

Transnational urban heritage? Constructing shared places in Polish-German border towns

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the urban context and spatial manifestations of the construction of shared heritage sites resulting from cross-border interactions in Polish-German border towns. A comparison of the three border towns of Frankfurt(Oder)/Ślubice, Guben/Gubin and Görlitz/Zgorzelec offers insights into the relationship between the creation of transnational urban places and the contrasting spatial circumstances in the urban environments of the border towns. The greater permeability of the border in the Schengen period from 2007 has intensified cross-border activity, and actors from both sides of the river have cooperated to create new shared places, most prominent among these are heritage sites. These new transnational heritage sites emphasise different aspects of the past, including valorising ‘neutral’ heritage, rediscovering sites of trauma and victimhood, or reinventing existing sites. While divisions persist, rooted as much in the burden of the past as current socio-economic asymmetries, some evidence is coming to light of the forging of shared heritage sites linked to narratives of reconciliation and mutual recognition. The creation of shared heritage is a fragile process which depends on contingent urban conditions. This paper draws attention to the need for heritage sites to evolve gradually and with significant participation from civil activists if they are to gain local transnational significance. Moreover, heritage sites only have transformative potential when they become integrated in the urban environment as active settings for everyday life which transcend commemorative or tourist purposes alone.

Keywords

Urban conflict; borders; urbanism; transnationalism; Europeanisation; politics of heritage.

Introduction

Polish-German border towns offer remarkable windows into the emergence of transnational heritage sites in the context of shifting bordering processes in Central and Eastern Europe. Following the territorial realignments sealed by the Allies at the Conference of Potsdam in 1945, the German towns of Frankfurt(Oder), Guben and Görlitz were severed from their eastern parts, which were turned into the separate Polish municipalities of Ślubice, Gubin and Zgorzelec (Jajeśniak-Quast and Stokłosa 2000). Today, the Oder and Neisse rivers delimiting the six towns constitute a topographic boundary that functions as a municipal and national border. It also marks a pivotal frontier within the supranational bloc of the EU between one of the major founding states and the largest new member-state. The constitutive border spatiality and modest size of these provincial towns mean that the encounter with ethno-linguistic, economic, cultural and religious differences are inescapably embedded in and continuously negotiated at the level of everyday life. This article focuses on the urban context and spatial manifestations of the construction of shared heritage sites that result from cross-border interactions in the border towns, with particular emphasis on the Schengen period from 2007.

Scholarly interest in Polish-German border towns and regions has mainly focused on issues of cross-border governance (Rogut and Welter 2012; Dołzbłasz and Raczyk 2010), economic cooperation (Krätke 1996; Kulczyńska 2010) and the Europeanization of identities (Asher 2005). Studies which have addressed the interrelationships between identity and place are based on the situation before Poland joined the Schengen area in 2007 (Dürschmitt 2002; Meinhof and Galasiński 2002; Galasińska, Rollo and Meinhof 2002). Recent developments in the socio-spatial construction of urban places and heritage sites have not received sufficient attention in the literature on the border towns. Few studies have fully seized on the possibilities of comparative analysis, focusing instead on a single pair of towns with typically limited reference to the others (notable exceptions are: Galasińska and Galasiński 2003; Armbruster, Rollo and Meinhof. 2003). Comparing the three pairs of border towns offers an opportunity to analyse the spatial dynamics of transnational heritage practices in relation to subtle differences in the urban and institutional landscapes. Each pair of border towns has pursued diverging approaches to which particular ‘past’ and potential shared heritage to valorise and for whom.

Two trends have been characterising cross-border interactions in the border towns under study since the Schengen agreement came into force. On the one hand, despite local and regional efforts at cooperation, official cross-border networks have long remained blocked and continue to stagnate. Municipalities on both sides of the border endorsed ‘Europeanization’ language from the early 1990s, well before achieving any meaningful progress towards integration on the ground (Asher 2005). **More than twenty years on, an official from the Euro-region Viadrina stated that the municipalities feel ‘condemned to collaborate’ while deep psychological and economic divisions remain.**¹ On the other hand, the Schengen period has brought significant change to daily urban life. The increased permeability of the border has accelerated the deepening web of informal cross-border interactions. The stark economic disparities are narrowing, inter-marriage is on the rise and reciprocal cross-border activity is steadily increasing in shopping, education and leisure (Makaro 2007; Dołzbłasz and Raczyk 2010). Neo-Nazism – once a visible presence in the German towns – seems to have become marginalised in public life, according to the general tenor of interviews on both sides of the border and confirmed by site observations. Once deeply ingrained, antagonistic narratives of mutual victimhood following the war have receded in local memory politics (Opłowska 2009). The key question for this study is whether this increased, everyday cross-border activity is also tied to the spatial transformations of the urban environment. Of particular importance is evidence of shared urban places that are actively created and used by both Poles and Germans.

Recent research in memory studies has drawn attention to two critical, interrelated themes of this paper, namely the importance of the urban environment and the proximity of the state border in the perception and shifting uses of contested memory-sites that transcend exclusively national frameworks in post-socialist societies (Blacker 2013; Zhurzenko 2013; Hackmann and Lethi 2013). When investigating transnational heritage practices in the border towns, it is necessary to take into account the specific implications of living not *by* but *on* the border. In large swathes of Ukraine and Poland, many people live with ‘ghosts of the past’, in cities to which they have no direct pre-war familial or community links (Blacker 2013). By contrast, in the border towns under study here, the respective ‘other’ is neither a ghost nor an

occasional tourist, but a permanent presence in everyday life, with both communities having the possibility of using, intervening in and even potentially changing the environment of the other.

