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Departing from Krickerhau and Arriving in Handlová: Childhood Memories of Migration among German Expellees and Slovak Settlers

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Abstract

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Handlová (German Krickerhau) was one of the main centres of Hauerland, a region in central Slovakia inhabited predominantly by a German-speaking population until the end of the Second World War. As a consequence of wartime events and post-war population transfers, German, and later Czechoslovak, authorities forced Slovak Germans to leave their homes. After 1945, Slovak settlers from neighbouring regions as well as from Hungary, France, Belgium, Romania, and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia arrived in Handlová to take the place of the ousted German population. Drawing on oral history interviews, this article examines the childhood experiences of both the original German inhabitants of Handlová and the Slovak settlers who were relocated there after the Second World War. For both groups, German expellees and Slovak newcomers, childhood was profoundly shaped by (forced) migration. Yet while the Germans departed for a devastated Germany leaving most of their possessions behind, the Slovak settlers often arrived in what they perceived as their “home country,” bringing with them not only material belongings, but also distinct expectations and identities. By comparing the two sets of childhood recollections, the article explores how displacement was experienced and remembered across ethnic and national divides, revealing the shared emotional and sensory dimensions of migration and also the contrasting interpretative frameworks through which loss and new beginnings were understood. Ultimately, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how memory, identity, and belonging were formed through post-war migration in Central Europe.

In the afternoon, someone from the town authorities arrived with the announcement that by eight o'clock the next morning we were to be ready. Each person was permitted to take 30 kilograms of belongings. We had no suitcases, we were peasants. We packed what we could into sacks and were ordered to leave for the [internment camp] in Nováky.¹

Thus recalls one narrator, who as a child in 1946 was forced to leave Krickerhau with her family. At roughly the same time, another child arrived in the same town, which was known as Handlová:²

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- 1 Interview 9, conducted by Michal Korhel in Voerde, Germany on 10 August 2024. For ethical reasons, all interviews used in this study are presented anonymously. The original quotations in German or Slovak were translated into English by the author of this study.
- 2 Krickerhau is the German name for the Slovak town of Handlová. The dual naming

They drove us from the station—the car rattled, it jolted us up and down—to the barracks. At first, they cooked for us until we managed somehow, and then they gave us apartments. We were assigned one at Horný koniec [Upper end]. From the doorway, there was only a narrow space—just enough for a bed, and barely enough room to pass alongside it. Our mother lamented—it was as though we were at a funeral, she kept crying, for she could not come to terms with it.³

These two testimonies placed side by side capture the opposing yet interconnected experiences of departure and arrival that defined not only the post-war transformation of the town of Handlová (German Krickerhau), but also similar profound ruptures brought about by the end of the Second World War in Central Europe. Millions of ethnic Germans who had inhabited these regions for centuries were forced to abandon their homes.⁴ In their place, settlers arrived from surrounding areas, and abroad as well.⁵ Experiences of loss and new beginnings, occurring within the span of only a few weeks or months and at times even simultaneously, became part of a single shared, though deeply asymmetrical, history.

Handlová is a town in central Slovakia in the Upper Nitra region. Known in German as Hauerland, the area was inhabited until the end of the war predominantly by descendants of German-speaking settlers who Hungarian kings had brought to the region in the Middle Ages. The ethnic Germans of Handlová engaged in agriculture, crafts, and coal mining.⁶ Their evacuation at the end of the Second World War and subsequent forced expulsion dismantled a centuries-old social and cultural order. Into the vacated homes moved Slovak families from the surrounding countryside as well as settlers from Hungary, Romania, Belgium, and other countries.⁷ For the original inhabitants, this process entailed the painful loss of a homeland shaped over generations. For the settlers, it represented both a return to the land of their forebears and the beginning of a new life in an unfamiliar environment, a life often marked by material hardship yet infused with state propaganda heralding burgeoning expectations of a better future.⁸

Such interrelation of “departure” and “arrival” forms the starting point for the present study, which asks how children, whether forced to leave Handlová

reflects the area's multilingual past and the presence of a German-speaking population prior to their forced displacement.

3 Interview 5, conducted by Michal Korhel in Handlová, Slovakia on 9 December 2022.

4 See, e.g. DOUGLAS, Raymond M. *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War*. New Haven : Yale University Press, 2012.

5 For the post-Second World War resettlement in the Czechoslovak context, see e. g. WIEDEMANN, Andreas. „Komm mit uns das Grenzland aufbauen!“ *Ansiedlung und neue Strukturen in den ehemaligen Sudetengebieten 1945–1952*. Essen : Klartext, 2007 or ŠUTA, Štefan (ed.) *Zmeny hraníc a pohyb obyvateľstva po druhej svetovej vojne*. Košice : Univerzita Pavla Jozefa Šafárika v Košiciach, Filozofická fakulta, 2020.

6 For more information about the town of Handlová, see: MRVA, Ivan – REIFF, Igor (eds.) *Handlová od praveku po súčasnosť*. Banská Bystrica : Štúdio Harmony, 2017 and for the history of Germans from Handlová, see: STEINACKER, Ruprecht (ed.) *Krickerhau: eine deutsche Siedlung in der Slowakei*. Voerde : Arbeitskreis der Krickerhauer in der Karpatendeutschen Landsmannschaft e. V., 1980.

