

## Memories of ethnic cleansing and the *local* Iron Curtain in the Czech–German borderlands

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*(Received 2 June 2012; accepted 10 November 2013)*

The Czech–German borderlands are an archetypal European border region. They evoke not only Cold War histories, but also shelter layers of European memories of the ethnic reshaping of early post-war Europe. By means of life story interviews with German speakers of the border region, this article analyzes the symbolic meaning of and the individual dealing with the *local* Iron Curtain. It will shed light on the biographical and narrative interconnectedness of experiences of ethnic cleansing in the early post-war period and retrospective perceptions of the Iron Curtain in these borderlands. In particular, it inquires whether and to what extent the *local* Iron Curtain intensified fractures caused by the region's post-and pre-war attempts to halt the multiethnic composition of the border communities. The article suggests that the *local* Czech–German Iron Curtain would have never endured as strongly if the border communities' common identity had not already been severely damaged in the course of the region's traumatic history and forced population transfers.

**Keywords:** borderlands; border communities; ethnic cleansing; post-war; iron curtain; oral history

### Introduction

The symbolic importance of borders is often more important than their physical reality. The symbolic importance invested in the border depends on the identity of the person or group that experiences the reality of the border. The symbolic importance of a border is neither natural, nor given for all time, but is shaped by history. (Pittaway 2003, 25)

Throughout history borders have regularly turned into overtly contested and negotiated spaces, reflecting national struggles over territories, populations, and resources. In response, historiography has identified borderlands as “badlands” (Winnifreth 2003), “warlands” (Gatrell and Baron 2009), or “borderlines” (Diener and Hagen 2010). These terms underline the way these territories operate as sites of fierce political conflicts over nationhood and nationality. In particular, twentieth-century borderlands have witnessed the forced transfer of populations and people in the context of ethnic cleansing policies (Naimark 2001, 3).<sup>1</sup> In addition, the new focus on the history of borders reflects “a response to the decentering of [...] imperial narratives and has allowed for a revival of regional history” (von Hagen 2004, 447). The Czech–German borderlands – the focus of this article – raise questions about the long-term impact of the region's post-war population

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transfers on the concerned societies. They witnessed not only population transfers but also became Cold War borderlands in the early post-war period, which were strictly guarded and secured. What relationship existed, then, between the attitude of local people toward the physical reality of the Cold War's barbed wire and their prior experiences with the ethnic cleansing of the German-speaking area of Bohemia?

By elaborating on the relationship of this border region's ethnic cleansing and the people's narrative making of this *local* Iron Curtain, this article will provide a new interpretive framework that links the region's post-war and Cold War history. My primary inquiry is to what extent the Iron Curtain – as a local border – contributed to the alienation of the bordering populations, or whether it intensified already existing fractures. I will explore the way Cold War border dynamics and its acceptance at a local level built on conflicted legacies of the region's prior ethnic conflicts and final disentanglement. What historical experiences enabled the acceptance of this *local* Iron Curtain? Why did border communities – who watched their *local* Iron Curtain descend in the early 1950s and later lived with this Cold War border – ostensibly accept the complete division of neighboring communities? By pursuing these questions, the article will shed light on the way border communities symbolically employed the *local* Iron Curtain.

Having explored people's perception of the former German–German Iron Curtain, Sheffer has plausibly demonstrated that “the wall in the head formed early and propelled the wall on the ground” (2011, 4); it was a “collective construction” that resulted from the “volatility of the immediate post-war period” (Sheffer 2007, 307). In the Czech–German case, it was also the post-war period that led to the acceptance of the *local* Iron Curtain, which even lasted beyond 1989. Yet, the idea or image of the *local* Iron Curtain was seldom elicited to just address the Cold War and the systemic divide itself. Instead, the border was employed as a symbol of earlier biographical, regional, and historical fractures. As such, this space illuminates the interplay between the border communities' traumatic experiences of ethnic cleansing and their subsequent Cold War alienation. Thus, this article provides an unknown insight into the biographical and narrative construction of a border community's historical path toward its Cold War disintegration.

### Collecting memories in the borderlands

Beyond serving as venues for political power games, borderlands – composed of villages, landscapes, and cities – are first and foremost places and spaces for people. Their history has impacted deeply the lives and the memories of their communities. Yet, whenever borderlands have been subject to historical experiments of nationalization and national homogenization, individuals' “bodies, lives and homes stood as obstacles of progress” (Brown 2011, 234). In this way, the political history of borders and the everyday life of its people become closely intertwined. But why should we bother about border populations' individual narratives and life stories? As each inhabitant has his or her own story of life at the border, their individual narratives reveal the mosaic of memories and narratives that have shaped the individual and collective memory of this particular border region.<sup>2</sup> Archival documents portray largely fixed histories, whereas people still actively remember and search for how to understand history's impact on their lives. Furthermore, while written sources often relate to a single time period, life stories allow us to grasp the coherence of lived experience and to explore the way early biographical experiences have a lasting impact on people's attitudes about and reflections on the course of their lives.

Starting from this assumption, 45 life story interviews were conducted in the last three years in the Upper Palatine and Western Bohemia with members of the border

communities,<sup>3</sup> of which only interviews with the German speakers of the border region will be presented. They cover the interviewees' whole life course, and the analysis focuses primarily on memories of the region's post-war ethnic cleansing, the perception of the newly established Iron Curtain in the early 1950s, and on 1989 as a distinct historic moment that allowed inhabitants to think about (and also biographically re-experience) the region's post-war and Cold War heritage. In order to recover memories and not only today's re-evaluations of past events, layered descriptions and dense narrations of outstanding biographical events will be presented.<sup>4</sup> Independent of these lives' individual paths, most of the life narratives touch upon larger historical questions about population politics, practices of forced migration, and the perception of the Iron Curtain, which was deeply inscribed into the collective memory of the region. Particular emphasis is given to the narrative layering of individual experiences of ethnic cleansing and its impact on the perception of life at/with the border.<sup>5</sup> The individual stories provide us with a subjective interpretation of how it was to live in one of Europe's most troubled border regions.

The interviews were conducted according to the life story interview method of Rosenthal (1993), which aims at motivating thick and self-structured descriptions of past events. This interview method aims to elicit narratives of past experiences. But to produce narratives captured almost half a century after the actual experiences, past and present evaluations sometimes stand alongside or even become indistinguishable. As our "memories of childhood are inseparable from our adult self-perceptions and experiences," the interviewees' narrative recollections of their childhood experiences are a product of the life they lived (Zahra 2004, 235). Their present situation as well as their life courses greatly affected the way past events were remembered. Yet, the question about the memories' social and local function will critically interpret the place of memories in the region's history. Remembered but also forgotten experiences are part of what Biess labeled "mythical memories" or "usable pasts," which "served essential functions for post-war reconstruction" (2010, 1). Even today many remembered life stories still have a strong tendency to generate "sanctioned and substantiated fictionalized tales and individual memories, blurring the line between fiction and fact" (Moeller 1996, 1032). Zahra places the individual recollections of refugees into the context of an emerging "culture of memorialisation that has developed around World War II" (2004, 235).

Beyond acknowledging the possible, even likely distortion of the subjective memories of past events, I do not question the integrity of the memory itself. Instead, I attempt to understand the subjective and social function of the interviewees' narrative presentation of their lived experiences. Interpreting narrative patterns of victimization provides insights into subjective notions of perpetrators and victims of the border region, but in no way do they adhere to the political and politicized agenda of such German expellee organizations as the *Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft* (SdL), which continues to aim for financial retribution, the restitution of property, and the right to return to their former *Heimat* (Cordell 2011, 20). It is well known that Germany expellees' widespread "experience of their forced loss of home and their struggles to settle into a completely new environment" (Schulze, 2002, 41) resulted in a common sense of alienation that again produced a strong feeling of solidarity among the Sudeten Germans (Tonkin 2002, 202). While the integration of ethnic Germans "into the economic, social and political process(es) of a collapsed country" was successful, German post-war and post-1989 society largely failed to deal with the expulsions and the expellees' discontent "from the perspective of their impact on German identity," as well as on Germany's relation to its Eastern neighbors

(Wolf 2002, 9). The expellees that were confronted with the immediacy of their lost home throughout the Cold War played a particularly important role in this development.