In focusing on the border towns, I draw on the growing literature of lived experience in divided cities. In ethno-nationally contested cities such as Nicosia or Beirut, people do interact with the 'other' in everyday life, but they also remain subject to destabilising national contestation at the state level (O'Dowd 2010); here memories of violence and post-war reconstruction often serve as instruments of exclusion (Larkin 2009; Bakshi 2014; Sørensen and Viejo Rose 2015). For the Polish-German border towns, however, the state conflict may be said to have been definitively resolved by the landmark treaty of the Polish-German Treaty of Friendship and Good Neighbourliness of 1991. In fact, national or supra-state authorities have mostly had a benevolent if limited effect on local relations (Asher 2008; 2011). Consequently, the border towns present possibilities for everyday transnational interactions uncommon in ethno-nationally contested cities. While the longstanding presence of a 'hard' border regime continues to weigh down on the potential for local transnational relations, cross-border interactions may lead to the reconfiguration of the urban environment and the creation of shared places, including heritage sites (Kurnicki and Sternberg 2016). The focus of this paper is not primarily on official memorials or public institutions such as museums, but rather on the re-appropriation, reconstruction and re-imagining of sites of significant perceived heritage value in public spaces.

This paper adopts mixed methods engaging in interpretive-qualitative analysis of historical and media sources, site observation, photography, interviews and maps (Groat and Wang, 2013). The article draws on three fieldtrips to the border towns conducted in 2011-13 that included 30 qualitative interviews falling into two broad categories carried out in all six towns. The first targeted German and Polish municipal and EU officials, as well as civil activists engaged in cross-border cooperation; some interviews took place as part of a walks through interface areas in the towns. The second category were more ethnographic in nature, based on impromptu interviews with ordinary residents of different generations encountered in specific everyday life situations (Kusenbach 2003).

Physical legacies of division

The border towns were all fundamentally affected by the traumas of war and displacement. The political order imposed by the Allies after 1945 was premised on ethnically homogenous nation-states. The majority of the post-war populations of the border towns were victims of violent ethnic cleansing leading to a deep sense of victimhood (Opłowska 2009). The German towns came to host not only local refugees from the neighbourhoods across the river, but also thousands more from other former German territories in the East. The early years saw starvation and deep uncertainty (Service 2013). The newfound Polish towns faced an even more difficult situation than their German counterparts. The new populations were entirely foreign to the towns and regions to which they were, on the whole, forcibly resettled. They were composed of a highly heterogeneous mix of Poles, including refugees from different parts of Poland's Eastern territories (now Ukraine and Belarus), former forced labourers and prisoners of war (including from the Soviet Union), soldiers and, with time, also settlers from Central Poland. There was little to tie together these disparate groups and many viewed each other with suspicion. Forging cohesive urban communities in a climate of deep uncertainty posed considerable challenges even at this small scale along the border (Makaro 2007; Muzeum 2011). Yet throughout the period of Socialism, the regimes on both sides of the river imposed a strict taboo on addressing the suffering of displacement, as the Soviet Union had been the primary driver and beneficiary of the territorial re-alignments. Repressed memories of wartime violence have scarred local relations well into the recent period, despite a climate of increasing openness in the memory cultures of both towns (Opłowska 2009).

The physical distortions of division have perhaps had the most lasting impact on the everyday lives of the towns (Figure 1). Despite a number of similar demographic and socio-economic characteristics, the spatial expressions of shared heritage contrast significantly from town to town, not just because of different social constructions, but also due to the particular spatial and architectural circumstances of division. The location of the pre-war town centre, the level of war-induced destruction, and the process of post-war reconstruction have played important roles in forging the particular urban characters of the towns that were to emerge after 1945 (Table 1). Yet the legacies of particular physical ruptures within the fabric of the pre-war city centres

have left a deep imprint on the towns and continue to influence the nature and levels of cross-border interactions and the potential they have to create new spaces which speak meaningfully of a conflicted but shared heritage. All six towns were effectively cut off from their traditional access to the rivers, their main public recreation areas, due to the violent introduction of a national border – one which has been heavily militarised for long periods, particularly in the first decades after 1945. Post-war development in all towns tended equally to focus on areas away from the riverbanks although this was precisely where the towns had historically concentrated (Haslinger 2010, 28-31) (Figure 2).

The fragmented character of the Polish towns must only have served to underline the precarious nature of life experienced by new arrivals across Poland's western provinces (Service 2013). Most inhabitants lived with an acute sense of the temporary and the consequent insecurity, a situation commonly found in divided borderlands subject to displacement (Navaro-Yashin 2009). A third-generation resident of Słubice stated that her grandmother, who settled in the town in the 1940s, declared to her only a few years ago: 'You know what, perhaps we might stay here after all'.² While this sentiment began to recede in the western territories from the 1970s, there is evidence in the Polish border towns of inhabitants expressing the perception of dwelling in lesser town 'halves' into the late 1990s (Galasińska, Rollo and Meinhof 2002). This contrasts starkly with the renaissance of civic pride and local identity emerging in the regional capital of Wrocław soon after the fall of Communism.

The border has remained an inescapable and intrusive presence in the heart of the towns. For most of the post-war period the border has remained largely impermeable to the local populations. Quasi-absolute closure between 1945-1989 was interrupted by only eight years during limited visa-free travel (1972-80). Yet until the Schengen agreement in 2007 everyday border-crossings were onerous and asymmetric. In the 1990s a student residing in Słubice but attending the European University of Viadrina across the river in Frankfurt, would regularly have to wait for hours at the border before being able to attend a lecture in the morning.³ Perceived discrimination at the hands of German border control agents regularly caused resentment amongst Poles, even after EU accession in 2005. The Schengen area has finally allowed genuine, uninhibited freedom of cross-border movement. One resident described her

experience of the lifting of passport controls in 2007 as marked by an ‘overwhelming sense of freedom.’⁴