7 For more information on the resettlement process in Handlová, see: KORHEL, Michal. Povoľňová migrácia na Slovensku: perspektíva osídlencov a ich detí v Handlovej. In *Historický časopis*, 2024, vol. 72, no. 4, pp. 741–770. <https://doi.org/10.31577/histcaso.2024.72.4.6>

8 HELDÁKOVÁ, Lucia. *Mať volá! Propaganda výmeny obyvateľstva medzi Československom a Maďarskom – teoretické a historické aspekty*. Košice : Univerzita Pavla Jozefa Šafárika v Košiciach, 2020.

as Germans or those arriving as Slovak settlers, speak about their experiences of migration. The argument proposed here is that a comparative analysis of these memories moves beyond a simple juxtaposition of similarities and differences, instead highlighting the relational character of post-war migration experiences. While children on both sides recall hardship, restriction, and the need for adaptation, their narratives are moulded by the different positionalities within a shared historical process. The town of Handlová thus offers a microcosm of post-war transformations across Central Europe, illuminating the interconnectedness of expulsion and resettlement while contributing to a broader understanding of how childhood migration experiences shape memory, identity, and belonging.

This study approaches Handlová not only as a geographical setting, but as a space whose meanings were actively reconstituted through post-war migration. Drawing on insights from humanistic and cultural geography, “space” is understood here as relational and processual rather than static. As Tuan has argued, places emerge through lived experience and affective attachment,⁹ while Ingold emphasizes that individual environments are continuously produced through practices of dwelling.¹⁰ In the context of post-war Handlová, these processes were intensified by the exchange of populations, which entailed not only demographic change, but also a re-signification of the built environment. Houses, streets, and workplaces did not simply persist as neutral backdrops, but became sites where meanings were negotiated, overwritten, or silently inherited. At the same time, as Edensor has shown, material environments retain traces of previous inhabitants that may disrupt or complicate new narratives of belonging.¹¹ This perspective allows Handlová to be conceptualized as a palimpsest, in which layers of German and Slovak presence intersect, rendering the town an active participant in the formation of memory, place-based attachments, and shifting forms of collective and everyday identification.¹²

Research on post-war migration in Czechoslovakia has produced a substantial body of literature which focuses primarily on the legal foundations, scope, and course of the expulsion of German-speaking populations on both national and local levels.¹³ In the Slovak case, particular attention has been given to the evacuation of Slovak Germans during the final months of the war from the advancing front—an experience not shared by German speakers in

9 TUAN, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*. London : Arnold, 1977, pp. 4–6.

10 INGOLD, Tim. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London; New York : Routledge, 2000, pp. 172–188.

11 EDENSOR, Tim. The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins: Ordering and Disordering Memory in Excessive Space. In *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2005, vol. 23, no. 6, pp. 829–849, here p. 834.

12 EDENSOR, Tim. Mundane Hauntings: Commuting through the Phantasmagoric Working-Class Spaces of Manchester, England. In *Cultural Geographies*, 2008, vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 313–333, here p. 313. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474008091330> and HUYSEN, Andreas. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford : Stanford University Press, 2003.

13 E. g. ARBURG, Adrian von. *Zwischen Vertreibung und Integration. Tschechische Deutschepolitik 1947–1953* (Ph.D. thesis). Praha : Univerzita Karlova, 2004; DVOŘÁK, Tomáš. *Vnitřní odsun 1947–1953. Závěrečná fáze “očisty pohraničí” v politických a společenských souvislostech poválečného Československa*. Brno : Matice Moravská, 2012; SPURNÝ, Matěj. *Nejsou jako my. Česká společnost a menšiny v pohraničí (1945–1960)*. Praha : Antikomplex, 2011; STANĚK, Tomáš. *Odsun Němců z Československa, 1945–1947*. Praha : Academia, 1991.

the Czech lands.¹⁴ Alongside the expulsion of Germans, scholarship has concentrated on the Czechoslovak–Hungarian population exchange, while the socio-historical aspects of resettlement have remained at the margins.¹⁵ The life experiences of the settlers themselves have long remained overshadowed in literature, which privileges the perspective of state and local authorities responsible for organizing the process.¹⁶

While studies have predominantly addressed migration as a demographic and administrative process, scholarship on the culture of memory in Germany has advanced our understanding of how interpretations of migration are shaped by collective narratives.¹⁷ A comparative view of German and Slovak memories thus makes it possible to transcend national frameworks and analyse the shared, albeit asymmetrical, history of places such as Handlová. Despite these advances, the perspective of the children, both displaced Germans and incoming Slovak settlers, remains largely absent.¹⁸

Moreover, existing scholarship has paid less attention to how transformations connected to the post-war migration were inscribed into the material and symbolic fabric of specific localities. Yet migration did not unfold in an abstract space, it was embedded in concrete environments that were shaped by prior inhabitants. In towns such as Handlová, the departure of the German population left behind not only empty houses, but also a dense network of material traces, from domestic interiors to urban layouts and work sites. The arrival of Slovak settlers thus involved not merely relocation, but the practical and symbolic appropriation of a previously inhabited world. Even where the personal accounts do not explicitly dwell on these material remnants, implicit horizon of experience is formed, structuring how narrators recall both loss and arrival. As Edensor has argued, such traces often persist in subtle and uneven ways, shaping everyday experience without being necessarily explicitly articulated.¹⁹

14 ZÜCKERT, Martin – SCHVARC, Michal – FIAMOVÁ, Martina. *Die Evakuierung der Deutschen aus der Slowakei 1944/45*. Göttingen : Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019. For the history of Slovak Germans after 1945 see also: GABZILOVÁ-OLEJNÍKOVÁ, Soňa – OLEJNÍK, Milan. *Karpatskí Nemci na Slovensku od druhej svetovej vojny do roku 1953*. Bratislava : Spoločenskovedný Ústav SAV, Múzeum Kultúry Karpatských Nemcov, 2004.

