum instead of on a shop front, it also has a political, social role to play in the museum. Almost resembling a pop art piece through the incongruity of its display, its apparently benign nature as an “easy” symbol of migration, of multiculturalism and of interculturalism within Europe is further disrupted by information (and possible prior visitor knowledge) relating to the so-called Döner murders – an infamous series of murders committed against Turkish residents and others with immigrant backgrounds in Germany. The discovery that the murders were committed by members of a neo-Nazi cell in Germany, and not as a result of victim complicity in organized crime as had been assumed initially by the police, highlighted not only the issue of far-right terrorism within Europe, but also the presence of racism and prejudice within the German police and society (see Saha 2017). The MEK takes migration as a particular focus for its temporary exhibitions, with at least one exhibition on the topic each year (Tietmeyer 2017). The director makes clear that they understand the politics of this topic and the positionality of a museum within this debate, saying: “of course, we are not neutral, and we are somehow also political, in that we are reacting on society crises or debates, but [...] the state is in the background [...] we have the freedom to do what we think is important” (Tietmeyer 2017).

Museum activities use participation in the processes of cooking and eating, or sharing the experience of preparing food, and of consuming, as an immersive means to achieve “intercultural” communication, while simultaneously using the unfamiliar as a route to familiarity. The MEK in Berlin has an annual cultural days festival, “Kulturtage”, focused on a different nation, region or city and the people living in it each year. Part of this includes the sharing of food – for the 20th anniversary of the MEK in 2019 the Kulturtage theme was “Café Europa: essen verbindet” (“Café Europe: food connects”), taking a broad view of Europe and the people living there, specifically through the means of food. The positive effects of migration, mobility and cultural transfer are expressed through the changes to food and nutrition and the significant role of “culinary migration to contemporary lifestyles” (MEK website 2019). The events enable the museums to act “as a forum for cultural encounters [...] different communities and different cultural institutes, or the embassy, they all try to present their



Figure 6.3 Döner kebab display, Museum Europäischer Kulturen – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photo: Susannah Eckersley, with thanks to Museum Europäischer Kulturen – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

way of life, or aspects of life and their culture [...] and then they get in contact with different people who are visiting the events and the exhibition. And this is really lived cultural contact. So, we try to live Europe” (ibid.). The website text specifically states that they not only want to strengthen relationships

with their formal partner organizations, and to offer visitors the chance to discover different ways of life, but also to address “people of a non-German background, to discover the museum and see and enjoy familiar things from their homes. Through this we want to make a contribution towards affirming peoples’ self-images and better social integration” (MEK website 2019, own translation). Tietmeyer highlights the crucial significance of participation for the MEK: “since our foundation, we have this participatory approach [...] we collaborate with people, not doing exhibitions about the people, but with the people [...] in that the people are doing their exhibition and we are facility managers [...] so, this participatory approach is very, very important to us. It’s the core of our profile. And also, the orientation in the present time is very important to us” (ibid.). Following the international “participatory turn” in museums, the limitations of such community participation and the involvement of marginalized groups on individual and group processes of “integration” are now also being researched (see for example, Lynch 2013; Lynch and Alberti 2010).

Other museums offer bookable cooking courses, connected to different national cuisines or linked to special exhibitions or event programmes. Notably those on offer at the UK Migration Museum have a migrant individual as the course leader, who not only guides the participants through recipes from their homeland and the food preparation, but who also acts as a discursive host during the shared meal at the end. For paying participants this offers the opportunity to learn a new recipe from a possibly unfamiliar cuisine or culture, while also allowing them access to an individual from that culture in order to ask questions or to listen to personal stories in addition to the shared experience of the food. The notion that “food is so good at triggering dialogue” (Steinberg 2012, 83) has shaped the use of food in migration-focused museums internationally. This strategy can also be found in other non-museum situations and organizations, such as a recent example discussed on Twitter of the “Tandem” project in Hamburg where a local and a refugee cook together, tell their life stories and are filmed in the process, and the “Stories and Supper” (www.storiesandsupper.co.uk/) organization of supper clubs which works with local communities and refugees in south-east England.