These distinct spatial contexts have differing impacts for the construction of shared urban places as I will suggest below. What is important to note in terms of their common spatial situation is the complex and dynamic relationship between visibility and interaction characteristic of ethno-nationally divided cities. Difficulties experienced when coping with histories of violence and evident national differences are frequently exacerbated when the visual perception of the other is simultaneously tied to a border regime that allows no, or highly limited, physical interaction (Pullan 2013). In Guben, for example, internal refugees gazed across the narrow course of the river – with no possibility of access for decades – not just at their former homes, but also at the empty fields of their former city centre over which loomed the abandoned, roofless Gothic church. The scars of the past in the form of distorted urban environments created by the violent intrusion of borders, buffer zones and security barriers have been shown to perpetuate conflict and contribute to a process of vilification of the ‘Other’ in cities as different as Belfast and Nicosia (Papadakis 2005; Leonard and McKnight 2011; O’Dowd and McKnight 2013). Urban voids, such as the buffer zone that runs right through the heart of Nicosia – and this is precisely what the river was turned into in the case of the Polish-German border towns – prevent the emergence of alternative narratives that might resist imposed nationalist claims which lock the other side into a feared antagonist and foreign intruder (Bakshi 2014). From the 2000s EU funds were used to regenerate a number of recreational areas, often along the river front, on both sides of the border towns (Asher 2008). Yet these spaces were largely the result of top-down initiatives, conjuring the neutral unifying symbolism of Europe or the EU, such as the ‘Europa-Park’ in Frankfurt, without making specific reference to any actual shared local heritage and avoiding all controversial topics, such as the trauma of displacement in particular. Only in very recent years has the new permeability of the border allowed for practices to emerge that can challenge a crippling dynamic in place for over six decades.

Spatial manifestations

Frankfurt/Slubice: neutral heritage?

Of the three pairs of border towns, Frankfurt/Ślubice perhaps best expresses the disconnections along the border. This is particularly evident in the formal memorial landscape of both towns. Divided cities that are part of contested states often produce explicit antagonistic commemorative practices and institutions of mutual blame, in the form of museums of national struggle for example (Pullan 2011). The memorials of the border towns, under the nomenclature of official discourses of cooperation since 1951, have tended simply to ignore each other's history, conflictual or otherwise.

Both towns have socialist-era memorials, the most significant relating to Soviet soldiers, the transnational spirit of which was largely resented as an Soviet imperial imposition by the local populations (Asher and Jańczak 2007; Kurnicki and Sternberg 2016). Frankfurt has two small memorials dedicated to German refugees euphemistically named as 'home-comers', as well as a memorial dedicated in general terms to the 'victims of fascism', but they refer neither to the division of the city nor Polish victims of war or displacement (Figure 3). Only Frankfurt's Peace-bell of 1953, which commemorates the Oder-Neisse 'peace-border', acknowledges the presence of the other, but even then only implicitly. The memorial bell was relocated and newly arranged in 2011; its inscription is in German only and refers in general to friendship and peace among nations.

The period since 1989 has seen no significant change in this apparent blindness to the history of those on the other side of the river. Frankfurt founded a 'Centre for the commemoration and documentation of victims of totalitarianism (1939-45/1945-89)' in 1994 that again makes no reference to either Poland or Ślubice. On the Polish side, new memorials have appeared in prominent public places in the city centre, honouring victims who were the subject of taboo during Socialism, such as Poles deported to Siberia. Yet no memorial makes reference to German history, either in general or about the local history of the Dammvorstadt and its expelled pre-war population. In fact, one of the most recent memorials dating to 2011 is dedicated to veteran soldiers and border guards defending Poland's western border. Other victims linked to Frankfurt/Ślubice in recent history, such as the pre-war Jewish community, have provoked no joint commemoration, even though in both countries there is significant interest and investment in commemorating the Holocaust and pre-war Jewish culture. The salvaging of the remnants of the old Jewish cemetery just outside Ślubice, most of which had made way for a brothel in the 1990s, has attracted little interest in either

town (Abraham-Diefenbach and Tomann 2013: 370-373). Today an ultra-orthodox community in Szczecin has responsibility for the cemetery; it remains fenced off and closed to visitors.

The vacuum of mutual recognition evidenced in the official memorial landscape appears to reflect a genuine rift between the towns. Civil society initiatives aimed at raising awareness of the other side's culture and history and at creating new, post-national identities in both towns have born little fruit and are virtually invisible in urban terms. Most notable in this regard is a project led by West-German artist Michael Kurzwelly. Kurzwelly describes his project 'Ślubfurt' as a 'participatory art project' grounded in a 'civil society network' that aims to create a new, post-national, 'playful' shared urban and regional identity.⁵ Ślubfurt convenes a 'parliament', organizes events, airs a radio show and has created a multi-media library of shared cross-border narratives hosted at the Collegium's library.

Kurzwelly's project has attracted national media attention in Poland and Germany. It has received EU funding and has enjoyed sustained local participation from a small number of academics, journalists and artists (Abraham-Diefenbach and Tomann 2013: 367-69).⁶ The reception among ordinary people in both towns has, however, been limited (Asher 2012). Residents in Ślubice view the project sympathetically – Kurzwelly is fluent in Polish and lived in Poznań for eight years – but do not necessarily see it as very relevant to their everyday lives (Bielecka 2009). In Frankfurt, reactions in the wider community have ranged from hostility to indifference. A representative of the tourist office in Frankfurt mentioned that Ślubfurt provokes some interest among visitors and students, but ordinary people in Frankfurt view Kurzwelly's work with irritation and see it as self-serving.⁷ Kurzwelly himself admits that the local daily, the *Märkische Oderzeitung*, has an unofficial policy of not citing Ślubfurt in their headlines for fear of losing subscriptions.⁸