15 E. g. SÁPOSOVÁ, Zlatica – ŠUTAJ, Štefan (eds.) *Povojnové migrácie a výmena obyvateľstva medzi Československom a Maďarskom*. Prešov : Universum, 2010; VADKERTY, Katalin. *Maďarská otázka v Československu, 1945–1948. Trilógia o dejinách maďarskej menšiny*. Bratislava : Kalligram, 2002.

16 There are, however, some exceptions addressing imbalance, focusing increasingly on identity, adaptation, and everyday life in transformed communities, such as: JUHÁSZOVÁ, Tereza. Post-WWII migration flows in micro-perspective. In *Individual and Society*, 2022, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 1–20 <https://doi.org/10.31577/cas.2022.01.598>; SÁPOSOVÁ, Zlatica – GALLOVÁ, Miroslava. Presídlenie obyvateľov slovenskej národnosti z Maďarska v rámci výmeny obyvateľstva medzi Československom a Maďarskom (so zreteľom na sťažnosti presídlencov). In ŠUTAJ 2020, pp. 255–272 or JOVANKOVIČ, Samuel. Spomienky repatriantov z Juhoslávie v akcii Mať volá (1946–1950), čiastkový výstup z dotazníkovej ankety. In *Slováci v zahraničí*, 2008, vol. 24, pp. 193–204.

17 HAHN, Eva – HAHN, Hans Henning. *Die Vertreibung im deutschen Erinnern: Legenden, Mythos, Geschichte*. Paderborn : Schöningh, 2010.

18 This goes not only for the Slovak context, but in general with the exception of Jewish children. WYLEGAŁA, Anna. Child migrants and deportees from Poland and Ukraine after the Second World War: experience and memory. In *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 2015, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 292–309, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2015.1008411>, here pp. 292–293.

19 EDENSOR, Tim. *Industrial Ruins: Spaces, Aesthetics, and Materiality*. Oxford; New York : Berg, 2005, pp. 95, 162–164.

Attending to these spatial dimensions helps to connect individual memory with the broader processes of cultural re-signification.²⁰

The present study draws on sixteen semi-structured oral history interviews conducted by the author between 2022 and 2025. Half were carried out with Slovak settlers born between 1929 and 1945 who came to Handlová from Hungary and Romania. The other half were conducted with narrators born in Handlová and its surroundings between 1934 and 1942 who, as ethnic Germans, were forced to leave the town and eventually settled in Voerde and its surroundings in the former Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Federal Republic of Germany, FRG).²¹ These interviews were approached through the lens of memory studies and oral history, in particular drawing on scholarship that understands memory as socially and culturally mediated, selective, and shaped by narrative conventions.²² At the same time, the analysis follows oral history approaches that emphasize the narrative construction and subjectivity of remembered experience.²³

Recent scholarship has emphasized that children were not passive companions but active witnesses of migration and transformation. Their recollections, often fragmentary and emotionally charged, provide insight more into the atmospheres, emotions, and sensory impressions that marked everyday life than into political contexts.²⁴ Precisely because of their experiential immediacy, childhood recollections constitute a distinctive form of historical knowledge; not simply an addition to broader narratives of post-war migration, but a mode of remembering that links sensory perception, affective experience, and temporality. As Alessandro Portelli has argued, the value of oral testimonies lies not only in factual accuracy, but in subjectivity and narrativity.²⁵ Childhood memories therefore serve as a distinctive source, revealing how the experiences of expulsion and resettlement were embedded into everyday life, while also reflecting broader family discourses and collective narratives. These include, for example, the West German discourse of expulsion (*Vertreibung*), shaped through expellee organisations, public commemorations, and media representations,²⁶ as well as Slovak post-war narratives of resettlement, disseminated through state

20 CRESSWELL, Tim. *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*. New York : Routledge, 2006, pp. 175–194.

21 As many of the Germans in Handlová had worked in the local mine, they sought employment in a similar line of work after their displacement. Many found jobs in Voerde and in the nearby Walsum mine.

22 On memory as a socially and culturally mediated process, see: HALBWACHS, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago; London : University of Chicago Press, 1992; ASSMANN, Jan. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2011.

23 E. g. PORTELLI, Alessandro. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany, N.Y. : State University of New York Press, 1991.

24 RÖGER, Maren – VENKEN, Machteld. Growing Up in the Shadow of the Second World War: European Perspectives. In *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 2015, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 199–220, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2015.1008410>, here p. 204 and SCUTARU, Beatrice – PAOLI, Simone. Childhood, Migration and Biopolitics in Modern European History. In SCUTARU, Beatrice – PAOLI, Simone (eds.) *Child Migration and Biopolitics: Old and New Experiences in Europe*. Oxon; New York : Routledge, 2021, p. 2.

25 PORTELLI 1991, p. 26.

26 MOELLER, Robert G. *War stories. The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 2003.

institutions, school curricula, and propaganda emphasizing national renewal and socialist reconstruction.²⁷ Following Harald Welzer's work on communicative memory,²⁸ the study interprets the interviews as sites where individual recollections intersect with intergenerational storytelling.

The article unfolds in four interconnected steps, beginning by examining the childhood memories of German expellees from Handlová, showing how their recollections of loss and displacement resonate with—and at times subvert—the dominant post-war discourse of expulsion in West Germany. Turning next to the memories of Slovak settlers who arrived in Handlová after 1945, the text explores how the narratives of “returning” and “new beginnings” were shaped by both propaganda and everyday experience. In comparing these two mnemonic perspectives, the study highlights the emotional and moral asymmetries of post-war migration, while also tracing the shared affective logic of adaptation and belonging. The final section situates these findings within broader debates on the relationship between migration, memory, and identity in Central Europe.