I emphasize, however, how individual experiences of forced displacement partly laid the ground for an easier acceptance of the *local* Iron Curtain and of the radical and long-lasting disentanglement of the border communities. In the Czech–German border region, the overall expellee experience was also overshadowed by the cruel everyday presence of the *local* Iron Curtain. It is indeed true that German expellees settled throughout the entire territory of occupied Germany, where they “commemorated idealized eastern spaces that they would steadily come to realize only existed in the safe but ungraspable world of their memories” (Demshuk 2012b, 46). As most of the expellees ended up immediately beyond the border in Saxony and Bavaria, their everyday lives were strongly influenced through the local inevitability of living with and near the Czech border, which – even physically – symbolized their no longer accessible former *Heimat*. The geographic proximity of their lost homes simultaneously forced the local refugees to (often indirectly) witness the radical population change in – or even disappearance of – their childhood villages. But the Iron Curtain left them powerless to act. In this way, many of the borderland expellees adopted a distinct local attitude toward the Cold War division and the border communities’ ongoing alienation. As will be shown, present-day locals’ narratives express emotions that range from apparent disinterest to hatred toward the new border and their Czech neighbors, reflecting much of what compromised the process of reconciliation between Germany and Czechoslovakia for a long time.

When asking people in the Czech–German borderlands about their life story, myriad associations, memories, and narratives emerge. One oft-repeated general observation regarding life in the borderlands relates to the region’s marginalization, backwardness, and poverty. Eisch once argued that in this particular region, the saying “‘one should not live at the border’ should be both literally as well as metaphorically understood” (2001, 318). Metaphorically it means that one should live in the world’s center and not on the periphery. Literally understood – as many of the life stories indicate – one should not physically live at the border. Concentrating on narratives from borderlands, then, shifts the perspective to a European rural periphery, which was largely characterized by underdevelopment, deprivation, and shortage, on the one hand, and ethnic conflicts, on the other (Éger 1996, 25), a description that the interviews reflect. Several of the interviewees complained about the lack of food, consumer goods, and entertainment, as well as the hardship of physical, often agricultural work during their childhoods and adolescence. The Bavarian borderland was a simple agricultural region, and the extremely stony soil and resulting poverty of farmer families figure extensively in the narrations. Juxtapositions of the “poor” Bavarian borderland and “wealthy” German-speaking Bohemia appear in various Bavarian interviews. The 83-year-old Gerda, born here in 1929, contrasts the agricultural life at home with life “over there:” “There the people were prosperous. They had far more agriculture. Over there it was just almost like a granary”. In particular, the Sudeten Germans compare their former economic prosperity in the Sudetenland with their impoverished life after their forced transfer to Bavaria.

### **(Troubled) coexistence in the Czech–German borderlands**

Although this region’s borderlands represent both an economically marginalized and a relentlessly troubled territory, in many of the interviews with Sudeten Germans images of a period of peaceful Czech–German coexistence emerge. Even if the Bohemian borderlands remained a multiethnic region after 1918, they witnessed increasing controversies and

conflicts between the various ethnic groups. Throughout Central and Eastern Europe, the post-1918 remaking of the region's multiethnic empires into homogenous nation-states was a troublesome undertaking that affected borderlands in manifold ways. Insofar as most successor states had "failed the test of national homogeneity," still embracing linguistically and religiously heterogeneous regions and populations, Judson rather refers to these as "nationalizing" states (2006, 239). Notwithstanding the possible negative consequences, the "impetus to homogenize" nation-states and its populations was, as Naimark convincingly argues, "inherent to the twentieth-century state" (2001, 8). Ethnic purification of borderland regions, as Brown suggests of a formerly multiethnic borderland in present-day Ukraine, might be interpreted as a direct result of twentieth-century totalitarianism (2011, 230). As this new process of state building was based on the principle of ethnic nationalism, it paved the way for violence against ethnic minorities; and insofar as ethnic minorities often populated the geographic margins of the nationalizing states, new state building processes caused particular trouble in ethnically hybrid borderland areas (Naimark 2001, 7; see also Bartov and Weitz 2013). Consequently, multiethnic communities were destroyed "by means of national taxonomies which transformed zones of cultural contingency into cogently packaged nation-spaces" (Brown 2011, 229).

In the context of the Czech–German borderlands, 1918 represented a turning point for the German population, as the end of the multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire simultaneously meant the absorption of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia and its ethnically mixed frontier regions into the newly proclaimed Czechoslovak Republic in 1919. The ethnic composition of the borderlands turned the German population into a minority of the total national population in the new Czechoslovak Republic (Řepa 2011, 309). Resulting from this "the provinces' three million Germans and seven million Czechs lived in parallel and largely separate societies, each with its own fully developed social structure, economy, and national mythologies" (Glassheim 2000, 467). As Zahra shows through children's education, by the late 1930s "children had become one of the most precious stakes in the nationalist battle, and a parent's choice of a German or Czech school had become a matter of unprecedented personal, political, moral, and national significance" (2004, 502). Political practices such as national categorization and the notion of ethnic cleansing emerged not in Europe's totalitarian era, then, but instead "[i]n the heart of republican democracies as interwar national-states" (Zahra 2008, 140).

Resulting interethnic conflicts had intensified by the 1930s, but this region was also home to many individuals who had switched nationality or whose nationality was not entirely clear. "Czechness" and "Germaneness," as King illustrates with the town of Budweis/Budaejovice, were not clear-cut definitions (2002, 12), and people with mixed national identities – labeled "amphibians" since the nineteenth century (Bryant 2002, 684) – shaped the ethnic composition of the region (see also Bryant 2007, 3–4). While nation-states often perceived the "ambiguity of people who dwelt between cultures and boundaries – ethnic, religious, social, and political" as backwards or threatening, these "in-between-people" embodied the cultural and linguistic composition of historically grown regions (Brown 2011, 234). In many of the interviews, based on individual experiences with the region's national and linguistic plurality, the image of the "glorious" harmonic multiethnic coexistence of the early interwar period prevails. Born between 1930 and 1940, many of those interviewed positively recall the period before 1938 when the Bohemian border region was still a multinational region with a largely mixed population (Janowski 2008, 450). The Sudeten German expellee Marie remembers how



wonderfully everyone lived, all lived together, all together, the Czechs and the Germans. And Jews were also still there. One did not know any difference, until it all started, you know. We lived wonderfully. I could speak Czech, but today I can't speak a word. [...] I still have relatives there, but we could never go there.

She stresses the linguistic diversity of the time by remembering that often “one asked in Czech and received an answer in German, as most Czechs could speak German. It was so harmonic there inside”. This idealized image of the early interwar period allowed many interviewees to stress the radical changes that later occurred and affected their everyday life in border.

In particular, the events of 1938 and 1945/1946 resulted in major breaks in the area's multiethnic history when it was largely freed from such intercultural intermediaries, complying in this way with the forceful wish for ethnic homogeneity. Due to these events, not much of the interwoven history of these two regions remained intact. Hitler's rise to power in 1933 served to further implement on the local level “a symbolic attack on the border as an institution” (Murdock 2010, 171), challenging the legitimacy and status quo of the Czech–German political border. While the politically charged label “Sudetenland” was seldom used to refer to the Northwestern frontier region of Bohemia in the early interwar period, it gained immense prominence in the course of Hitler's borderland politics of the 1930s, which saw borderlands as the “future of the Third Reich” (Murdock 2010, 184). After 1933, German National Socialists increasingly employed this term to lay claims to the Czechoslovakia's German-speaking frontier region, thereby further alienating national populations. It successfully propagated “liberation of an oppressed German diaspora” and helped to legitimate its *Lebensraum* expansion eastwards (Zahra 2008, 170). By 1938, Nazi Germany had successfully propagated its claims to historical legitimacy over this borderland, so that it gained international approval to physically dissolve the border (Murdock 2010, 182). Quite radical steps toward ethnic homogenization and the so-called “German revolution” (Murdock 2010, 196) of this Reich region were taken after Hitler annexed and occupied it in 1938, soon invading what had remained of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 (Arburg 2011, 74). Hitler built on the previous achievements of the Sudeten German Party, to further the Germanization of the borderlands (Zahra 2008, 177). But the dissolution of the border and the incorporation of the population into Hitler's German Reich also caused tensions and resentments between Reich Germans and Protectorate Germans. By means of “colonizing efforts” (Zahra 2008, 180), the newly invading Reich Germans took over important positions in the administration, which often made Protectorate Germans feel inferior (Bryant 2007, 48–57).