Kurzwelly's attempts to rethink the use of the public space made available by the removal of the border infrastructure next to the bridge in Frankfurt by engaging civil society stakeholders on both sides of the river, was reluctantly and indirectly supported by the municipality but has thus far resulted only in a small exhibition and some temporary activities. According to Kurzwelly, a common response by the authorities to proposals for spatial interventions of this kind has been: 'But this is not

art! Why should we fund it?'⁹ The limits to Słubfurt's transformative urban potential perhaps account for why Kurzwelly has now shifted in scale to address transnational links at a regional level through his project 'Nowa Amerika' geared more to attracting outside tourist interest than by provoking a response from local audiences. 'Słubfurt' has remained largely restricted to a local elite already committed to cultural exchange. The student milieu is receptive but it is a transient population; furthermore many students of the Viadrina and Collegium actually live in Berlin or Poznań. It has made no genuine spatial impact on the towns, their cultural activities are mostly tolerated, but the cosmopolitan ideals are largely dismissed or ignored. In the words of Toralf Schiwietz, speaking about Frankfurters, 'culture is viewed as a luxury here, in a town where people are overwhelmed by the challenges of simply making ends meet'.¹⁰ Kurzwelly mentions that many Frankfurters still talk about visiting 'Poland' but not Słubice. Instead they visit the *Polenmarkt* (which has derogatory connotations in German) rather than the *bazaar* (a Polish term recognisable in German) or simply the *Markt* (German term).¹¹

Official bi-communal projects have attempted to by-pass the controversies of the past, opting instead to anchor the image of the city in more 'neutral' heritage. Frankfurt has attempted to rebrand itself as the 'Kleist-city', the birthplace of the leading literary figure, Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811). Słubice is formally part of the 'Kleist-route' as it is presented on maps in tourist brochures, and has allowed a sculpture to be erected in a central square. A major investment in a joint tourist branding initiative has involved the reconstruction of the late medieval 'Bolfras-House' opposite the town hall in Frankfurt, and the construction of a 'Kleist-tower' in Słubice, designed as a modern reinterpretation of the historic tower associated with poet Ewald Christian von Kleist (1715-59). The original structures were destroyed in the war. The project claims rather vaguely to 'build a joint future on the foundations of a common history'.¹² The precise function of the Kleist-tower remains to be determined, but the Bolfras-House, now open to the public, serves as a German-Polish Centre. The Bolfras-House is mainly a conference facility, its reception hall is said to make reference to the 'common' Hanseatic history of Frankfurt.

While it is too early to judge, the potential impact of the Bolfras-House and the Kleist-tower on cross-border relations appears limited. Heinrich von Kleist's

connections with Frankfurt are tenuous, Ewald Christian von Kleist is far less known, and neither has any particular resonance in Słubice or Poland. The extent to which the 'Hanseatic past' is perceived as 'shared' heritage is equally questionable; as opposed to a city such as Gdańsk/Danzig, Frankfurt has no genuine shared Polish-German history and the Hanseatic past was as brief as it is remote and intangible. Both spaces will be quite controlled and reveal little about their functions to the surrounding public spaces. As places purporting to convey heritage meaning, they make no reference to the difficult history that the two towns *do* share, namely the period since the end of the war. Even Frankfurt has few direct familial or community connections with the pre-war city.

It is, however, important to acknowledge that both spaces are prominently located and are motivated by a cross-border effort to make positive use of the border location. The reconstruction and reinvention of ordinary, ostensibly 'neutral' heritage sites is a trend observable in the other towns as we shall see below. The main weakness of the Bolfras-Haus and the Kleist tower in Frankfurt/Słubice is the intention to address an outside rather than an internal audience, a flaw common to the heritage and conservation industry (Rodwell 2007). The negotiation of transnational identities in Frankfurt/Słubice appears to miss a middle ground, faced with the idealistic expectations of the 'avant-garde' of German-Polish civil society dialogue on the one hand and, on the other, the naïve official local marketing strategies of the municipality trying to fabricate neutral heritage beyond all controversy. Both approaches are removed from the lived experiences of cross-border relations such as shopping, where socio-cultural differences, national prejudices and neo-colonial hierarchies continue to inform mundane interactions (Asher 2005; Dürschmitt 2006; Busch 2010).

Görlitz/Zgorzelec: Addressing victims and common traumas

In contrast to the situation in Frankfurt/Słubice, the survival of an exceptional historic urban fabric in Gorlitz/Zgorzelec has placed the question of heritage centre stage. Two of the most prominent cultural institutions to be founded since the fall of Communism in both towns have been museums of history, namely the Silesian Museum and the Lusatian Museum, which opened in 2006 and 2007 respectively. The Silesian Museum was initially viewed with scepticism in Zgorzelec and Poland more

widely. Despite the Museum's declared intention to be a testament to the multi-cultural history of Silesia, 'shared between Germans, Czechs and Poles'¹³ the Polish media presented the permanent exhibition as advocating an essentially German portrayal of the past. Polish suspicions were aroused by the close involvement of German expellee organisations (Opłowska 2009, 237-38). Though they generally have no actual familial connections with Görlitz itself, a few hundred West-Germans who consider themselves expellees, have settled permanently in the city and it is they who often hold the most negative views of Poland.¹⁴ Silesia provokes rather less interest among native residents of Görlitz. In an interview, a young café-owner from a longstanding Görlitz family, mentioned that he enjoys provoking visiting Silesian-enthusiasts from West Germany who air anti-Polish sentiments, by telling them that the city is really Czech, historically speaking.¹⁵ The identification of the Museum in Zgorzelec with Lusatia was clearly an attempt to point to an alternative, more local and less national historical reference point, even though the German past is by no means repressed in the exhibits and German tourists are acknowledged as an important market.¹⁶ While the museums remain separate, nationally-framed institutions, it is noteworthy that they have contributed to active debate about the other side in public discourses and bring diverse national histories to visibility in their permanent exhibitions.