The notion that cooking and eating together is a way to create common understandings may be both valid and valuable on the one-to-one level of interpersonal communication, but becomes more problematic when scaled up as a strategy for implementing broader “integration” measures or to provide evidence of them. The simplistic perspective that having a place at the table (whether this is a table for a shared meal or the metaphorical table of social, cultural or political influence) overcomes structural inequalities is naïve – “such utopian desires imagine eating to be a solution to the fractious malaises of the world but are predicated on sentimentalized and dehistoricized understandings of the power of consumption” (Mannur 2007, 27). At the same time, however, the recognition, appreciation and enjoyment of “migrant food” by members of

the “host society” constitute a valuing of the contribution of “newcomers” and their skills (Hage 2010, 425).

The use of willing individuals as migrant or refugee guides in museums with the intention of widening the interpretation of the museum through new perspectives on the museum objects is not entirely new (see the Multaka project in Berlin, <https://multaka.de/en/startsite-en/>, and now also in Oxford, www.prm.ox.ac.uk/multaka-oxford-0). However, this approach carries the risk of the migrants themselves becoming “the object” or “beneficiary”, thereby reinforcing asymmetric power relationships between the migrant, the museum and other museum visitors (Eckersley 2019; Lynch 2013; Lynch and Alberti 2010), and that, for potential participants, their involvement appeals to a sense of “orientalism”. Furthermore, a common trope of public representations and framings of refugees and migrants – found in museums as well as in the media (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017) and elsewhere – is not one of migrant agency, resilience or determination, but rather a “tendency in the study of migration that wants to make migrants passive pained people at all costs” (Hage 2010, 417). Instead, Hage argues that memory and the enactment of practices of homeliness among migrants is a settlement strategy: “for migrants [...] memory belongs to the construction of the future. It is only in certain pathological situations that memory becomes a form of entrenchment in the past” (ibid., 419). In this sense, museum involvements with migrant and multicultural communities could be categorized as a form of “reflective nostalgia” (Boym 2001), where the process of remembering allows a differentiated perspective on the past, in relation to the constructions of a new future, rather than a more problematic “restorative nostalgia” (ibid.) which aims to somehow return to an idealized past. The examples here make evident that while the use of food, cooking and eating by and in museums is often intended as a means to mobilize positive understandings of different cultures and shared human experiences, there are underlying problems if museums see food as apolitical. In fact, several of the examples show that the social tensions, antagonisms and problematic misconceptions of difference and similarity which museum staff may be aiming to overcome might even be reinforced if a museum presents visions of “otherness” rooted in orientalism.

A place for the past and the past in its place: nostalgic engagements with food

Secondly, I consider how food is used in museum contexts where the appeal to visitors is to engage nostalgically with a certain view of the past, in connection to the specificity of place – even when this is not an “authentic” place. I use data from Beamish Open-Air Museum in England, in which food history is a key part of a museum experience based on recreating past times and places.² The museum’s strategy for food swings between Proustian sentimentalism, didactic intent and commercial gain (as seen in other museums, such as the

Tenement Museum – Steinberg 2012), and the result is an offer to reminisce, and literally to consume the past as pure and wholesome – through immersive re-enacting as a form of “restorative nostalgia” (Boym 2001). More difficult histories relating to food – such as those relating to shortages, class inequalities and colonialism – are not absent, but they are rather toned down compared to the invitation to indulge in celebratory, nostalgic time travel through food. Our fieldwork at Beamish took place in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, when some visitors took the time-travelling experience of the museum as a reminder of a (mythic) past of bucolic social homogeneity, prior to immigration and the interference of the European Union – one that it might now be possible to recover and to relive.

For Boym (2001), restorative nostalgia is when nostalgia is utilized in order to recreate a positive sense remembered from or conjured out of memories of the past, rather than to face the realities of the present. Museums may do this in ways which are both collective and individual – in appealing to visitors’ individual memories (perhaps of childhood) or in responding to a collective social, cultural or even political mood in relation to specific parts of the past.