In the interviews with Sudeten Germans, the 1938 annexation of the Sudetenland is rarely, if at all, mentioned; if these events are mentioned, Sudeten Germans seldom seem to remember or acknowledge that Sudetenland's annexation was probably as problematic for the local Czech population as the population transfer had been for the Sudeten Germans. In the years following 1938, over 100,000 Czechs fled to the remaining Czechoslovak territory, which only a year later would cease to exist as an independent state, after many of them had been pushed out of their enterprises. The Sudeten German Dora, born in 1936, remembers the annexation of the Sudetenland as an entirely unproblematic event:

Many Czechs did not know that the border region had been populated and that Germans had been living there. Germans did live there. “No Czechs?” they asked. “No, no Czechs. Only before '38 the postman was Czech [...],” we answered. And then, when Hitler came to power, the [Czech] people were allowed to move. They could take everything. Then people gossiped that Czech families had been expelled. But they had been well-known [in the village] and good friends with the Germans. And nothing [bad] had happened.

While Dora is fully convinced that for the Czech inhabitants the annexation had “allowed” the Czechs to move, she shows great indignation when being confronted with some Czech’s ignorance of German regional influence. While it needs to be acknowledged that “the Communist regime had propagated a policy of erasing the memory of the past, of ‘anything German’” (Scholl-Schneider et al. 2010, 19), it is highly problematic that acknowledgement of German contributions to the poisoning of the Czech–German coexistence is generally lacking. Yet, as Dora was only two years old when Hitler annexed the Czech borderlands, she just remembers the time of Sudeten German political domination. In her and in various other Sudeten German life stories from people who were children at the time, references to the “harmonic” interwar period mostly relate to the period after 1938, rather than to the early interwar period, or even the region’s imperial heritage prior to 1918. Already, then, it becomes clear that references to the Czech–German coexistence after the annexation reflect a highly problematic and exclusively Sudeten German view. Children like Dora only remember the positive effects of the newly gained power of the Sudeten Germans over the Czech population in the borderlands, serving as a proof that the peaceful coexistence of Germans and Czechs had once been possible. Such narratives of symbiotic coexistence – symbolized in particular by the region’s bilingualism – are often brought up to counterbalance later, more troublesome images of the deeply segregated borderlands. The region’s lost cultural symbiosis is used as an idealized, and often even imagined, “other” story of the region’s history. Czech interviewees would surely present a different story of the region’s multiethnic and multi-lingual heritage.

### **Reconstructing memories of ethnic cleansing and resettlement**

While the interwar stories center on the idea of a harmonic Czech–German coexistence, the war – and first and foremost its immediate aftermath – is presented as abruptly ending the “rosy days” of Czech–German coexistence. During the war, Edvard Beneš, the president of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile, was already planning how to restore the pre-Munich borders of Czechoslovakia and lobbying to expel the German minority; a strategy that was officially recognized at the 1945 Potsdam conference. The region’s planned ethnic cleansing was based on the belief of Germany’s collective guilt (Gerlach 2007, 181). Similarly, the “fear of the potentially disruptive activism of the national minorities” was a core motivation for the homogenization of “regions that were literally ethnic mosaics” (Judson 2006, 239, 256). Western power all officially supported ethnic cleansing at Potsdam, but the Soviet Union – Central Europe’s “liberator” – played a particularly important role in the region’s ethnic cleansing. As early as 1943, Beneš met with Stalin in Moscow and agreed to transfer the German minority. The Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia subsequently went hand in hand with Czech retribution practices against the Germany minority. Many of the interviews present the Russian army’s arrival as the beginning of the end of German life in the Bohemian borderlands. The Sudeten German Marie remembers the arrival of the Red Army on 9 May 1945:

Then the Russians arrived, and then the Czechs approached them with flags. Unbelievable. And then in the evening, they told me that they had gone to dance with the Russians and then they saw what kind of dirty animals (Dreckbären) they were. They must have been as dirty as possible.

Marie goes on to argue that the “Russians then governed over there. Everything was over with the Russian. That was a system of informers (Spitzelei).” She concludes that her uncle’s family who had remained in the Sudetenland did not have a good life “and if he had also gotten out [of the Sudetenland] he would have had a better life than over

there.” In his 1955 autobiographical report, Rudolf Grünig recounts that the Russians were particularly keen on watches, jewelry, and other valuables. He recalls the Russians plundering his house, and “the striking cries of fear of two or even more local women” made him decide to flee from the Sudetenland (Schieder 1997, 66–68).<sup>6</sup> Few of the interviews explicitly refer to experiences of rape by Russian soldiers. The then still young Dora describes how a group of Russian border guards once stopped her and her mother, loudly shouting “Stoj, Stoj, Stoj” when they tried to cross the border to Germany in 1945. While nothing happened to herself, Dora assumes retrospectively, struggling with tears, that her mother must have been raped at that moment as a Russian soldier took her aside. Despite this memory, Dora states earlier in the interview how she felt the Russians were unproblematic compared to how badly the Czechs behaved:

It was said that the Russians arrived. And we were very afraid. We stood along the street and then the Russians went through the village, eight or ten, always in a row. They behaved irreproachably. They did not do anything, anything [...]. They had their rifles, and there were also tanks, but I don't know this exactly. But the Czechs they behaved very badly, they behaved terribly.

Instead of going into more detail as to why the Russians' behavior was exemplary, Dora closely narrates the possible, but to her nevertheless incomprehensible, reasons for the Czech's “misbehavior” toward her own family. She recounts that the Czechs often observed her house, as her father was part of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) but had not yet returned from the war, since he knew that it would not be possible to hide at home. She mentions that “the SA once, sometimes rioted and so on” and “we had the uniform of my father in the cupboard.” She then remembers her mother's worries about “what to do with the uniform,” deciding to hide both “the SA uniform and the boots with the cords” under the coal in the shed and to burn all “the books, *Mein Kampf* and such Hitler books, SA books” in a little oven in the courtyard. Dora acknowledges her father's complicity with the Nazi regime and honestly describes her family's attempt to dispose of material objects that demonstrated complicity with the Nazi regime. Dora does not suffer from what was once labeled as Germany's “collective amnesia” to describe notions that post-war Germany avoided dealing with the recent past. Instead, she only lacks the ability to link her father's SA affiliation with the resulting – often-violent – Czech retribution practices. Less today than in the 1950s, “West Germans were by no means silent about the ‘horrible totality’ of the past,” but, as Robert Moeller argues convincingly, “their memories were selective,” and their stories focused more on their “own experiences as victims” than as perpetrators (1996, 1033–34). Dora does not acknowledge that the violence was a tool of retributive justice to punish those who had helped destroy the Czechoslovak state during the Nazi period (Gerlach 2007, 181). Through Dora's account, we can see how patterns of selective remembering and telling have persisted until today, and the way they prevent the interviewees' willingness to soften their notions of victims and perpetrators.