German children from Handlová and the West German discourse of expulsion

As in other parts of Central Europe, the German population of Slovakia was forced to leave their homes as a consequence of the Second World War and the atrocities that accompanied it. The displacements began in the autumn of 1944, when German authorities in Slovakia (primarily the Deutsche Partei (DP)²⁹ and the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle)³⁰ initiated evacuations. The process began as a direct response to the advancing Soviet army as well as the upheaval triggered by the Slovenské národné povstanie (Slovak National Uprising, SNP), which represented the culmination of resistance against the authoritarian regime of the wartime Slovak Republic (29 August – 28 October 1944). Acting on an order from Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, the evacuation became part of the broader Nazi *Volkstumspolitik*, which intertwined military, racial, and strategic aims. Although officially described as a “temporary relocation,” some SS officials regarded it as an opportunity to bring about a lasting ethnic transformation of the region.³¹

27 HELDÁKOVÁ 2020.

28 WELZER, Harald. *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung*. München : Verlag C. H. Beck, 2002.

29 The Deutsche Partei (DP) was the sole political organization representing the German minority in the Slovak State from 1938 to 1945. It functioned as an extension of the National Socialist apparatus, aiming to unify all Germans in Slovakia into a single “ethnic group” aligned with the interests of Nazi Germany. ZÜCKERT – SCHVARC – FIAMOŤOVÁ 2019, pp. 35 and 41–42.

30 The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle (VoMi) was an SS agency responsible for coordinating National Socialist ethnic and resettlement policy. It organized the registration and mobilization of ethnic German populations in East-Central and Southeastern Europe in line with Reich interests. Between 1939 and 1941, it oversaw the resettlement of nearly one million Germans, and from 1944 onward, under the direction of Heinrich Himmler, it organized the evacuation of German populations in response to the advancing Red Army. ZÜCKERT – SCHVARC – FIAMOŤOVÁ 2019, pp. 8, 86, 92 and 267–268.

31 ZÜCKERT – SCHVARC – FIAMOŤOVÁ 2019, pp. 18–22, 92–102.

The evacuation of Slovak Germans initially targeted women, children, and the elderly, while men between sixteen and sixty were retained for home-defence service (*Heimatschutz*) or for work in strategically important industries. Relocation was initially conducted on a voluntary basis. However, seeing the operation produced only limited results, German authorities soon introduced compulsory evacuation lists. Tensions arose when relatives demanded the return of family members who had already been removed. The timing and scope of evacuations varied from region to region. Eastern Slovakia was evacuated first, in late 1944, with transfers continuing into January 1945. In Hauerland, the central Slovak region affected by fighting during the SNP, depopulation intensified by the beginning of 1945, while the Bratislava area was evacuated only in late March and early April. Estimates of evacuees range from 70 000 to 120 000, depending on the source.³²

After the war ended, in the spring and summer of 1945, some evacuees attempted to return to their homes. For those that succeeded, their houses were often found looted, destroyed, or occupied by Slovak settlers. The re-established Czechoslovak authorities responded by interning returning Germans in camps in order to prepare an additional forced resettlement from Czechoslovakia.³³ With Presidential *Decree no. 33/1945* of 2 August 1945, Slovak Germans were stripped of their citizenship, setting the basis for organized expulsions in 1946. By the end of that year, roughly 32 400 ethnic Germans had been forcibly transferred, mostly to the occupation zones of Germany and Austria.³⁴ These expulsions ended more than seven centuries of continuous German settlement in Slovakia and formed part of a broader post-war effort at ethnic homogenization across Central Europe.

The case of Handlová illustrates the above-described dynamics at the local level. After the town was briefly under partisan control during the SNP, it became occupied by German troops at the end of September 1944. In response to the advance of the Soviet army, German authorities organized an evacuation. The first phase began in October 1944, with schoolchildren and teachers relocated to the Czech borderlands—belonging at that time to the German Reich. The main phase followed in January 1945, with most of the local German population moving westward toward Austria and the Czech borderlands. The final group to leave were the miners, whose transport departed Handlová on Easter Sunday, 1 April 1945, just days before the arrival of Soviet troops. In total, about 6 250 of the town's estimated 7 500 German residents fled during these months.³⁵

After the war, those who remained or attempted to return faced internment and eventual deportation. They were gathered in internment camps, most notably in Nováky, which had previously served as a Jewish internment camp

32 GABZILOVÁ-OLEJNÍKOVÁ – OLEJNÍK 2004, pp. 35–42; ZÜCKERT – SCHVARC – FIAMO VÁ 2019, pp. 14–15, 112, 117–118.

33 By 1946, nearly 18 000 individuals of German nationality were held in such facilities, where living conditions varied widely depending on local circumstances and the general disorder of the early post-war period. ZÜCKERT – SCHVARC – FIAMO VÁ 2019, p. 298.