To give another example, the Culinarium’s display on the different food products consumed in East and West Germany during the Cold War are designed according to this tendency to respond to food in museums from a nostalgic point of view, using old picture frames for photographs of food items and packaging. The two display boards face one another, allowing the visitor to look from one to the other and to make comparisons or to note contrasts between the “two Germanies”. This exhibit plays on feelings of nostalgia for foodstuffs that were available in each country, but with a particular – albeit rather benign – appeal to *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for East Germany, a term coined in the 1990s and addressed in detail by Arnold-de Simine 2013, 160–83). Berlin’s GDR Museum, however, seems to present food rather more overtly cleansed of the difficult political and social history of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Arnold-de Simine (2013) provides a detailed analysis of this museum in relation to *Ostalgie* and the tendency of German museums dealing with the GDR to address *either* the “banal” everyday experience *or* state oppression, but not to bring the personal and the political together. In their semi-immersive, interactive exhibition, where visitors can enter a reconstructed East German *Plattenbau* flat and handle objects in the kitchen for example, the GDR Museum appeals particularly to foreign tourists, rather than necessarily German visitors – for some of whom this history may still be too close to reconcile such “playful” treatment of it in a museum. From 2010 the museum also included a restaurant, the Domklaus, serving “authentic” favourite dishes from the GDR period (Arnold-de Simine 2013, 178); however, the restaurant was closed in March 2015 and a statement about this appears on the museum website (www.ddr-museum.de/en/blog/archive/goodbye-isnt-easy-ddr-restaurant-domklaus-closes-till-31st-march-2015).

Currently, the GDR Museum makes increasing use of social media platforms such as Twitter to engage with a public beyond the walls of the museum and to



Figure 6.4 CULINARIUM exhibition as part of Open Air Museum Domain Dahlem Berlin: display board “Eating in East Germany”. Photo: Susannah Eckersley, with thanks to Open Air Museum Domain Dahlem

inspire people to share their memories of the GDR. Food is a frequently recurring theme on their Twitter account, where celebrations such as Christmas and New Year, regular everyday practices or products from the GDR which are now lost – such as the triangular school milk cartons, or particular food brands – are presented online with a request for people to respond with their memories. In this way, the museum encourages people to share personal aspects of their lives not only with the general public via Twitter, but also potentially as a rich source for museum curators, educators and historians of the time. Interestingly, however, such personal stories or “oral histories” are only collected via social media, and not included in the museum displays (Arnold-de Simone 2013, 181). By playing on the sense of nostalgia, resulting from the museum’s focus on apparently non-political objects and memories, it plays an important role in the sense of *Ostalgie*. Of course, *Ostalgie* is not an essential component of displaying objects related to food in the GDR. For example, the Dresden City Museum has many similar objects on display, but it does not rely on the overtly nostalgic designs or the playfully nostalgic display styles of the Culinarium and the GDR Museum.

At both the GDR Museum in Berlin and Beamish Open-Air Museum in the United Kingdom, personal nostalgia is layered into a sense of political amnesia, particularly when it comes to food. This is despite both museums including displays on difficult aspects of the past – on internment in the GDR and on the home front during World War II at Beamish. Food is a significant



Figure 6.5 CULINARIUM exhibition as part of Open Air Museum Domain Dahlem Berlin: display board “Eating in West Germany”. Photo: Susannah Eckersley, with thanks to Open Air Museum Domain Dahlem

part of any visit to Beamish – as a large, open-air museum it caters to families and other visitors who come for a full day out, and who need to eat on site. In fact, the need to provide food for visitors has become a key part of the historical attractions, with several “exhibition” spaces (reconstructed historic homes, shops or other buildings) acting as places where food and drink are not only prepared according to traditional techniques but also sold to visitors. The Beamish museum site includes a working sweet shop, a pub, a bakery and a fish and chip shop, where visitors can “feel” part of a historical experience, watching sweets being made in the traditional style before buying some, or waiting in line for the coal-fired fish and chip shop to prepare their order for lunch. The participatory aspect of the food experience, combined with its sensory nature – seeing, smelling and finally tasting the food – make it extremely popular amongst visitors, while also aligning with research on how memories are made and retrieved. The staff at Beamish consider the focus on food crucial: “when the visitors go into the sweet shop [...] the smell of the sweets being made brings memories back, doesn’t it? And that’s really important [...] I can’t imagine doing it without the food” (Anon. B 2016).