In contrast to Dora, the forced removal of German inhabitants from the Czech territories was the logical consequence, for the Czechoslovak state, of the previous “anti-German emotions that had accumulated during the occupation [and] exploded upon liberation” (Radvanovsky 2001, 242). But despite the region's overwhelming support of the Nazi government and the German minorities' hostility to the Czechoslovak state in the 1930s, the Czechoslovak government's radical solution toward the Germans met with little or no understanding among the local Germans in the border region. The demand for the “immediate removal of the disloyal majority of the German population” (Luža 1964, 272) was initially believed. While the American invasion had signified the population's return to normalcy in the Bavarian borderlands, the Americans were harbingers of the unbelievable



news of expulsion in the Bohemian frontier region. Marta, a Sudeten German born in 1931 in northern Sudetenland, remembers the day the Americans informed her family about their destiny:

We had a large courtyard and, together with children from the neighborhood and with my younger brothers, we were playing ball with the Americans and they distributed sweets, and an officer was also there. He said to my parents – my father had returned by then from the war – he then said: “You need to leave, you Germans.” We did not believe this.

The Sudeten Germans refused to describe their removal as a “transfer,” as the term – which has voluntary overtones – did not convey the procedure’s forceful and often brutal nature enough. In this case, “transfer refer[ed] specifically to the concentration of indigenous Germans in internment camps and their subsequent removal by rail to occupied Germany throughout 1946” (Frommer 2001, 222).

The population upheavals started with the “wild transfer” during the summer of 1945, which represented the process’s unorganized phase, realized by civilian and military authorities (Frommer 2005, 33–61). A few interviewees experienced these transfers. Although the interview’s opening question did not address the forced removal of the Sudeten Germans, Luise, born in 1927, focused her entire life story exclusively on the day of her family’s transfer and recounts in great detail the traumatic events of May 1945. She remembers: “I was not long apprenticed, as there came *the* upheaval [*Umsturz*], maximum after a year, and then we had to leave” (Luise). By employing *Umsturz*, Luise stresses the event’s unjust, radical development. The term can equally be read as a personal evaluation of the event’s profound impact on her life, as the Czech invasion abruptly ended her education and turned her life upside down. While she had trouble remembering anything from her early childhood, Luise emotionally recounts the Czechs’ traumatic intrusion into her village during the first “wild transfer:”

Then the Czechs came and they treated us bitterly and sourly. And there was my father and then, when the Czechs came, they went through the village, constantly swinging a stick and said: “Do you know about the KZ (concentration camps)?” We did not know. And then they went into our house and took my father and hit my father, as we supposedly had weapons and ammunition.

The climax of these events is represented by the memory of physical brutality toward her father. Luise presents herself and her family as entirely passive objects and assigns guilt exclusively to the Czech perpetrators; she constructs a victim discourse for her family. The Czechs’ direct reference to the system of Nazi concentration camps leads her to distance herself from any previous knowledge of that aspect of National Socialist politics. By using “we,” she detaches herself from the collective guilt attributed to the Germans for the Holocaust and codifies her own role as a victim in the framework of the Sudeten German community. Her painful experience with the loss of her *Heimat* and the brutal intrusion into her private life prevent her from working through the German-speaking community’s troubled past and even from considering any possible complicity in the prior Nazi regime (Rosenthal 2002, 226). She regularly employs the term *Heim* (“home”) throughout the interview to describe her loss past in a physical and emotional way. Another closely narrated event is the Czech incursion into her village school:

We had to disappear, as otherwise we would have been abducted and taken to Czechoslovakia (Tschechei). Then they brought together the schoolmaster - the men who held official posts everywhere - and then they went into the school, the Czechs, and beat them up. And then we went over, when they were gone and the whole room was filled with blood, and the Czechs took them away by car. And none of them ever returned, none ever returned. These are memories. There was blood in that thing.

Although Luise mentions that those whom the Czechs beat were “men who held official posts everywhere,” she does not contemplate their possible guilt. She retains the striking visual image of a schoolroom full of blood as a symbol of Czech brutality and unlawfulness. Besides her father’s beating, Luise entirely blames Czech invaders for her family’s poverty after their forced removal:

At home we didn’t have anything. We didn’t have money, and at home they had taken the cattle. The Czechs, they came and took all the cows and stuff: the butter churn, our food supplies and everything that we had. Everything was gone. The Czechs took everything. We didn’t have anything left.

Her self-presentation corresponds largely to the long prevailing public discourse of many Sudeten Germans, who hoped to gain wider support in German society and push for financial reparations (Rosenthal 2002, 231).

While narrations about the “wild transfers” often centered on the intruders’ physical violence, the “regular transfers,” starting in early 1946, produced different experiences. These transfers were agreed on at Potsdam Conference in summer 1945; they demanded that the transfer of the Sudeten Germans be realized in an orderly and humane manner. At first sight, many Sudeten Germans were happy with the nonviolent behavior of the “regular” occupying Czechs, but then they realized that the occupation simply followed different rules. The collective “regular transfers” differed in that they were no longer spontaneous acts of retribution but rather legitimate and regulated acts of administrative necessity. By means of administrative measures, the Czechoslovak state organized and implemented the official transfer of the Germans (Pykel 2004). Marta remembers when the Czechs arrived at her house:

I don’t remember if it was June [...] when the Czechs came. It might have also been August. The train arrived, people with briefcases under their arms arrived and walked through the streets, saying that, “I like this house, this farm.” We had house number twenty-nine. In the meantime, a Czech had already taken over the town hall. [...] Then the Czech went to someone and declared the house his property. We were one of the first families to be occupied.

The arrival of the “man with the briefcase” symbolizes the way the occupation of Sudeten German houses and the subsequent transfer of ownership occurred. Narrations about the “regular” relocation of Sudeten Germans deal in particular with a sense of abrupt and forced invasion of their private life and officially approved, everyday practices of expropriation. They resembled mere administrative acts, as Marta remembers:

The Czech who occupied our home was quite human. [...] When my father wanted to attach the horse to the cart, the Czech then said “That is my horse.” [...] Or when my mother wanted to collect eggs from the chicken roost, he said “Those are my eggs.” But he was not aggressive towards us; one needs to mention this.

Though devoid of physical force, these examples of the Czech’s “human” behavior nevertheless seem to have been similarly traumatic. Marta remembers that her family lived like guests in their own house, waiting for their transfer to Germany. In her narration, Marta differentiates between the effects of forced removal on the various generations. While herself a child, she points to the traumatic impact of the expulsion on her grandparents’ generation, discussing the moment her family left the village:

It was the worst for my grandfather and my grandmother. [...] When my grandfather passed the house of the smith with our coach, the smith’s wife, who was his niece – as she told us later – knocked [on the coach] and screamed, “Uncle, Uncle.” He sat on the coach as if he was made of stone. He neither looked left nor right. Now, as we are old, we can understand this.

The experience of removal strikes her grandfather motionlessness, unwilling to “look left or right.” This depiction of not wanting to look back recurs in the expellees’ resistance to visit their former homes after 1989. While this picture reflects the reaction of an elderly person, the 90-year-old Sudeten German Bärbel, born in 1931, recounts her childhood perspective on the transfer:

As I am extremely fond of animals, the worst for me was to leave the cats behind. We also had goats and now we had to give the goats away; the Czechs took them. And the cats, an uncle of mine then killed them, so that no one would need to let them starve. [...] That was the worst for me.

Some of the Sudeten Germans still managed to distribute property among their neighbors. Dora, for instance, differentiates between her perception of Czechs who came to transfer the Germans forcefully, and her Czech neighbors. She remembers that they talked little to their Czech neighbor, but “when [we] [...] knew that [we] had to leave, [...] my mother passed a lot of silver ware and down comforters through the fence.” These Czechs, Dora recalls, actually regretted their departure and were nice people. The different perceptions of the region’s long-term Czech inhabitants and its new settlers manifest themselves in several of the life stories. Marie, too, distinguishes between the Czechs from her village and the Czech “strangers” that implemented the transfer:

But these were not [Czechs] from the village; they weren’t from the village. Strangers arrived. Because those from the village, those Czechs, did not like that behavior, because we, the Czechs and Germans, we all lived there together and nobody did any damage. They also cried when we had to leave.