34 GABZILOVÁ – OLEJNÍKOVÁ – OLEJNÍK 2004, p. 139; ZÜCKERT – SCHVARC – FIAMO VÁ 2019, pp. 298–299.

35 STEINACKER 1980, pp. 267–270, 278–281.

during the Slovak State,³⁶ and consequently transferred to the occupation zones in Germany. Most of Handlová's former residents resettled in the territory of the future the FRG, particularly in the industrial Ruhr region (e.g. in Voerde and Oberhausen), where mining work was readily available and their skills were in demand, or around the city of Stuttgart in south-west Germany. Others found new homes within the Soviet occupation zone in Germany, the Czech borderlands and in Austria. Only a small number of Germans were allowed to remain in Slovakia—mainly politically “reliable” anti-fascists, members of mixed families, and essential specialists in the mining industry.³⁷

While these events are well documented in official records, the voices of those with personal experience as children provide a different kind of testimony, one that captures the emotional and sensory dimensions of displacement that statistics and decrees cannot convey. For the German children of Handlová, the experience of migration began with an abrupt severance from their familiar environment. Whether it occurred at the end of 1944 during the evacuation of school-aged children, in early 1945 when mothers with children and elderly residents were leaving the town, or as part of the forced displacement in 1946, the narrators recall in their interviews how they had to abandon their homes and families. Many note that, as children, they only partially understood what was happening. Their memories preserve vivid images of departure; the houses where belongings were left³⁸ the animals they had cared for,³⁹ and the places where they used to play.⁴⁰ As they recall today, at the time they had no idea where they were going or whether they would ever return to Handlová.⁴¹ Such scenes correspond closely to the core of the West German narrative of the expulsion of Germans from Central and Eastern Europe, which since the late 1940s has been shaped by the notion that Germans were innocent victims of historical injustice.⁴² While the children were unaware of the political background, such as the Beneš decrees or the violence of the immediate post-war period, their memories nonetheless consistently reproduce this very pattern: a sudden and inevitable expulsion from a familiar world.

In post-war West Germany, the expulsion and forced migration of German-speaking populations from Central and Eastern Europe became a central element of the emerging culture of remembrance. Public discourse and political rhetoric coalesced—particularly in the 1950s and early 1960s—around a collective narrative that depicted millions of displaced persons as innocent

36 NIŽŇANSKÝ, Eduard – RAJCA, Vanda – HLAVINKA, Ján. Nováky. In LOHSE, Alexandra – PARKEN, Oliver (eds.) *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos: Slovakia*. Bloomington; Indianapolis : United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1353/document.4227>.

37 STEINACKER 1980, pp. 290–291, 293.

38 Interview 13, conducted by Michal Korhel in Voerde, Germany on 1 February 2025 and Interview 9.

39 Interview 8, conducted by Michal Korhel in Voerde, Germany on 10 August 2024; Interview 11, conducted by Michal Korhel in Voerde, Germany on 10 August 2024.

40 Interview 11.

41 Interview 13.

42 KOSSERT, Andreas. *Kalte Heimat: Die Geschichte der Vertriebenen nach 1945*. München : Siedler Verlag, 2008, pp. 9–15; MOELLER, Robert G. Germans as Victims?: Thoughts on a Post-Cold War History of World War II's Legacies. In *History and Memory*, 2005, vol. 17, no. 1/2, pp. 145–194. <https://doi.org/10.2979/his.2005.17.1-2.145>

victims of wartime violence and moral injustice. The discourse emphasized material loss, trauma, and nostalgia for a lost homeland, while often downplaying the broader historical context of Nazi aggression and any German responsibility for war crimes.⁴³

Dominating public life, from politics to the media and state-sponsored commemorations, was a construct known as the *Mythos Vertreibung* (Myth of Expulsion). Focused on the suffering of “innocent” groups such as women, children, and the elderly, the narrative tended to obscure the fates of men—often former members of the Wehrmacht or the SS. Expulsion was reframed as an autonomous European tragedy, at times compared to genocide or even the Holocaust.⁴⁴ Severed from the context of Nazi warfare, the expulsions were frequently presented as acts of revenge by the victorious powers—above all the Soviets, Poles, and Czechs.⁴⁵ In this way, the narrative of expulsion became integral to the formation of a collective identity in the FRG, enabling society to reframe its own suffering within the wider history of civilian hardship during the Second World War. This “victim discourse” provided West Germans with a symbolic means of processing trauma, yet it also reinforced a sense of self-victimization that served to delay a deeper reckoning with the legacies of Nazism and the Holocaust.⁴⁶

Similar to millions of other Germans expelled from Central and Eastern Europe, the narrators from Handlová describe their departure as both involuntary and traumatic. Testimonies repeatedly emphasize that they “had to leave”⁴⁷ or were “driven out”⁴⁸ under the threat of advancing Soviet troops and partisan reprisals. Motifs of violence and fear recur frequently in their recollections. Some describe the arrest and execution of men, while others recall raids by partisans, portrayed as “criminals” or “swines.”⁴⁹ These first-hand stories reiterate the moral framework characteristic of early West German discourse on expulsion, which foregrounded the suffering of Germans as victims of external aggression.⁵⁰

One element central to the migration experience of the German children from Handlová was the train transport itself. It was within the context of these transports—most commonly in cattle wagons—that feelings of hardship and humiliation were most acutely concentrated, with overcrowded conditions, cold, hunger, and the absence of basic sanitation. For adults, these journeys were remembered as deeply traumatic experiences that later became symbolic of the loss of rights and human dignity in the wider discourse surrounding displaced persons.⁵¹ Similar aspects appear in the children’s recollections from

43 KOSSERT 2008, pp. 9–15; MOELLER 2005.

44 HAHN – HAHN 2010, pp. 24, 87–90.

45 HAHN – HAHN 2010, pp. 10–11, 87–90.

46 MOELLER 2003, pp. 177–180.

47 Interview 13.

48 Interview 13.

49 Interview 8; Interview 9; Interview 10, conducted by Michal Korhel in Voerde, Germany on 10 August 2024; Interview 11; Interview 12, conducted by Michal Korhel in Voerde, Germany on 10 August 2024.