The two museums have also played a role in explicitly addressing the most controversial, emotive topics in the history since the war. Two coordinated exhibitions on the topic of displacement opened in 2011 and have marked a watershed in mutual recognitions of painful chapters of history in the towns, even by national standards. The Silesian and Lusatian museums staged 'Life Paths into the Uncertain: Görlitz-Zgorzelec 1933-2011' and 'In the new land among strangers' respectively. Originally planned as a joint exhibition initiated by the Silesian Museum, and presented as such by the German curator,¹⁷ the Lusatian Museum in the end decided to organise an autonomous exhibition despite continued cooperation with their German counterparts. Director Piotr Arcimowicz explained that the Polish team felt the German exhibition relativized the causes and facts of displacement by placing too much emphasis on personal accounts, even though these included Polish and Greek refugee narratives.¹⁸

Despite their separate curation and contrasting emphases, the level of mutual recognition in representing common traumas was unprecedented in official representations of this sort. Both exhibitions and their catalogues were bilingual (Pietsch 2011; Muzeum 2012) and both also received above average visitor numbers, including from across the river.¹⁹ The most controversial aspects were addressed head on. The German exhibition clearly made the link between the rise of Nazism, the war and the resulting expulsions, emphasising the challenges of refugee life and the post-war hardships in both towns. Though the Polish exhibition focused more on Polish wartime suffering and the difficulties of establishing a new existence in the western territories, it also addressed questions of deep concern to many Germans; namely the plunder of German property and the maltreatment and expulsion of Germans from the western territories. The presence of the two museums to some extent enabled a dialogue but also a plurality of perspectives, without the restrictions of needing to fit the complex of events, memories and affects into a single narrative framework.

The leading cross-border initiative with *spatial* implications to have emerged over the past twenty years is the work of 'Meetingpoint Music Messiaen' on the site of the former Prisoner of War Camp Stalag VIIIA, located at the southern outskirts of Zgorzelec.²⁰ It is estimated that the camp held up to 120,000 prisoners during the Second World War, among them Polish, French, Belgian, Slovak, Yugoslav and Soviet soldiers. Stalag VIIIA is not only one of the best-preserved German POW camps in Central Europe, it is also where the leading French modern classical composer, Olivier Messiaen (1908-92) was interned for nine months in 1940-41 and where he conceived and first performed the *Quartet for the End of Time* with fellow inmates (Lusek and Goetze 2011). The camp had largely been forgotten in the towns until the early 2000s, even though a memorial had been established there in the 1970s catering mainly to foreign ex-POWs from Belgium and France. In 2004 a West German theatre director founded the Meetingpoint with the aim of cultivating the memory of the camp and promoting inter-cultural youth education. The Meetingpoint has since performed many concerts and established summer-camps which focus on maintaining the site, uncovering remains, introducing signs and explanatory panels, as well as artworks. In 2014 a European Centre for Education and Culture was opened on the site, funded by local, national and EU grants.

What is particularly noteworthy about this project is that it is driven by civil society actors on both sides of the border, and it is also a place actively used for cultural purposes that go beyond exclusively commemorative functions, thereby avoiding the dangers of the mere commodification of trauma and memory. The society has been driven by support from young persons in both towns, who were born after the fall of socialism or are too young to remember. The emphasis is on intercultural dialogue among young persons across Europe, and the historic regional points of contact between Germans, Poles and Czechs.²¹ A coordinator at the Meetingpoint and native of Görlitz, stated that the aims of the centre are ‘focused as much on the past as the present and future’, serving as ‘a place not only of education but also of encounter’.²²

Meetingpoint Messiaen has rapidly developed into a significant memory site of supra-regional standing, drawing on an inspirational narrative of the redemptive power of art in the face of terror and suffering. At this point it is unclear, however, whether the site will shape cross-border interactions at a local, urban level. In Görlitz the Stalag has provoked little interest amongst ordinary Germans. An activist mentioned that the older generation often claims to want to ‘forget’ the past when prompted about the camp, others find the emphasis on Messiaen exaggerated. A call in Görlitz for witness accounts by those old enough to remember the camp during the war received next to no responses. Young people tend to see the camp and its history as far removed.

According to a local activist ‘many in Görlitz perceive the proximity to Poland as a disadvantage’ which undermines the local impact of the new cultural centre on the German side.²³ Schools in Zgorzelec have been much more actively involved in using the site for educational purposes than their German counterparts. The summer camps mainly attract young people from outside the towns. Furthermore, the location of the Stalag is a major disadvantage in terms of its potential urban impact. It lies outside the built-up area of Zgorzelec, right on the edge of the municipal border. It cannot be reached easily by foot from the city centre, is not currently connected to public transport, and is therefore in effect twice removed from Görlitz. Moreover, though it is publically accessible, it is a formal memory site that does not connect or overlap with everyday cross-border activities.

While Görlitz/Zgorzelec has witnessed the emergence of an explicit transnational memorial site, it is perhaps the more ‘ordinary’ heritage that has transformed the

shared public spaces of the towns more significantly. Most interesting in this regard is the historically faithful reconstruction of the nineteenth-century Postplatz, right where the rebuilt old-city bridge crosses over to Zgorzelec. Damaged and demolished after the war, it remained an unattractive vacant lot, right in the central area of the shared riverside. A Polish investor completed the development in 2013.²⁴ Unlike the Kleist-tower in Słubice, the Postplatz has no explicit German cultural connotations, certainly not to Poles. It is merely an 'old-looking' ensemble that has enhanced the sense of a contiguous historic townscape across the river between Görlitz and Zgorzelec. This tacit, physical link may encourage residents of Zgorzelec to take as much pride in the beauty of their urban environment as their German counterparts. In their marketing brochures Zgorzelec already refers in a self-evident manner to Görlitz as a 'pearl of architecture' and presents this as one of its own main tourist assets.²⁵

While a recent study of the attitudes of inhabitants of Zgorzelec to their German neighbours has been aptly characterised as 'warm indifference' (Dębicki and Doliński 2013), it has also become normal for residents of Zgorzelec to visit the old city of Görlitz for recreational purposes. This mirrors the situation in the equally restored historic parts of Guben popular among Gubiners for recreational walks. The employee of the German office stated that: 'on a sunny Sunday afternoon in Guben you'd think you were in Poland'.²⁶ In Zgorzelec the high quality cafés and restaurants on the Polish riverbank are also increasingly popular among Germans. Germans frequent restaurants in Słubice and Gubin, but the points of attraction are low prices rather than atmosphere or décor.²⁷ While efforts to use the site of the bridge for town festivals in Frankfurt/Słubice have failed, the practice is flourishing in Görlitz/Zgorzelec (Figure 4). The Postplatz is not the direct result of cross-border collaboration, nor does it aim to commemorate certain events or even valorise heritage as such. Yet in its very implicit heritage value and ordinariness it is perhaps contributing more to a sense of 'sharedness' than any explicit commemorative practices.