When remembering this farewell Marie starts to cry, explaining that she cannot talk about these memories, as she “did not want to leave, absolutely not.” The loss here refers not only to her home, but also to the people she left behind, including her Czech neighbors. But then the “Czech strangers” came and transported them to Bavaria. In her memory the Czech “invader” embodied the experience of forced expropriation and expatriation. Marie does not remember anything of the journey, as she fell asleep from crying and woke up only when they arrived at the Bavarian border city Furth im Wald. But retrospectively, she views this experience as a severe shock; even at 10 years, she was aware what this border crossing signified.

Other interviewees even state that – until the Czechs removed them – they had never had any contact with Czechs. For the Sudeten German Carla, born in 1935, the Czechs had always been strangers; the region where she grew up was almost entirely populated by Germans:

At that time we lived in the Czech Republic and [...] we were Germans in the Czech Republic. We were mainly Germans in the area where we lived. Czechs were foreigners to us. And, well, then came the collapse.

She starts with a story about the harassment she experienced with her grandmother when expelled. Her grandmother, Carla explains, only took a pushcart with a blanket, a cushion, and a few pieces of clothing when she began her march into Saxony. She remembers her anger when she realized that they were forced to make a large detour of 30 kilometers on foot, even though Saxony was only 10 minutes away, just for a “simple trick.” While this march represented just a temporary absence from home for Carla, as she was allowed to return to her parents after a short period, Carla centers her “real” removal on two key narrations. Both stories focus on the suffering of children during the transport. The worst experience, as she recounts, was the death of a mother’s baby in the adjacent railway carriage. She explains that when the baby died during the journey – which lasted

four to five days – the train only stopped momentarily so that the baby could be taken away from the mother. The mother was simply pushed back into the carriage, and the voyage continued without any further delay. While this story evokes memories of the German treatment of the Jews during their deportation, Carla employs this story to emphasize the Czechs' administrative, inhuman treatment of the Sudeten Germans.

The transfer of Sudeten Germans went hand in hand with the region's resettlement. In order to prevent this once-flourishing region's depopulation and impoverishment, the Czechoslovak government implemented a new wave of migration that promised new settlers "easy financial gain, cheap housing, and a new life" (Glassheim 2006, 69). The Communist authorities originally intended to replace the German inhabitants with Czechs from the interior, but the actual resettlement relied on the influx of various ethnic groups. Between May 1945 and May 1947, almost two million people – including Slovaks, Roma, Hungarians, and Zipser (Carpathian) Germans – were settled into the formerly Sudeten German region (Urban 1964, 44–69). As with the Sudeten Germans' removal, this settlement wave was characterized by "wild" and "organized" periods of resettlement. The more orderly settlement started at the beginning of 1946. Frequently, the new Czech settlers and the former Sudeten German inhabitants had to live together from anywhere from several weeks to several months. The physical transfer of Sudeten Germans, then, resulted in deep-rooted anti-Czech prejudices. The German expellee Bärbel recounts how she still worked at a Czech farm before being transferred to Bavaria:

I still worked a little then for the Czechs. First, I was on a farm, but the woman there was a devil. She plundered. We never got anything real to eat. Once, when she came from plundering, she sat on top of a truck. She was a really dark, a dark type of person. When my mother came home then, she said, "I am so happy that you are no longer with this woman." These are memories that remain.

Describing the new Czech settler Bärbel worked for as a "devil" – reinforced through the "dark, really dark type" epithet – mirrors one of the dominant stereotypes of the new settlers: the "dark-skin" invader who pillages and strips bare German houses. Throughout the interviews, ethnic stereotypes are ascribed to metaphors about "plundering the borderlands," although new settlers in the Sudetenland were composed of various groups. Approximately 44,000 Hungarians were deported from the south of Slovakia to Bohemia (Grainer 2002, 54), and about 16,000 Roma were settled into formerly German houses – a political act by the post-war Communist regime intended to solve the "Gypsy question." The new socialist government hoped to "mobilize the Czechoslovak Gypsies as citizens of the new socialist state," including education, assimilation, and settlement (Donert 2008, 125). Both Sudeten Germans and Bavarians draw sharp contrasts of the Sudetenland before and after the resettlement.

As the Bavarian local Paula emphasizes, principles such as "learning, discipline, order and cleanliness [ ... ] were an absolute must" in these rural border regions, and local people did not perceive the new settlers as fulfilling societal expectations. The Sudeten German Bärbel, too, describes how the newcomers "ruined" her beautiful village:

It was a nice village, that stretched out. There were simple houses on the right and left side of the street and the creek ran in the middle. Everyone made sure that everything was in order. I need to say that these were diligent people. [ ... ] They always had everything in order. And when we visit the village now, a lot has been destroyed. We had to cry.

In this face of this social norms, the settlers seemed to embody the polar opposite of what the (Sudeten) Germans had developed throughout the centuries. In the interview with Alf, a Sudeten German born in 1928/1929 (?) and expelled in 1948/1949, Sudeten Germans did not even accept the new Roma population as a people, but as "gypsy stuff"

(*Zigeunerzeuch*), “who were given these flats and houses.” He concludes that they “remained strangers,” as they were “not the best to enrich our border region, the Sudetenland.” Even in the late 1960s, many Czech settlers perceived the Gypsy settler – as Otto Ulc sarcastically observed in 1969 – as “a stranger to the white way of life, [who] moved in with countless relatives, with domestic animals, and ruined the place in no time, to the outrage of white neighbors” (1969, 431). Creating a diametrically opposed image of the remembered *Heimat* versus the “real” one now “destroyed” by the new inhabitants appears to be a meaningful biographical strategy. This strategy applies not only to memories of the Sudetenland, but also to accounts of other expellee groups. In the same way that “they idealized the *Heimat of memory*,” German expellees from Silesia also “watched the *Heimat* transformed through a lens darkly, shaded by resentment and loss and usually divorced from the real circumstances” (Demshuk 2012a, 21). The biggest problem with this contrast is the expellees’ rhetoric of cultural superiority over the new settlers, which resonate with the still-fresh National Socialist propaganda.

In many interviews, the “new” Czech settler is presented solely liable for the expellees’ loss of home and property. Dora recounts that after her expulsion she sometimes dared to approach the border, in order to see what was happening to her old village on the other side of the Iron Curtain:

Sometimes we really went far down in the meadows until [we reached] the border and watched with the binoculars. And the village was erased as it was a border village. And my grandfather’s house was the last house to remain. [ ... ] And then also that house was demolished.

While Dora narrates the destruction of the border village and her grandfather’s house quite neutrally, she employs a story about the destruction of the village cemetery to emphasize the inhumane desecration the village’s demolition represented:

Further up is the cemetery, which still remained, with a wall around it and large trees. Later on we discovered that a large herd of cattle had arrived, which is still there today. And then during the night they always locked the animals in the cemetery. Later when we were allowed to go there, we [saw] that not only cows but also the Czechs had trampled the cemeteries.

Experiences of the physical disappearance of her home village resulted in her disinterest in what was happening on the other side of the Iron Curtain. As to the question if she ever returned to her home village before 1989 and if she still kept contact to people in the village, Dora strongly responded:

No, no, no. We did not know anyone. My mother and I were happy that we were allowed to leave, as it had become unbearable. That one teacher, whose class I had attended, hung himself. [ ... ] And then I remember that once before the expatriation I said to my mother: “Mother, should we commit suicide?” We did not see a way out. [ ... ] This fear we had. [ ... ] We were really happy to be out.

It is not only her physical removal, but also above all her previous experiences that ended her relation to the Sudetenland, a fact that the Iron Curtain’s quotidian, physical presence intensified.

Other expellees who were not traumatically expatriated, but were among the last to leave the region, still recall the local German population’s slow disappearance. The Sudeten German Max, born in 1933, recalls his memories as a 12-year-old boy in his abandoned hometown:

It was then that as a young lad we explored everything. We went everywhere, although it was forbidden. You weren’t allowed to enter the abandoned houses, but we did look inside. [...] It indeed had become a ghost town. We were among the last ones, after us there were still 6 or 7 families in Plöss who had to bring in the harvest, but otherwise the whole village was empty.



You could not do much. The Czechs kept a close watch. They believed there were treasures inside.