50 HAHN – HAHN 2010, p. 78.

51 HAHN – HAHN 2010, pp. 445–446 and KOSSERT 2008, p. 44.

Handlová. However, in their accounts, the agents responsible for these negative, often harrowing experiences were not limited to the victorious powers, but also included German soldiers and officials.

The testimonies differentiate between two phases of displacement. The first concerns the wartime evacuation of civilians, initiated by German authorities themselves. One narrator who evacuated at the age of five recalls, “The German soldiers loaded us into cattle wagons. There were no windows. We just sat on the floor. Everything was shut tight, and we were transported away.”⁵² Here, the suffering is linked to the coercive practices of the German regime, revealing how the structures of total war also dehumanized their own population, including children.⁵³

The second phase refers to the post-war expulsion of ethnic Germans from Slovakia in 1946. A female narrator forcibly removed from Handlová after the war describes the journey as deeply degrading:

It was truly a catastrophe. There was little to eat [...] And people had to relieve themselves, but there was only a bucket. I don't know how many people were in one wagon. They transported us in cattle wagons. The bucket was covered. There were small children, too.⁵⁴

In this case, humiliation and loss are connected to the collective punishment of Germans after 1945, marking the transition from wartime mobilization to post-war retribution. The narrator's repeated reference to the “bucket” is not incidental, but functions rather as a focal point of embodied humiliation. As the only means for relieving oneself in an overcrowded cattle wagon, the bucket collapses the boundary between private and public, symbolizing a radical loss of dignity. Its recurrence in the testimony suggests not only the centrality of bodily degradation to the experience, but also the workings of traumatic memory.

Finally, a similar experience is described by another narrator whose family was relocated within the Soviet occupation zone of Germany, “One family per wagon, and then a cattle wagon, a cold night—we had to press sacks over ourselves. It was October.”⁵⁵ This testimony further underscores the continuity of displacement across political boundaries and temporal phases of the late 1940s.

Taken together, these memories highlight the embodied and sensory dimensions of forced mobility (cold, hunger, confinement) that became deeply ingrained in both personal and collective memory. At the same time, the shifting attribution of responsibility—from German soldiers and authorities during the war to the Czechoslovak authorities after 1945—complicates the linear West German narrative of innocence and victimhood. The Handlová accounts thus expose a morally ambivalent landscape of displacement in which German suffering is entangled with earlier complicity and the broader scope of war violence and its aftermath.

German children from Handlová shared many of the negative experiences of forced migration with adults. Based on the analysed interviews, this included

52 Interview 8.

53 ZÜCKERT – SCHVARC – FIAMOVIÁ 2019, pp. 305–308.

54 Interview 9.

55 Interview 13.

not only the harsh transport conditions, but also direct encounters with death⁵⁶ and forced separations from family members.⁵⁷ The narrators recall these experiences through the emotions they felt at the time, which feature above all fear and sadness.⁵⁸ These emotions were not only their own feelings, but also those of their parents and other adults, which the children perceived and internalized. At times, however, these emotional responses diverged; while parents feared for the future, children sought ways to “normalize” the situation.

A telling example is how life in the previously mentioned Nováky internment camp is recounted. The post-war living conditions there were catastrophic. The buildings to which internees were assigned had broken windows and doors, with beds often missing, forcing many to sleep on the floor. Sanitary facilities failed to meet even basic hygiene standards, water supplies were inadequate, and food was scarce. Such inhumane conditions directly affected mortality in the camp, particularly among the elderly and children.⁵⁹

The recollections of narrators who awaited expulsion in Nováky as children, however, provide an intriguing counterpoint to these historical accounts, evoking scenes of everyday life in which the camp appears as a relatively open space. While their parents were assigned to forced labour,⁶⁰ the children recall being able to move freely, meet one another, and play.⁶¹ In their memory, the camp thus assumes the character of a temporary but not overtly hostile environment. Some German children were even allowed to stay with Slovak neighbours in Handlová where they waited for the date of their family’s resettlement.⁶² This stark contrast between the scholarly representation of suffering and the children’s recollections of daily life highlights the plurality of mnemonic perspectives that typify the post-war experiences of ethnic Germans in Slovakia. Such divergences remind us that children’s memories are not simply fragments of adult narratives, but autonomous acts of meaning-making, revealing how even in spaces of coercion, imagination and play offered a means of reclaiming agency. At the same time, this mixture of suffering and childhood adaptation suggests that the memories of children are not merely miniature versions of the broader expellee discourse, but rather open up independent dimensions of remembrance and interpretation.

The experiences of the Germans from Handlová diverge from the West German expulsion narrative primarily in the temporal and spatial structure of their displacement. Unlike Germans from Silesia or East Prussia, who moved directly into the occupation zones of Germany after 1945, most families from Handlová underwent a multi-stage deportation process. After their departure

56 Interview 11. The narrator recalled finding a bundle thrown from a passing truck and opening it to find a dead, frozen baby.

57 Interview 9; Interview 12; Interview 13.

58 E. g. Interview 8.

59 GABZILOVÁ – OLEJNÍKOVÁ – OLEJNÍK 2004, pp. 68–69; ZÜCKERT – SCHVARC – FIAMOVÁ 2019, pp. 298.

60 The men were employed primarily in the mines in Nováky and Handlová, while others worked in agriculture or in various crafts. The women assisted in households and in agricultural work in the surrounding area. GABZILOVÁ – OLEJNÍKOVÁ – OLEJNÍK 2004, p. 69.