Guben/Gubin: collaborative reconstruction

Guben/Gubin features conspicuously few memorials compared to the other border towns, yet from the city centres of both it is hard to escape the presence of one rather dominant monument. Devastated in the war, the majestic brick bulk of the bell tower

and roofless nave of the sixteenth-century Gothic church in Gubin appear to belong in a landscape painting by Caspar David Friedrich rather than the heart of a contemporary border town. Up to the end of World War II the church served as Guben's principal church. Abandoned and left as a ruin in subsequent decades, the building has attracted national attention in the past twenty years, and was a case study in the EU landscapes project (2000-2010) of the prestigious Internationale Bauausstellung.²⁸ However, it was not until local Polish and German civil society activists created two dedicated sister foundations in 2005 that its reconstruction became a tangible possibility.²⁹ After achieving considerable local support in both towns, the organisations received funds from national and regional bodies and private donors, as well as an EU grant to establish a European Centre for Communication and Culture, also referred to by the societies as a Place of German-Polish encounter. In 2013 the restored tower was opened to the public for the panoramic vistas it affords. In the same year an architectural competition was run, awarding first prize to a Polish-German practice based in the neighbouring regional capital of Wrocław. The design proposes to salvage the shell of the nave and to surmount it with a translucent pitched roof, preserving some signs of ruination whilst creating a large open space for public functions and performances. While the fundraising for this final phase is ongoing and construction may take ten to fifteen years, this act of reconstruction arguably already constitutes the most significant shared heritage site of all the border towns, despite Guben/Gubin being the smallest and economically most marginal of the three.

What is distinctive about the actors who drive the project forward, is that they are locals with cosmopolitan experience, which grants them a distinctive legitimacy as agents of cross-border cooperation (Dürschmitt 2006). In the other border towns, the activists engaged in the construction of memory-sites are either outsiders, or locals with relatively little experience of interacting with the other side of the border at a more formal level. The two key leaders of the reconstruction project, Günther Quiel and Bartłomiej Bartczak lived in Guben/Gubin for sustained periods, and both have gained considerable expertise in managing German-Polish relations (Figure 5). Though of a different generation, they both acquired their cosmopolitan 'social capital' in Frankfurt/Słubice in the 1990s. They are thereby also among the rare figures involved in German-Polish dialogue in the border towns, who have detailed knowledge of the other towns. Quiel was the senior financial officer of the Viadrina

University, directly involved in setting up the Collegium Polonicum. In retirement he has dedicated himself to the reconstruction of the church. Bartczak was a student at the Viadrina, and a striker for Frankfurt's football club, a player popular even amongst the club's then neo-Nazi fan-base. Bartczak returned to Gubin, got involved with the society for reconstruction and then entered municipal politics. In 2006, he was elected the youngest mayor of Poland, turning the reconstruction of the church into his leading election promise. Bartczak emphasise the advantages of the relative proximity to the German capital, stating proactively for a border town official: 'our best friend is not Warsaw or Brussels, but Berlin.'³⁰ Quiel and Bartczak emphasise the project's importance as a symbol of Europeanisation, yet both are essentially focussed on using the church for the purposes of local, cross-border reconciliation, and creating shared opportunities for the struggling towns. As opposed to efforts in Frankfurt/Ślubice or Görlitz/Zgorzelec, this high-profile heritage project does not primarily look to address audiences beyond the towns, and has thereby engendered a mutual interest and commitment, unique in the border towns, in creating a shared site of significant heritage value.

The urban impact of the project rests on its visibility, the distinctive meanings of its ruination for the two communities and the civic potential of the reconstruction. The church looms large over the centre of Gubin, but also stands on an axis with the main high street of Guben, thereby serving as the iconic landmark – simultaneously reachable by foot from practically anywhere – for both towns. In Quiel's words the church simply 'is the centre' of Guben/Gubin.³¹ The church was clearly perceived as the leading landmark in pre-war Guben, and its new accessibility and restoration has brought it back to life for the German community. Gubeners lived with the ruin at a distance and for a long time it stood in foreign and inaccessible territory. This is perhaps why there have been no calls on the German side to preserve it as a ruin or memorial, unlike in Dresden, for example, where the ruins of the Frauenkirche was an intimate presence, and had acquired significant meanings as a site of commemoration but also protest during the period of the GDR, making its reconstruction contested (Rehberg and Neutzner 2015). Events and ecumenical services held in the church ruin in Gubin in recent years have been well attended by Gubeners.³² The progress of the project is regularly reported in detail in the German and Polish regional press and

with sympathetic interest, a striking contrast to the taboo over Kurzwelly's 'Slubfurt' project in Frankfurt's media.³³

The church's rejuvenation has distinctive but comparably transformative meaning for Gubiners. In a photo-essay by local resident and artist Florian Tadeusz Firlej, he states that 'the image of the ruins oppressed inhabitants of Gubin every day' (2010, 46). The question of reconstruction was always politicised, but clearly the election of Bartczak marked a decisive turning point in mobilising popular support to finally redeem the church as a scar in the townscape. There have been no suggestions on the Polish side to keep the ruin as a memorial, turn it into a Catholic church or simply to reject collaboration with the German side. Given the typically divisive nature of reconstruction in post-conflict societies (Sørensen and Viejo Rose 2015), the decision to reconstruct rather than to preserve the church as a ruin has been remarkably uncontroversial. In Frankfurt/Slubice a proposal to reinstate a historic tramline across the main bridge has repeatedly failed, aggravating mutual suspicions (Asher 2012).