The idea that the techniques (and therefore perhaps some of the flavours) of the food preparation are no longer in use elsewhere adds to the sense of nostalgic remembering of times gone by. Such use of food within the open-air museum is undoubtedly a very successful marketing strategy, and visitors make great use of the food outlets available to them at Beamish. However, this use of food

and nostalgic remembering and re-enacting has recently been taken further at Beamish through the development of a series of bookable “experiences” – some connected to traditional crafts or skills (ranging from basket weaving to steam-roller driving) and others connected to food. While a traditional bread-making or sweet-making workshop may be seen as “good clean fun”, the inclusion of a “1940s wartime cooking” workshop within the range of food-related experiences on offer to paying customers for entertainment is an indication of the rose-tinted nostalgia being sold. All such experiences include the opportunity for participants to dress up in period costume, as a way to facilitate imagining themselves within the circumstances of the time. The 1940s experience includes a meal of spam sandwiches and tea – a light-hearted attempt to recreate the food privations of rationing in the United Kingdom – and recipes using mock ingredients. As another Beamish staff member points out, Beamish experiences are “more than a museum, it’s an experience, it’s an immersive aspect of your life which will always be with you as a memory, so you take that memory away with you” (Anon. A 2016). This light-hearted approach to the purchase and consumption of “food experiences” may be comparable to that at the GDR Museum with its former inclusion of a working restaurant as an example of “restorative nostalgia” (Boym 2001). Arnold-de Simine points out that the significance of *Ostalgie* for GDR food products was less to do with the actual foods or their flavours, but rather more connected to the loss of “cultural capital and expertise” and that such “restorative nostalgia” should be seen as an “attempt to regain agency in modelling the future” (Arnold-de Simine 2013, 175).

The Beamish “wartime cooking experience” can be considered an innovative way to educate visitors and to create a deeper, more personal response to the history of everyday life in the United Kingdom during World War II. On the other hand, it reflects a growing trend in the United Kingdom to look back at the past through a nostalgic filter, through which the notion of overcoming hardship is celebrated. This plays into nostalgic beliefs perpetuated by the discourse of “leavers” in relation to Brexit – the notion that the United Kingdom prior to its membership in the European Union was somehow “better” and that if only everyone believed this, it might be possible to return to such an idealized past – much like people can when visiting Beamish. This is in stark contrast to the intentions of staff at Beamish, who state categorically that while they aim to provide a historical perspective, they try to do this apolitically: “staff recently [...] have reported that they have quite challenging conversations with visitors at times, particularly around culture, ethnicity. We encourage all our staff and volunteers to be very, very neutral in their responses” (Anon. A 2016).

Addressing the current sense of purpose and mission of the museum, Anon. A says: “our mission is to put the visitor first” (2016). As a commercial rather than a fully publicly funded museum, the need to act commercially, seeing the visitor as a customer, therefore fits a business model of self-sustainability. However, a business which happens to be a museum also operates under a sense

of public value, of trust and of expertise. While visitors to Beamish are unlikely to be aware of the differences between a museum managed and funded by local or national government and one which is a private, commercial operation, this difference becomes evident in the lack of critical engagement with the politics of the past in relation to the present. The “restorative nostalgia” enjoyed by visitors at Beamish and at the GDR Museum is therefore to some extent created by both museums’ intentional distancing from political issues and current affairs, allowing visitors to step into a mythical world of the past uncomplicated by political realities.

Food as *Ersatz* for traumatic loss: mourning a lost future

Within the context of museum displays, the absence of food can become a proxy (in German literally an *Ersatz*, ironically also the word adopted in both German and English to describe replacement foodstuffs during rationing) for attempts to come to terms with or to gain recognition for personally and politically difficult pasts. The emotive appeal of museum objects which combine the familiarity of food and cooking with the challenging impact of scarcity and hunger connects to theories of attachment and adjusting to traumatic change (Hirsch and Spitzer 2006; Parkin 1999). This emotional appeal becomes heightened when the objects relate in a non-nostalgic manner to the lack of food, to scarcity, hunger and privation. The absence of food links personal tragedy with international conflicts and historical atrocities, including the Holocaust.