61 E. g. Interview 10.

62 Interview 9.

in 1944–1945, many settled temporarily in the Czech borderlands or in territories that later became part of the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (German Democratic Republic, GDR).⁶³ This intermediate phase, sometimes lasting into the 1960s, represents a form of “double displacement;” the initial wartime evacuation was followed by a second, politically regulated resettlement from Czechoslovakia or the GDR to the FRG.

Some witnesses recall that their departure from Czechoslovakia was postponed for decades because the authorities retained them under the pretext that they were needed as labourers or specialists in local industry. When emigration finally became possible, it was no longer a chaotic flight, but a bureaucratically controlled process requiring official permits, employment and housing guarantees in the FRG, and in some cases even exit fees.⁶⁴ This so-called *Spätaussiedlung*⁶⁵ (late resettlement of ethnic German repatriates) of the 1960s stands in sharp contrast to the image of a spontaneous escape in 1945–1946 that dominated the West German collective memory.⁶⁶

The experiences of German children from Handlová upon their arrival in the FRG were similarly complex. While the official narrative emphasized the moral unity of expellees with other Germans, many of them encountered rejection and social distance. Their distinctive dialect, barely comprehensible to other Germans, set them apart from the majority population.⁶⁷ Many mention being called *Zugereiste*⁶⁸ (newcomers), or how local children were forbidden to play with them as *Flüchtlingskinder*⁶⁹ (refugee children). One narrator, recalling an encounter later in adulthood with a woman originally from Voerde, described how this acquaintance, unaware of her interlocutor’s background, shared a memory from her school days:

We were at school together with all the refugee children. Yes, my parents forbade us to play with the refugee children in Buschmannshof. At school we were together, in the schoolyard we played together, but we were not allowed to visit them or play with them in Buschmannshof.⁷⁰

Buschmannshof had been a camp used during the Second World War to house forced labourers, and after the war it also accommodated Germans from Handlová, among others. Living there thus became a kind of social stigma, much like their origin itself. “Refugees” were often met with distrust and perceived as a burden on local communities, while places such as Buschmannshof itself became socially marked spaces that reinforced their marginal position within the local social order.

63 E. g. Interview 8; Interview 14, conducted by Michal Korhel in Voerde, Germany on 1 February 2025.

64 E. g. Interview 14 or Interview 12.

65 For more information on see e. g. PANAGIOTIDIS, Jannis. “Aussiedler/Spätaussiedler”. In BART-ELS, Inken et al. (eds.) *Umkämpfte Begriffe der Migration: Ein Inventar*. Bielefeld : Transcript Verlag, 2023, pp. 61–74. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839457122-004>

66 HAHN – HAHN 2010, pp. 78–79.

67 KOSSERT 2008, p. 12.

68 Interview 14.

69 Interview 12.

70 Interview 12.

For children, this situation was deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, they remembered hunger, cold, and a persistent sense of otherness; on the other, they recalled new experiences like attending school, forming friendships, and meeting kind neighbours or teachers who helped them integrate. These tensions between rejection and acceptance shaped their adolescence and sense of belonging in their new homeland. Their stories link individual experience with the broader collective memory of the Federal Republic, reflecting both the hardship and exclusion of the early post-war years and the gradual process of settling into a society that, over time, became their second home.

The memories of German children from Handlová intersect with the dominant West German narrative of expulsion while simultaneously challenging and expanding it. As in the broader post-war discourse, their accounts emphasize forced departure, the separation of families, suffering, and the enduring loss of *Heimat*. Yet, their recollections also reveal the selective nature of memory, that what children remember most vividly are not necessarily politically or historically significant events, but emotionally charged moments of their own experience. Alongside fear, hunger, and uncertainty, their recollections contain scenes of play and adaptation, suggesting that children's memories blur the boundaries between trauma and everyday life, and thus complicate the moral clarity of the expellee discourse.

At the same time, the experiences of the Handlová Germans diverge from the standard West German narrative in significant ways. Their displacement often unfolded in multiple stages before eventual resettlement in the FRG, forming a pattern of "double expulsion." Integration into post-war West German society was further shaped by cultural distinctiveness and linguistic hybridity. Many remembered feeling like outsiders, labeled as *Flüchtlinge* or *Zugereiste*, with their dialects and accents clearly marking them as different. These testimonies expose the limits of post-war solidarity and challenge the binary categories of "Germans" and "Slavs." In this sense, the children's memories from Handlová both reaffirm and unsettle the post-war narrative of expulsion, portraying it as a prolonged, culturally layered, and deeply personal process that transcended the confines of a single collective identity.

Children of Slovak settlers and the memory of post-war resettlement

After the end of the Second World War, the territory of Slovakia underwent profound ethno-demographic changes shaped by both international and domestic frameworks. On the one hand, the agreements of the Yalta Conference and the Potsdam Conference legitimized population transfers across Central and Eastern Europe, on the other, the *Košický vládný program* (Košice Government Program), defined the post-war reconstruction of Czechoslovakia as a nation-state of Czechs and Slovaks.⁷¹ Alongside the forced expulsion of the German-speaking population, the displacement of inhabitants of Hun-

71 ŠMIGEL, Michal – KMEŤ, Miroslav. Výmeny obyvateľstva v strednej a východnej Európe v kontexte 2. svetovej vojny (na pozadí percepcie a názorov). In SÁPOSOVÁ – ŠUTAJ 2010, pp. 50–65.