The relative lack of controversy in Guben/Gubin is arguably rooted in the positive urban possibilities the reconstruction of the church holds. More than a mere heritage site it has everyday urban value. As Françoise Choay (2006) has asserted, an urban space rarely succeeds in being both a memorial and simultaneously a place of local life. Mayor Bartczak emphasised that the regeneration of the surrounding areas of the church, bridge and market 'should look like what they have done on the other side', in order to foster integration and to attract more German visitors.³⁴ The market in Gubin that caters mainly to Gubeners and German tourists has been refurbished and relocated by the main open space of the church; in Słubice and Zgorzelec the bazaars are somewhat removed from the town centres. Unlike Frankfurt's idealistic initiatives, the reconstruction does not aim to embody neutral meanings, but rather responds to a concrete urban challenge, namely to restore a historic landmark that was languishing, without answering the towns' needs. As an increasingly active locale, the church can be used as a backdrop for a wide range of events and will counter the sense of void in Gubin's centre. Guben/Gubin may still be far from having a unified, shared centre, but it is set to have the most symmetric and interdependent towns' centres in the border towns, the lynchpin of which is a shared site whose construction will have evolved over a period of decades.

While the activists repeatedly express their frustration with the slow progress of the reconstruction, the protracted nature of the project may in fact be one of its primary strengths. The process of cooperation is as important as its outcome. Unlike the Stalag in Görlitz which emerged relatively quickly, the church has already served as a common rallying point and has necessitated continuous collaboration in the face of significant financial, legal and technical challenges. This sustained interaction is highly exceptional in the border towns. In Frankfurt, proposal to reintroduce the historic tram line over the bridge have regularly caused aggravation on both sides and have failed at the first hurdle.³⁵ The process of reconstruction in Guben/Gubin may itself acquire memory value without, however, purporting to be a memorial and thus falling victim to contentious memory politics. The fact that the church is the largest historic monument in the wider region on both sides of the border will likely again act as a source of civic pride for both towns. Unlike the Stalag in Görlitz/Zgorzelec the leitmotiv of this memory site is not trauma. Its destruction and ruination symbolised the burden of the past for a time, yet its reconstruction is an active healing process, and its repurposing transcends questions of loss, fear or guilt. The medieval character also appears sufficiently close and relevant to be meaningful, but also sufficiently distant historically to resist nationalist rejection or appropriation.

Conclusions

The creation of new heritage sites has been a leading conduit of cross-border interaction in Polish-German border towns. This is remarkable insofar as ‘peace money’ and the construction of heritage in divided cities frequently leave local populations indifferent or, alternatively, serve to aggravate one party or the other. In the case of the Polish-German towns, heritage practices have arguably made a greater impact than many official initiatives in the domain of economic and infrastructural cooperation on the creation of sustained, shared interests, with lasting spatial legacies. In most instances, the impetus for the identification and development of shared heritage has come from civil society actors, even though they subsequently received support from the state, at local, national and supranational levels. Heritage sites rooted in painful chapters of history have tended to engender more interest in, and commitment to, collaboration than those purporting to offer ‘neutral’ or ‘post-national’ meanings. Yet sites that memorialise trauma, such as the Stalag/Meeting

Point Messiaen in Görlitz/Zgorzelec, have not significantly transformed the use and perception of potentially shared public spaces in the border towns. Heritage sites which have involved reconstruction, generating values that speak actively to both communities, have been the most significant in this regard, the church of Guben/Gubin being the preeminent example. While here the ruined state of the church had long had an oppressive impact on both towns, its reconstruction has transformative potential that transcends memorialisation. This fundamentally rests on its capacity to act as a defining, shared urban landmark.

Topographic and urban conditions have played a significant role in harnessing the transformative possibilities of an increasingly open border, confirming the significance of contingent local factors (see Sohn 2014). Urban centrality, historic architectural grandeur and sheer visibility lend the church in Guben/Gubin a symbolic power that no other potentially shared heritage site in the other towns has. The power of its presence was of course precisely what had also turned it into such a debilitating scar in the preceding decades. The vacuum in Gubin's centre, another circumstantial physical legacy of war, has equally left Gubin few options but to build on this landmark. The reciprocal commitment of the main agents of reconstruction to create a shared site is also reliant on the fact that Guben/Gubin is the only one of the border towns where the core was east of the river, thus keeping alive a German interest in its Polish counterpart; such an interest cannot be attested in the other towns.

What is true of all three border towns, however, is the importance of 'ordinary' heritage, one that carries no special memory values but which can serve as a coherent, common scenic backdrop. Here Görlitz/Zgorzelec has the most advantages, as the shared riverbank today again serves as the recreational centre for both towns. It is a centre from which both communities can benefit equally and of which both can feel proud. Increasing harmonisation in the built fabric contributes to the shaking off of the disjointed border character and mitigates the visible effects of income disparities and the highly uneven availability of public funds. These outward signs can help to create a greater sense of parity, and a reciprocal 'appropriation' of the other side through inclusion of spaces and routes across the river in town dwellers' daily routines. Whether this will have a transformative effect on the memory cultures of the towns remains to be seen.

Does the emergence of shared sites and their related spatial transformations engender a *transnational* urban culture? A decade ago, leading urban historian Karl Schlögel—who happens to hold a chair at Frankfurt’s Viadrina University—aptly observed: ‘from the Oder as a border-river to the Oder as a stream that leads to Europe there is still a long way to go’ (2006: 252). This remains true today in many ways. Despite the remarkable project of the church, Guben/Gubin no more constitutes ‘Gubien’ than Frankfurt/ Słubice ‘Słubfurt’. The national border, contrasting national identities, historic prejudices, economic disparities and linguistic asymmetries continue powerfully to determine mutual perceptions and interactions. Guben/Gubin’s church is indeed a Polish-German place of encounter, but it is not a ‘third space’ of EU identity. Yet, it is important to note that if European integration has not directly fostered transnational identities, it has certainly not hindered it. On the contrary, EU funding has allowed the border towns to pursue their **separate** agendas, as well as to engage in genuine cooperation.