Food utensils, such as crockery and cutlery, which have historically had a role in conveying the status of a family or individuals, perhaps being linked to previous generations or to the idea of “the family silver” or “the good china” being kept for special occasions, can become symbols of individual significance during difficult times, or during separation from loved ones. Such objects therefore stand not only for the experiences of food scarcity and the heightened significance of cooking and eating utensils, but also become a proxy for associated loss of individual agency or control and for a subsequent desire for recognition of past suffering or for the loss of imagined futures.

One example of this is at the Tränenpalast Museum in Berlin – in the buildings at the Berlin Friedrichstrasse station, where limited visits between East and West Germany and some permitted emigration from the GDR took place. Suitcases containing some of the key personal possessions of individuals leaving the GDR are displayed, including one with a china plate, teacup and saucer. Not the most practical items to take away, either in terms of packing them or their future necessity, these objects have a significance that therefore goes beyond their practical purpose. Symbolizing the sense of attachment to family traditions in the face of disconnection and displacement, the dishes become an indicator of nostalgic loss, and of a desire to start afresh without entirely leaving the past behind,

but to “engage in home-building in the here and now” (Hage 2010, 420), much as the contemporary migrants and refugees discussed in the first section.

Scarcity of food as a result of war is evident in displays from museums across Europe. In some of these museums food, cooking and eating appear to be a peripheral concern, almost missing from the museum – but on second glance, the few objects which do relate to this are deeply significant, and their sparsity is telling in itself. The main collection of food-related objects in Dresden’s City Museum is from the GDR collection; only a few food-related objects from the earlier 20th century are found. However, those that are present relate to scarcity. For example, a decorative plate from 1916 with a rather foreboding inscription (“*das Essen wird knapp, gewohnt’s Euch ab*” – “food is getting scarce, get used to not having it”). This sentiment of food scarcity as integral to wartime at home is echoed in the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk – particularly in the children’s exhibition. Here visitors are invited to walk through a series of exhibition spaces, within which the same living room of a city apartment is reconstructed at three different moments during the Second World War (1939, during the war and after 1945). In the living room visitors find a china cabinet and dining table, laid at first with fine china and a silver coffee set and decorative elements indicating the status of the family living there. As the war progresses, visitors see how, in stages, the dining table becomes bare, with *Ersatz* products instead of luxuries, then UNRRA food parcels appear and the fine tea set has been replaced by chipped enamel mugs, until the last reconstruction shows the room bombed out and almost bare.

The gradual presentation of wartime food shortages in the Gdańsk museum makes what is evident in the dish in the Dresden museum all the more clear. The museums here do not make entertainment out of food shortages, but rather lead visitors to see the predictable inevitability of individual suffering as a result of war. The objects and displays serve multiple purposes: taken simply, they stand for experiences of food scarcity and the heightened value of cooking and eating utensils; at the same time, they become symbols of the loss of individual agency or control; and finally, they represent the desire for past suffering – whether on an individual or a collective scale – to be recognized publicly.

The main exhibition of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk contains numerous objects connecting to food hardship and hunger. Ration stamps and *Ersatz* food products represented in the children’s exhibition reappear in cases addressing the impact of war on civilians, and in those addressing military issues, mess kits are displayed. Later in the chronologically organized displays the focus on appealing to the visitors’ emotions seems to become stronger. It is important to note that this museum – its collections, displays and staff – have been the subject of significant political interference from the Polish Law and Justice Party national government since it first opened in 2016, as it was perceived not to sufficiently present Poles and Polish history in the politically preferred “victim–hero” role (Ciobanu 2017; Clarke and Duber 2018; Michalska 2017; Waszak 2018). Objects and photographs