Max grasps the atmosphere of this “real ghost town” after the Czechs cleared the houses: “If you went through the houses, the windows rattled and the doors opened and closed, cats and dogs especially were running around.” When newly settled in the Bavarian borderland, as he remembers, an elderly lady regularly crossed the border to go to her hometown. When she was caught, she pretended nothing had happened. While border crossings were still possible, though difficult in the late 1940s, Max recalls the slowly increasing border fortification:

At the time, we could still cross. But that became more and more difficult from year to year and month to month, as many of their people escaped. An incredible amount of Czechs came over. When the communists took over, many escaped and the border controls became more and more strict. [...] They came to cross the border, and the people did not like it over there anymore. When the communists took over, it was not that easy anymore. When they installed the restricted military zone, nothing was left.

When the border fence was built in 1949, he remembers, the border became more restricted and also more real. Clearing the German population from the region went hand in hand with the destruction of those villages that were located in the immediate border zone. Although already in Bavaria, Max recounts witnessing the destruction of his hometown behind the border:

They built many bunkers in Plöss. They were so afraid of the Germans, that the Germans would come back. They built bunkers everywhere. And we also saw how they tore down house after house. We saw that all, how they blew up the local church.

Surprisingly little affected, Max closely narrates the sustained destruction of all the houses in his town:

They destroyed everything, so that the so-called “Republic Refugees” could not hide anywhere in the border region. [...] The border guards had to search the houses day and night. They made the houses uninhabitable. They destroyed the roofs, so that [rain] would pour in; they broke windows so that it became really uncomfortable.

Max seems detached from these actual events and the loss of his former home. He further tells how his family established a new life in Bavaria; after 1989, they regularly returned to his former home region to rebuild and clean the former Sudeten German cemetery. All that he remembers about the time between the expulsion and 1989 is that “nothing went on. Around the border everything became calmer. We could not see anyone coming and going. Later it became more permeable again.” An unusual silence seemed to have descended on the then radically divided region.

### **Symbolic meanings of the *local* Iron Curtain**

When comparing narratives about the Iron Curtain in Bavarian and Sudeten German life stories, it appears to mean very different things to both social groups. For long-term Bavarian locals, their relative proximity to the geographical and political border did not automatically evoke traumatic memories. For them, the border induced either disinterest or excitement about its proximity. Petra, a local Bavarian woman born in 1941, recalls some of her adolescent memories of the border:

With Czechoslovakia we did not have a trouble. It was simply a taboo. When we were older, when I was 14 or 16 years old, then we did sports [...] near the border. That did not bother us either, although we were told, “take care, don’t cross the white post, that is Czechoslovakia, and

if you go over there, you will be imprisoned for three days.” But actually Czechoslovakia did not bother us at all.

Fear also shaped the experiences and the perceptions of the border. Marlene, who was born sometime between 1939/1940, recalls an occasion when, collecting firewood, she unintentionally stepped over the border and entered the neighboring country. She was frightened and “immediately tried to get back to the West.” In contrast, the Bavarian Jakob remembers how he had been excited as a child to approach the border:

We often looked over the border and thought that if we only could go over [there], what kind of interesting things we could find. We always saw the patrolling Czech soldiers, which for us was as if we were already very close to the border. In the forest you can come very close to it. And some people just passed around the border landmark on the wrong side. It was just a thrill, which was part of this. We children all did this. We simply grew up with the border.

Although the curtain was supposedly *iron*, the accidental physical crossing of the border seems to have been part of local daily life. Erich, too, a local Bavarian, displays an entirely detached stance toward the physical Iron Curtain, remembering his refusal to accept the border’s physical reality:

We regularly went to the border, and it rankled us that we could not go over (laughs). And then we always dared small border crossings. When we went on mushroom forays it sometimes [ ... ] occurred that there were beautiful porcini mushrooms five meters away, on the other side of the border. Needless to say, we took them anyway. We simply watched to see if there was anyone around. It was already serious enough to dare these tiny border crossings. If the Czech was around and became aware of it, he simply took them away.

Though having very different memories about the region’s post-war period, local Bavarians perceived the Iron Curtain first and foremost as the embodiment of the Cold War’s ideological conflict and a physical international border. From the Czech community’s perspective, their German neighbors’ proximity was perceived as a very real danger – even years after the end of the war. German aggression was considered more threatening than Soviet-type communism. A report by *Radio Free Europe* from 26 October 1951 states “[t]he idea of returning Germans to the Sudeten is unthinkable. [ ... ] Everyone in the country considers the Sudeten German question solved and closed.” It further argues that in the event that the “West sends German troops against the Czechs, they will fight [ ... ]. Aversion to the Germans is so strong that it would weaken Czech resistance to Communism.”<sup>7</sup> This aversion was depicted as so potent that it undermined resistance to communism, and in this way even bolstered the communist system. In addition, even after the official organized population transfers ended, ethnic cleansing of the borderlands continued. Deportations of “disloyal” Germans (as well as Czechs) from the Bohemian borderlands continued throughout the early 1950s. A 37-year-old refugee recounts in 1952 that another movement of populations was taking place in the border zone according to which “[p]olitically unreliable persons of German and Czech descent”<sup>8</sup> were removed from the border region and relocated in central Czechoslovakia. The border zone increasingly became a severely controlled space of Cold War confrontation. The Iron Curtain, in short, symbolized enforced mutual alienation.

For the expellees, however, the Iron Curtain represented much more. Many of the interviewees never accepted their fate, preserving memories of their life “over there” as vividly as possible. But the Iron Curtain border prevented them from visiting their former homes, often for another 40 years. Others tried to forget anything related to the past and to accept the presence of the Iron Curtain. The border was thus imbued with a symbolic function: it became a border to the past and its memories (Eisch 1996, 134), visualizing a moment of geographical discontinuation. In some cases, the experience of forced migration resulted in

the interviewees' full or partial resistance to ever re-establishing links to their former home or the population that had been involved in their physical removal. However, the interviewees' perception of the *local* Iron Curtain and their attitude toward the neighboring border community depended extensively on the severity of traumatic experiences. Beyond perceiving the Iron Curtain as a Cold War fortification, many Sudeten Germans saw in it a symbol of their eternally lost home and childhood. The Sudeten German Konrad explains his stance toward the Czech neighbor community by saying that "I mean, I don't hate the Czechs but I don't ever want to have anything to do with them. I told myself that I am finished with this issue. Never mind." By taking the personal decision to draw a line under the past and refuse to have any contact with the Czechs, Konrad contributed on an individual level to mentally sealing off the *local* Iron Curtain. In this way, not only the Cold War powers but also the border region's inhabitants participated in "channeling [the experiences of the] war into [constructing] a wall" as well as creating a "wall in the head" (Sheffer 2011, 252, 4).

The Sudeten German Dora, who had been forcefully expelled and whose mother had possibly been raped at the border, also states that as a child the "Iron Curtain [ ... ] was the end of the world." Carla, too, having once assertively crossed the border with her family, remembers that the Iron Curtain retained a symbolic meaning for her family. She closely connects her family's forced removal from Czechoslovakia to her perception of the Iron Curtain:

In the beginning the Iron Curtain was entirely sealed off. Nothing went on there. We just lived 12 kilometers airline distance from the closest point. [...] I believe that during childhood when we were settled here, we had no connection to the Egerland. Nothing drew us there.

Thus, the border region's alienation was not just a reaction to Cold War demarcation; it slowly developed through consecutive historical attempts (from the interwar to the post-war) to reduce the region's multiethnic composition. The increasingly secure physical border not only "expanded in people's imagination," but also physically consolidated and finalized the desired [ethnic] division of border communities (Sheffer 2007, 319). Although the Sudeten German expellees did not physically make or guard this *local* Iron Curtain, the traumatic loss of their home "over there" and their fear of Czech neighbors contributed to mentally linking the Iron Curtain with current and past feelings of fear and trauma. Brunhilde, the daughter of a Sudeten German mother, recalls their trips across the Iron Curtain:

I noticed it at the time, as we were all so frightened. As a child I went twice with my mother to the Czech Republic to visit her cousins. Everything was strict, and we were checked, and the cars were inspected from the rear to the front, and then we always shivered of course [...] even if we did not smuggle anything. [...]. Nevertheless, we were afraid when you reached the border, it was just like that.