The Schengen area is fundamental, highlighting the relevance of the supranational, rather than transnational, framework. This is a decisive difference with ethno-nationally contested cities, where the state and international intervention tend to bring inordinate and partisan pressure on precarious practices of resilience and solidarity at a local, urban level (Pullan 2011). The persistent flow of crossings in the domains of shopping, education, work and leisure is the indispensable backbone that enables heritage sites and urban spaces to be used and perceived as shared. If border controls and security measures were to be reintroduced, not least in the context of the ongoing ‘refugee crisis’, the deepening web of interaction in the everyday, and the possibilities of shared urban experiences would receive a major setback. Fears that appear to pertain to the ‘outside’ borders of the EU would thus have significant, largely unacknowledged impacts on ‘internal’ bordering processes. The ability of the Polish-German urban communities to negotiate cultural boundaries at a local level would be much reduced, as they would once more primarily be crossing borders rather than rivers in their everyday lives.

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- ¹ Interviewed on 17 September 2012.
² Interviewed on 16 September 2012. See also Makaro (2007: chapter 2).
³ Bartłomiej Bartczak, mayor of Gubin; interviewed on 20 September 2012.
⁴ Interviewed on 19 September 2012.
⁵ Interviewed on 25 March 2013.
⁶ <http://slubfurt.brcs.eu>.
⁷ Interviewed on 29 June 2011.
⁸ interviewed on 25 March 2013.
⁹ Interviewed on 25 March 2013.
¹⁰ Interviewed on 17 September 2012.
¹¹ Interviewed on 25 March 2013.
¹² www.bolfras-kleist.eu/de/.
¹³ www.schlesisches-museum.de/index.php?id=1282.
¹⁴ Maximilian Eiden, cultural referent at the Silesian Museum; interviewed on 28 March 2013.
¹⁵ Interviewed on 21 September 2012.
¹⁶ Piotr Arcimowicz; interviewed on 28 March 2013.
¹⁷ Maximilian Eiden; interviewed on 28 March 2013.
¹⁸ Interviewed on 28 March 2013.
¹⁹ Martina Pietsch, Silesian Museum, confirmed that the exhibition received c.37,500 visitors; e-mail from 9 January 2015. Piotr Arcimowicz stated that the Polish exhibition received c.7,000 visitors; interviewed on 28 March 2013.
²⁰ <http://wordpress.themusicpoint.net/>.
²¹ Albrecht Goetze, director of Meetingpoint Music Messiaen up to 2012; interviewed on 20 September 2012.
²² Interviewed on 28 March 2013.
²³ Interviewed on 28 March 2013.
²⁴ Karolina Jakubowska, Planning Department Zgorzelec; interviewed on 21 September 2012.
²⁵ *Zgorzelec: Your Place in Europe* (Zgorzelec Municipality, 2011).
²⁶ Interviewed on 30 June 2011.
²⁷ Confirmed through site observations on all three fieldtrips.
²⁸ See: www.iba-see2010.de/en/projekte/projekt23.html.
²⁹ For the German society see: www.stadtkirchegubin.de; for the Polish foundation see www.fara.gubin-guben.eu/index.php.
³⁰ interviewed on 20 September 2012.
³¹ Interviewed 27 March 2013.
³² Anna Dziadek, Project manager of Polish reconstruction society, interviewed on 27 March 2013.
³³ For a complete archive see: www.stadtkirchegubin.de/presse-news/index.php.
³⁴ Interviewed 27 March 2013.
³⁵ Sören Bollman, Frankfurt-Słubice Cooperation Centre; interviewed on 18 September 2012.

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Town	Location of pre-war centre	Level of destruction in centre	State of built heritage	Level of reconstruction in centre	Level of displacement
Frankfurt	West of river.	Massive devastation of urban fabric.	Only isolated historic monuments restored today.	Modernist reconstruction with little of original urban layout preserved.	Vast majority of pre-war population displaced.
Slubice	-	-	Individual pre-war suburban streetscapes survive, partially restored.	Some streetscapes of pre-war suburb near river partially restored.	Completely new population: refugees from eastern territories, POWs from Germany and Society Union, slave-labourers, settlers from central Poland.
Guben	East of river	Massive devastation of urban fabric	Survival of industrial buildings and some suburban apartment buildings and villas, now fully restored.	Pre-war suburban and industrial fabric fully restored today.	Substantial continuity; majority of population lived on east side and was driven out to west side.
Gubin	-	-	<i>Stadtkirche</i> remains main surviving pre-war monument.	Next to no reconstruction of centre which remains largely vacant; isolated pre-war buildings partially restored.	Completely new population: refugees from eastern territories, POWs from Germany and Society Union, slave-labourers, settlers from central Poland.
Görlitz	West of river.	Very limited war damage.	Exceptionally good preservation of historic fabric.	Historic fabric now fully restored.	Substantial continuity: majority of population lived already on west side.
Zgorzelec	-	-	Individual pre-war suburban streetscapes survive, partially restored.	Some streetscapes of pre-war suburb near river partially restored with some recent historic reconstruction of pre-war ensembles.	Completely new population: refugees from eastern territories, POWs from Germany and Society Union, slave-labourers, settlers from central Poland, Greek refugees from Civil War.

Table 1. Key physical and demographic legacies of division in the towns centres of border towns



Polish-German Twin Towns

KEY

- German-Polish border, Oder/Neisse Rivers
- Border between East & West Germany (1949-1990)
- Pre-War German Areas Annexed to Poland in 1945
- Pre-War Polish Areas Annexed to Former Soviet Union in 1945
- Pre-War German Areas Annexed to Former Soviet Union in 1945
- Pre-War Free City of Danzig annexed to Poland in 1945

Figure 1. Territorial realignments of Poland and Germany 1939-1945
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Figure 2. **[DRAFT]** Urban development in border towns, 1939-present
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Figure 3. Soviet War Memorial and socialist-era 'Oder-tower', Frankfurt (Oder)
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Figure 5. Mayor Bartłomiej Bartczak in front of partly restored church, Gubin (2012)
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