Figure 6.6 a–c Gdańsk Museum of the Second World War, children’s exhibition. Photos: Susannah Eckersley, with thanks to Museum of the Second World War, Gdańsk

relating to hunger – including spoons from Auschwitz and Ravensbrück, a camp bowl from Dachau and objects from Poles executed at Katyn – seem to be displayed not only to inform the visitor, but so as to produce affective responses. Visitors encounter a case containing pieces of bread made according to a recipe used during the siege of Leningrad, as well as a bowl and cup from the Warsaw ghetto. These food-related items from deeply traumatic events in the history of World War II are displayed in highly scenographic installations, where the design of the space which visitors move through appears to be as important in shaping visitor understanding as the objects or interpretive texts themselves. Affective museum interpretation techniques where “talking about food in a time when there was none [...] presents an opportunity to introduce drama and action into the public history site” (Elias 2012, 14, in relation to the Tenement Museum in New York) highlight the apparent paradox of combining food scarcity associated with traumatic pasts in a highly designed, intentionally affective sensory environment – something which creates an unsettling, discomfiting effect.

At Auschwitz Museum and Memorial the exhibition and display design is very restrained. Museum cases and visitor spaces are simple and plain, evidently due in part to the fact that little has changed in the look of the museum’s presentation style over the years, but significantly premised as it is on the necessity to retain and present the authenticity of the historic site. The restraint of the display cases contrasts starkly with the affective power of their contents. Visitors encounter a huge case full of cooking pots and dishes, and a small display of kitchen utensils – a cheese grater, a wooden whisk, cutlery, a potato peeler – making us as visitors at once aware of the huge and inhuman scale of the destruction at Auschwitz, but also of the everyday needs and individual lives of those murdered there. The food utensils speak of the universal need to eat, something which people imprisoned at Auschwitz were denied, and of the victims’ expectation that they would need the means to provide for themselves – of their expectation of life. This dual approach of presenting visitors with the huge scale of the inhumanity carried out at Auschwitz, juxtaposed with the micro level of each individual victim’s humanity, bringing them “to life” as individuals, is achieved through different types of objects, including the familiar shoes and suitcases, but the food objects are particularly poignant.

In many of the other museums, recipes or recipe books which make use of only easily available ingredients are employed as a means by which to indicate hardship to visitors. The historically gendered nature of food and cooking is also at play here (as seen in the Tenement Museum, Elias 2012, 27). The apparent simplicity and homeliness of the recipe book, and in particular its association with the traditionally “female domain” of cooking, homemaking and the family, are used as a contrast with the traditionally male-centred experience of war as a military rather than a domestic issue. In 2018 a reproduction post-war recipe book with a New Year’s greeting was sent out to those on the mailing list of the Stiftung Flucht Vertreibung Versöhnung (Foundation



Figure 6.7 Gdańsk Museum of the Second World War, highly designed area with food-related content. Photo: Susannah Eckersley, with thanks to Museum of the Second World War, Gdańsk

for Flight, Expulsion and Reconciliation) (SFVV). The SFVV is developing a documentation centre in Berlin following decades of controversy around the idea of a “museum for expellees” based on the German experience of forced migration following the end of World War II. The personal story behind this recipe book and the transmission of the challenges associated with food shortages to a contemporary public can be seen as an attempt to defuse the political element of the object’s association with a history which continues to be contested and politically sensitive.

In these cases, food has become an affective, emotive medium through which difficult histories can be made more visible, more tangible and more comprehensible to museum visitors – and perhaps also to a politically sensitive general public – despite the political concerns and at times the controversies surrounding them. In this way, it acts as an *Ersatz* both for direct political statements and for overt positioning by museums and heritage sites, particularly those which operate within a political realm that is not always sympathetic. Simultaneously, the scarcity of food, in particular when presented as part of the Holocaust and war, can be seen as a means by which visitors are enabled to comprehend human suffering through hunger, at times within the extreme context of genocide. The dishes and utensils displayed at Auschwitz not only do this, but also enable visitors to imagine the past lives – the time before the Holocaust – in addition to the lost futures of all those who were killed. This relates to Žižek’s idea of nostalgia for unrealized futures (Žižek 2008, 141),