Although many other border-crossers across Europe surely shared feelings of anxiety when crossing the Iron Curtain, this "border to past" evoked traumatic memories for the expellees, in addition to feelings of unease when entering their former home country. While deeply intimidated by the border presence, Brunhilde joined into the local custom of border tourism, but only for the sake of visitors from abroad:

When we had visitors from abroad, we went to the border and looked at it, how it actually was. We were always afraid. [...] Silberhütte was always a destination, if you had guests from Vienna or wherever. They always wanted to see it. Then we went to the border. With a certain cold shiver we went there.

This Cold War practice of border travel, which was based on and simultaneously encouraged “feelings of trepidation” (Eckert 2011, 10), must have elicited markedly different sentiments in Sudeten Germans from neutral visitors from Western Germany or other countries:

Since we knew people over there, we took some pieces across the border again. It was August 1946, and we knew that it would not be long before we needed to leave. Each time we took something across the border, just little things that we could carry as adolescents and children.

In the interviews, it is apparent that this practice abruptly ended with military border enforcement in the late 1940s. Accounts of smuggling trips by night and the permeability of the border are substituted with stories about the brutality of Czech border guards. Repeated descriptions of their blind obedience and automated behavior present “the Czech” (again) as solely responsible for the border communities’ forceful separation. The Sudeten German Max closely links the Czech soldiers’ behavior with the border’s inapproachability:

It became more and more difficult [to cross the border], simply because the young soldiers who came from over there, immediately shot [from] over there. They shot immediately when they saw something moving. They did not call out, but shot instantly. And then it became increasingly difficult. They had the explicit command to shoot immediately. If a bush merely moved somewhere, they shot immediately. After that, it was not that easy anymore and we did not do that anymore.

Beyond the immediate border restrictions, stories about the newly forming Soviet-type and socialist Czechoslovak state and its radical implementation also circulated widely and affected Sudeten Germans’ perceptions of their Czech neighbors. Although the Sudeten German Marie does not seem to have come to terms with the loss of her childhood “Heimat,” she nevertheless separates memories of her past from the realities in her former region:

Then the Russian ruled over there. It was over with the Russian. That was a feast of spying! My uncle came to visit us once [...] there were so many informants. They, their own people, purchased dogs. They did not have a good life. If he had also gotten out, he would have had a better life than over there. He was always afraid. They were not allowed to move. Nothing of good came with the Russians.

Here it is not the Czech, but the Russian occupying forces that are held responsible for preventing the remaining Germans in Bohemia from having a good life.

While it would be natural to think that the systemic changes that occurred in 1989 would have contributed to a rapprochement between the local communities and an appreciation of the Iron Curtain’s destruction, this is only partially true. Many Sudeten Germans used the opportunity to visit their former villages. But members of the older generation of expellees often did not dare to visit their former homes. Marta, who herself went, remembers that her father and many elderly people refused to return to the places of their past as “[they] wanted to remember it how it was [before].” On the other hand, many others decided to visit the Czech borderlands. To them, the first visit was often almost as painful as the transfer itself, since the final loss of their homes became a reality. Dora, initially very enthusiastic and excited about being able to return home, realized that her memories no longer corresponded to how she had remembered it:

We looked at the market square and the convent school, where my husband had lived with his parents. Everything was dilapidated, terrible. If I think of Eger [Czech: Cheb] and the small villages, that was terrible. They had even destroyed the churches. During the socialist times, they intentionally destroyed German property.

Hence, these visits often resulted in an increased alienation with the neighboring region and its population. It was, however, not only the “native” Czech but, in particular, the “Gypsy” settler who was believed to have maliciously destroyed their homes. Marta remembers how her parents once returned to their home village many years after their forced removal, witnessing what the “gypsies and such stuff,” as Alf had earlier put it, had done to their former homes:

The hotels were nailed up and windows were broken – [it was] disastrous. They were not Czechs; they were Gypsies, Sinti, and Roma. They ruined the whole village and went from house to house, running them down one after the other. So, all the houses were in disrepair. My father was very disappointed, saying “never again, never again.” But we still went there. [...] My son-in-law joined me once with his car, as he had a new car. We did not dare to leave the car there alone. We went into the church. My son in law stood at the door of the church and took care that the car did not disappear. They thieved like magpies. Their own people went into church with their bike, because otherwise their bikes would have not been there anymore.

Seeing how the new inhabitants had ruined their houses was for many expellees enough reason to draw a line under the past and never again return to their villages of birth.

In many interviews, the term *Heimat* (“home”) is repeatedly employed. But this term often indicates a loss of something else, in particular the disappearance of their former lives and, above all, “the smell of their childhood” (Scholl-Schneider et al. 2010, 23). The Sudeten German Marie, who was a child at the time of the expulsions, retrospectively connects the loss of her *Heimat* with her childhood’s forceful end:

I don’t know, I was a different person. I wasn’t a real child. I always said that. I grew up too quickly somehow. It isn’t possible to explain it differently. I should have felt a bit younger. But at ten years old you already understand everything.

Their *Heimat*’s physical space evokes feelings and memories that belong to the past but which continue to exercise a severe emotional impact on the interviewees today. A number of those interviewed declare that they were unable to cope with the loss of their remembered *Heimat*, even when expellees were finally able to “tour the lands of memory” (Demshuk 2012a, 188). When the Sudeten German Luise, who had personally experienced a “wild transfer,” decided to travel to her birth village, the experience had a dramatic physical impact on her:

When the border was opened we all went there [Sudetenland]. For three days I was ill, as I had memories of how the village was. There were 65 houses, and when I arrived there everything was gone, just barracks [...]. It is just terrible because the whole village is composed of barracks.

Such memories of loss and the Czech invasion are troubling enough to make her fall ill and convince her to never again cross the border. Her new, “real” impressions of her former *Heimat* are irreconcilable with her past memories. The Iron Curtain’s opening in 1989, which finally allowed her to return to her village, did not diminish her homesickness, but rather led her to conclude that the *Heimat* of her memories had been lost for good. The *Heimat*’s long, gradual disappearance behind the Iron Curtain caused the expellees to withdraw into nostalgic memories of the past and further hardened their inability to reconcile with their “neighbors,” any less today than in 1989. Luise consistently portrays herself as a victim of “the Czech” – an experience that is re-enacted throughout her life in her obsession with passing on memories to her young son:

And then, when he got a little bigger, when he started talking, then I continuously told him about our former home [...]. Then he always said: “Yes, I know that all.” He knew this



from all the storytelling. Once when I told him the story again, he said that he had also been there actually.

These recursive narrated experiences nearly attain the status of real experiences in her son's eyes. The re-enacted memory serves Luise to create a common victim-identity. Even today, half a century after the actual event, "the Czech" remains the perpetrator responsible for her disappointing life, which she summarizes as a "plague." For Luise, the border caused an irrevocable break between her family's past life in Bohemia and her present life in Bavaria. The local border and Iron Curtain personified the successful disentanglement of the border communities.

In the light of the region's experience with traumatic practices of ethnic cleaning, the Iron Curtain could provide a mental shelter. From the expellees' perspectives, the Iron Curtain became a "borderline of loss" as Eisch formulates it (2001, 312). In this way, the physical reality of the Iron Curtain not only mirrored a new, systemic divide, but also intensified the historical and personal fractures and discontinuities caused by region's history. The individual and the border community were riven to their experience of the borderland's recent history. Marie, for example, still has not been able to overcome the childhood trauma of her displacement. When she concludes her life story with the final remark, "I can be satisfied with my life," she quickly adds, "yes, just the [life over there] inside, that had a small drawback, because it took a long time until I got over it." She explains that even today painful memories still haunt her:

Sometimes when I am melancholic (wenn ich meinen Moralischen habe), I still cry sometimes, but not quite as often, it is getting [better] now. [...] It must have been a shock to me. I think I should have undergone [psychological] treatment, as is customary nowadays, because I could not cope with it. I could not even think about it because if I [thought] of it, I cried. I have never done this in public, always in a corner. [...] The others laughed about it, but I could not. That was a lot that was inside, that was inside!

