



Heritage Out of Control: Musealising (Hi)stories of Migration

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Since the early 2000s, coinciding with the 40th anniversary of the recruitment agreement between Austria and Turkey in 1964, there have been increasing initiatives in Vienna that involve municipal institutions to capture the (hi)stories of labour migrants, the so-called ‘guest workers’, as integral part of the city’s memory. For example, in 2015-16 the Wien Museum, a key institution for the



city's memory, hosted the project [“Migration Collection”](#) (*Migration sammeln*). The recurring difficulties regarding the acquisition of objects for the collection reflect the tensions inherent in the musealisation of migration (hi)stories and their transition into the city's officialised canon. Particularly the differences in value attribution (and role allocation) among the various stakeholders involved, such as the museum with its specific criteria for collection, on the one hand, and migrants as bearers of (hi)stories and possible object donors on the other hand, highlight the complexities in the process of revaluing previously neglected pasts. The seemingly neat and stable distinction between heritage as valued and waste as disposable pasts becomes unsettled.

Migrants as bearers of (hi)stories and possible object donors.

The discrepancy between the objects which the museum envisioned as valuable for collection and display and the objects which labour migrants themselves considered worthy of keeping resulted in a perceived ‘lack’ of representative objects for the “Migration Collection”. The museum prioritised aesthetically appealing, multidimensional objects both in intangible and tangible ways. Objects should thus transmit complex (hi)stories in order to be applicable to a variety of contexts and hence exhibitions. And, most importantly, they should not constitute two-dimensional ‘flat goods’ (*Flachware*), like documents, letters, and photos. In the context of migration, however, it is commonly ‘flat goods’ that are imbued with high personal value, such as portable memories from ‘home’ in the diaspora, correspondence across geographies and of course the [paperwork emerging from the bureaucratic processes of residency, work permits and citizenship](#). For example, when the mother of one of my interlocutors decided to move back to Turkey upon retirement, she handed over several paper boxes of documents to her daughter. Treasured and stored carefully as inheritances from her mother, the boxes enjoy space in the living room like regular furniture. Yet, the abundance of these two-dimensional, paper objects rendered them even less valuable to the museum, whose [criteria for selection](#) also require the object to hold a certain element of rarity and originality. Thus, the museum's imagination about which



objects should be preserved as museal representations for labour migration to the city of Vienna was often at odds with the objects emerging from migrants' living realities.

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Moreover, the often cramped housing conditions and frequent changes of residence of labour migrants impacted severely on storage space. As a result, many objects considered 'relevant' nowadays by those institutions shaping the narratives on the city's memory have already been thrown away. As one interlocutor told the collection team of the ["Migration Collection"](#): "We didn't know that this would be of value one day." (interview, 2015) Consequently, objects that have in fact endured these adverse circumstances and have been guarded for decades tend to hold a high emotional value. For example, [objects that eventually became part of the "Migration Collection"](#) include a cooking pot, which the donor had bought from her first salary in Vienna, as well as a pair of scissors that another donor had used for decades during her employment in Vienna's textile industry. The range of what may constitute an object of migration is thus nearly unlimited, as long as the object narrates particular experiences or memories of migration from the donor's life and can be generalised into the larger historical context. Again, not all objects that are considered by their individual owners to hold a specific meaning met the museum's collection criteria and were thus not approved to enter its collection. The difficulty for the museum to acquire objects it deemed suitable for a collection on migration thus relates not only to the sometimes diverging value attribution to objects by the museum vis-à-vis migrants. It also relates to the fact that the museum's 'sudden interest' in migration arose in a situation in which for addressing the gaps in its collections it had to rely on the participation of migrants, whose existence and (hi)stories the museum had long neglected and treated as disposable. The revaluing of migrant (hi)stories by the museum thus highlighted not only a lack of representation in its previous collections, but also the absence of a relation to a significant part of



Vienna's population.

To complicate this even more, in opposition to what the museum defined as two-dimensional objects, multidimensional objects do not allow for the option of preparing a copy for the donors before being handed over permanently to the museum. This aggravated the collection team's discomfort in asking for the donation of objects. [As a team of five](#), all active as academics and/or activists, who had been hired to conduct the project, they had to navigate the ambivalences of the project, which they themselves considered both flawed yet also an important step in the right direction. That the donated objects would be preserved and (temporarily) displayed in the museum, moreover in one of Vienna's key institutions for the city's memory, did not always constitute a value or sufficiently convincing argument for people to donate objects, they realised. In light of the institution's long, multi-layered neglect of migrants as an audience to be considered, as staff members to be hired, or as residents whose (hi)stories constitute a valued part of the city's memory, this is not entirely surprising. In the project's closing exhibition [„Geteilte Geschichte. Viyana – Beč – Wien“](#) (“Moving History. Viyana – Beč – Vienna”) in 2017 at the Wien Museum, space was made for life story interviews with some of the object donors as one way to mitigate the object-centred focus of the project and to extend the possibilities for donors to participate beyond the provision of objects by narrating and interpreting their own (hi)stories of migration.