Figure 6.8 a. Auschwitz Museum, large display of cooking pots. b. Auschwitz Museum, small display of food utensils. Photos: Susannah Eckersley, courtesy of Museum and Memorial Former Nazi-German Concentration Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau

where the process of looking back enables the potential to consider alternative futures. Although the presentation of food scarcity, hunger and starvation seen in these cases might not appear nostalgic in the sense of happier times, the Auschwitz example in particular suggests a mixing of elements of both reflective and restorative nostalgia to create a more differentiated, multi-layered form of nostalgia. Arnold-de Simine addresses the complexity of heritage sites

and nostalgia (Arnold-de Simone 2013, 54–67) in relation to trauma, seeing both emotions as “on the threshold between remembering and forgetting” (ibid., 62), with traumatic memory and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) both characterized by a sense of bringing the past into the present and future – so almost the opposite of a “restorative nostalgia”. Instead of attempting to recreate a lost past (like the restorative nostalgia at Beamish or the GDR Museum), or to create a better future in light of the past (like the reflective nostalgia at the MEK), it rather addresses the significance of the losses in the past, while gently reminding us of the precarious nature of stable societies as a nod to possible difficult futures. As such it could perhaps best be described as an *anticipatory nostalgia* – where the possibility of future loss or change is anticipated at the same time that the past is mourned.

Conclusion

Food in museums is therefore not only a proxy – or *Ersatz* – for political issues, but also a means through which different notions of nostalgic place-making, attachment or “finding one’s place in the world” are being enacted and constructed at times with, on behalf of or even in opposition to people seen as “other”. This can be limiting, in the sense of fixing predetermined notions of attachment of people to place through the means of food – as Sutton points out, “the attachment of taste to place can be seen as one of the tautologies of food and identity” (Sutton 2010, 216). This echoes the way that “culture” is sometimes seen as a category of identity that is fixed to a nation, language or religion for example, rather than being constantly reconfigured in relation to changing environments and experiences – part of changing processes which connect people and place across time and space (Eckersley 2017). The different ways in which food, place, belonging and difference are put to work in these museums, whether in order to mobilize a conscious critical political engagement, or in attempting to disengage from contemporary politics through a supposedly apolitical, historical presentation, is always about addressing identity and belonging.

All the main museums analysed here – in Gdańsk, Auschwitz and Beamish, the MEK, the Culinarium and the GDR Museum – are museums with very different roles, purposes and audiences. They are located in different countries and operate on different scales, yet in each of them food is being used as a proxy or *Ersatz* for difficult political issues – whether historical or contemporary. The affective, sensory nature of food combined with its universality as both human necessity and desire enables the museums to speak to different forms of nostalgia and even loss. In the case of the multicultural museum, food enables people of different geographic origins to engage in processes of “reflective nostalgia”, reimagining for the future, to create – for a short time at least – a world where differences are welcome and the encounter with the unfamiliar is desired. At Beamish and the GDR Museum, we see different approaches to

the selective recreation of the past, as a means of “restorative nostalgia”, where the complexities and contradictions of difficult or contested pasts are smoothed out, in order to provide an entertaining learning experience for visitors. In the museums where food scarcity and privation is presented, it is as a symbolic *Ersatz* for the most difficult loss – that of human lives and futures. The food objects here are used to enable visitors to grasp the realities of atrocities which are simultaneously somehow unimaginable. They do this at the same time as subtly unsettling the apparent security of the present and future, through what I term *anticipatory nostalgia*, where the possibility of future loss and future mourning is always part of remembering past losses.

Food is used in museums in multiple politicized ways, which may not always be immediately evident, but which speak to difficult histories and memories of the past, as well as to troubled or challenging present times. Different forms of nostalgia are at play in these examples – the reflective and restorative nostalgia identified by Boym (2001) and the newly identified anticipatory nostalgia. These provide not only a means to analyse the use of food in museums, as in this chapter, but also offer a tool for analysing presentations, performances and enactments of difficult histories both more generally and within wider spaces of circulation beyond the walls of the museum.

Notes

- 1 Some of the early ideas from which this chapter has developed were formed in collaboration with Christopher Whitehead, and from presentations we each gave at a workshop organized by Ilaria Porciani in Bologna in 2018. Chris undertook the fieldwork interviews at Beamish Open-Air Museum and has given me permission to use this material here, for which I am very grateful.
- 2 Collected by Christopher Whitehead and used with his permission here.

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