The constant reactivation of these traumatic memories indicates that Marie is unable to come to terms with her family's trauma. Memories of her lost home prevent her from processing the trauma in order to heal. Stating that she could only mourn in a private corner, and not share her feelings with others, points to the main cause of her ongoing suffering. Although the expulsion was a collective experience in her former home region, she felt that she was alone when it came to expressing feelings of grief in her new *Heimat*. She underlines her inability to ever overcome the feeling of root- and homelessness (*Heimatlosigkeit*), stating that it was her strongest felt emotion, impossible to be erased. As the psychiatrist Uwe Langendorf from Berlin discovered from many of his patients who were former expellees, memories of their former *Heimat* remained a core element of their identities – even today – as the following statement by a former expellee suggests:

This is home and we will always carry it within us and around us. [...] It is part of us and we are part of it, whether we want to perceive and admit it or not. We are identified with our home. (2004, 210)

Untold or unrecognized stories of a lost home, emotionally internalized and geographically symbolized through the Iron Curtain, burdened many of the expellees. The inability to jointly and publicly grieve appears to have caused the persistent consolidation of traumatic memories.

The kept-alive memories and stories of particularly traumatic experiences in the Czech-German borderlands were often handed down over the generations, impacting the next generation's ability to handle the border and the neighboring country. In a similar way as Luise's memories were channeled through her son and primed the next generation with a

pre-made image of Sudetenland, Marie describes with astonishment the effect her own experience had on her son's general attitude toward borders:

My son does not drive anywhere. He does not cross any borders. He never went anywhere. Now he is already over fifty [years old]. He does not drive. He does not want to go anywhere, anywhere. That is so strange. I don't understand it. It is unbelievable. Now it isn't nice anymore when you go there, because there aren't any relatives that we knew.

Marie's stories actually transform her son into someone with a severe resistance toward mobility. He indirectly experiences a form of trauma by means of his mother's stories. Here we can see how the experience of forced removal had a lasting impact on the next generation's ability or inability to deal with the local border and its history. Marie's self-understanding as a traumatized victim, never able to work through her own past, severely impacted family dynamics over generations. It prevented her son from ever freeing himself from his mother's transmitted fears, leaving him to withdraw into isolation (Rosenthal 2002, 236). By passing down their traumatic memories, as well as their ignorance toward other experiences (Stráth 2009, 20), the expellees' swift recourse to self-victimization rhetoric (Melendy 2005, 107) continues to heavily influence Czechoslovak–German relations today.

### Conclusion

The life stories of Marie and other expellees show how the Bavarian–Bohemian border community paradigmatically illustrates the interconnectedness of local stories of the Iron Curtain and underlying narratives of earlier traumatic experiences in twentieth-century history. The Czech–German *local* Iron Curtain, then, mostly figured as a reference to the region's troubled post-war history rather than as an index of Cold War politics and ideology. As this article's introductory quote suggests, the success of borders depended – and continues to depend – first and foremost on its “symbolic importance,” not on its factual history (Pittaway 2003, 25). The local Sudeten Germans ascribed (biographically valuable) meanings to this local border that went far beyond its mere Cold War role. In the Czech–German context, the physical appearance of the *local* Cold War border and the strict protection of the border zone indeed visualized a continuation of the region's abrupt post-war alienation. Beyond this, when considering the life stories of German expellees, the long-term effects of the experience of forced migration appears to have severely impacted their local attitude toward the *local* Iron Curtain. Only by taking the historical processes that preceded the creation of the Iron Curtain into account can we understand the local population's behavior. It was the “lived experience of the violent consequences of ethnic cleansing” (Demshuk 2012a, 264) that forced many German expellees to accept the everyday reality of this *local* Iron Curtain. In this way, we can better comprehend the way this abrupt biographical disjunction further facilitated the estrangement of the local border population, providing an ideal foundation for early Cold War emotions of mutual fear, anxiety, disinterest, and alienation. And on this basis, the Iron Curtain was indeed very successful in intensifying the ongoing extrication and separation of the border communities, but it was neither its primary nor its original cause.

If we closely examined Czech attitudes toward the space, previous experiences of German domination in the Sudetenland, which caused an enormous amount of suffering on the Czech side, would need to be adequately taken into account. Considering both communities, it could then be argued, pre- and post-war experiences did contribute to the border communities' disintegration and separation, which subsequently eased the way for the implementation of the physical and mental Iron Curtain. The “fractured identity” of

certain Cold War borderlands was, as Edith Sheffer argues, not only a consequence of its everyday presence, but also the foundation it provided for enforcing the physical divide of the region (2011, 4). I would go one step further and conclude that this particular *local* Czech–German Iron Curtain would have never endured as strongly if the border communities’ common identity had not already been severely damaged in the course of the region’s traumatic history and forced population transfers. The early Cold War division partially owes its “success” to prior historical experiments of ethnic cleansing and forced nationalization.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to particularly thank Muriel Blaive and Libora Oates-Indruchova, the editors of this special issue, for their initiative, support, and helpful comments. I would equally like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the article as well as Eagle Glassheim for their inspiring comments and suggestions. Their critical feedback helped me to deepen my knowledge of the border region’s recent history and to better contextualize some of the interviews. At last, I would like to also thank Ilse Lazaroms and Zoe Roth for their careful corrections of the article.

### Notes

1. Ethnic cleansing is understood here as forced population transfer, not as genocide.
2. While having fully relied on the life story interview method of Gabriele Rosenthal (Rosenthal), the article does not apply the narrative analysis method. The article’s aim is not to look closely at the narrative logic of single life stories, but instead closely focuses on particularly relevant interview sequences.
3. In 2010, we initiated an oral history project at Regensburg University, entitled *Die Erzählte Grenze* (*The Narrated Border*). Through this project, we aimed at orally capturing the life stories of the elderly generation in this region, the results of which are continuously uploaded to the public and bilingual homepage [www.die-erzählte-grenze.de](http://www.die-erzählte-grenze.de).
4. Rosenthal argues that the thicker and more direct a narration is, the closer the interviewee comes to his/her actual experiences.
5. Throughout the article I will only be referring to the ‘Czech’ borderlands and border community, as the region under consideration only embraces the Western bohemian area.
6. Translation from German by the author.
7. HU OSA 300-1-2-9718. Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute (1951).
8. HU OSA 300-1-2-18230. Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute (1952).

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\*All interviews have been anonymized. All interviews have been translated from German into English by the author.

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Interview with “Barbara” on August 3, 2011 by the author. Transcript in the archive of the author.

Interview with “Bärbel” on May 27, 2011 by Sabina Bloman and Stephanie Neumeister. Transcript in the archive of the author.

Interview with “Carla” on May 27, 2011 by the author. Transcript in the archive of the author.

Interview with “Dora” on May 27, 2011 by Markus Meinke. Transcript in the archive of the author.

Interview with “Erich” on April 15, 2011 by Julia Kling. Transcript in the archive of the author.

Interview with “Fred” on April 26, 2011 by Markus Meinke. Transcript in the archive of the author.

Interview with “Friedrich” on April 7, 2011 by Sabina Blomann and Markus Meinke. Transcript in the archive of the author.

Interview with “Gerda” on August 10, 2010 by the author. Transcript in the archive of the author.

Interview with “Jakob” on April 15, 2011 by Julia Kling. Transcript in the archive of the author.

- Interview with “Luise” on April 1, 2010 by the author. Transcript in the archive of the author.
- Interview with “Max” on August 10, 2010 by Roxana Hila. Transcript in the archive of the author.
- Interview with “Marie” on May 27, 2011 by Sabina Blomann. Transcript in the archive of the author.
- Interview with “Marlene” on May 25, 2011 by the author. Transcript in the archive of the author.
- Interview with “Marta” on May 27, 2011 by the author. Transcript in the archive of the author.
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