garian nationality represented a particularly significant process. In contrast to the Czech lands, where Germans formed the principal minority, Hungarians in Slovakia—shaped by the region's historical integration into the Hungarian half of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy—constituted the dominant national minority which became the primary target of post-war policies.⁷² This was carried out primarily through a population exchange between Czechoslovakia and Hungary in the years 1946–1948.⁷³ At the same time, part of the Hungarian population was subjected to compulsory relocation to the Czech lands to perform mandatory labour there.⁷⁴ These measures possessed not only a political aspect, but also a nation-integrating dimension. The objective was to eliminate the remnants of Hungarian dominance in the southern regions of Slovakia and to strengthen the Czechoslovak state character of the border areas.⁷⁵

Closely related to these processes was the state-organized re-emigration of Slovaks from abroad, particularly from Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia. These settlers were placed mainly in the southern districts of Slovakia, which had become sparsely populated following the departure of part of the Hungarian minority. The authorities aimed at stabilizing the population and reinforcing the Slovak ethnic element in strategically important regions. The post-war resettlement measures thus contributed to the gradual homogenization of Slovakia's population and laid the groundwork for subsequent political and social development under the emerging socialist regime.⁷⁶

A specific phenomenon within the broader resettlement policies implemented in Czechoslovakia was the process of post-war settlement in Handlová. The distinctive position of this town stemmed from its economic importance, particularly due to the local coal mining industry.⁷⁷ Following the evacuation and forced resettlement of the German population in 1944–1945,⁷⁸ Handlová experienced a marked population decline, from a pre-war level of approximately 10 500 inhabitants to only about 4 500 by October 1945. During the following two years, however, as a result of targeted immigration efforts, the number of inhabitants came to exceed pre-war figures.⁷⁹ The primary motivation behind this process was the need to restore the labour force for the mining industry and to stabilize the local economy.⁸⁰

A substantial component of the new population consisted of settlers originating from various parts of Slovakia and from abroad. Within the framework of internal colonization, Slovak farmers from more densely populated regions were resettled in Handlová to ensure the continuity of agricultural production, while simultaneously replacing displaced Germans.⁸¹ An even larger wave of

72 DUDEKOVÁ, Gabriela. Etnické stereotypy v období nacionalizmu: problémy a výzvy (Úvod). In *Forum Historiae*, 2012, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 1–14.

73 ŠUTAJ, Štefan. Výmena obyvateľstva medzi Československom a Maďarskom – migrácie a Slovensko – výskum a výsledky. In SÁPOSOVÁ – ŠUTAJ 2010, pp. 7–17.

74 ŠUTAJ, Štefan. *Nútené presídlenie Maďarov do Čiech*. Prešov : Universum, 2005.

75 ŠUTAJ 2010, pp. 11–12.

76 ŠUTAJ 2010, pp. 11–12.

77 KORHEL 2024, p. 746.

78 The ones that were to be forcibly resettled were already in camps.

79 In December 1947 it reached 11 650. KORHEL 2024, p. 747.

80 KORHEL 2024, p. 748.

81 KORHEL 2024, p. 748.

settlement, however, came from immigrants from abroad (predominantly from Hungary, Belgium and France). Settlers with prior experience in mining were particularly sought after, corresponding to the structure of the local industry. The post-war development of Handlová was also shaped by the presence of so-called optants from Subcarpathian Ruthenia and refugees from the Upper Spiš and Orava regions (on the border between Slovakia and Poland), who arrived in Slovakia as a result of post-war territorial changes.⁸²

Despite the state's official efforts to create a nationally homogeneous environment, post-war Handlová was characterized by a high degree of social and cultural diversity. The new inhabitants came from varied cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds, which shaped the town's distinctive social reality. Tensions between different groups of settlers as well as the continued presence of segments of the German population made Handlová a unique space where economic interests, national policy, and the developments of social integration all came together. In this sense, Handlová became a model example of post-war settlement processes in Central Europe, reflecting not only the endeavour to restore the economy, but also the broader attempt to redefine the national space of Czechoslovakia.⁸³

The resettlement policy within post-war Czechoslovakia was not uniform, but reflected the differing historical, political, and ethnic contexts of the two parts of the republic. While in the Czech lands, the expulsion and forced displacement of the German population after 1945 were understood as both a security measure and a form of historical correction,⁸⁴ in the Slovak context, the principal emphasis was placed on the return of ethnic Slovaks from abroad.⁸⁵ The process was accompanied by extensive propaganda efforts serving, above all, nation-building purposes. The messaging was highly ideological in nature, employing a combination of emotional appeals, rational arguments, and manipulative elements, while deliberately influencing the attitudes and decisions of Slovaks living outside the country.⁸⁶

The aim was to target primarily the Slovak community in Hungary, although similar strategies were also applied among Slovaks in Romania.⁸⁷ The central motif of this campaign was the call to "return home," presented as a unique opportunity to preserve Slovak identity. Slovaks living abroad were warned of the risks of continued denationalization and assimilation. In this respect, the propaganda appealed to their "national conscience" and the need to maintain their language, culture, and traditions. At the same time, authorities emphasized the readiness and willingness of the Czechoslovak population to

82 KORHEL 2024, pp. 749–753.

83 KORHEL 2024, pp. 764–765.

84 WIEDEMANN 2007, pp. 41, 44 and 107.

85 The presence of Slovak populations abroad before their postwar resettlement can be attributed to overlapping factors, including economic migration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, organized settlement within the Kingdom of Hungary, and the fluidity of Central European borders, whereby changes in state sovereignty often preceded or substituted for the physical movement of populations. SÁPOSOVÁ – ŠUTAJ 2010.

86 HELDÁKOVÁ 2020, p. 159.

87 Interview 2, conducted by Michal Korhel in Handlová, Slovakia on 13 November 2022.

welcome the repatriates, a message expressed visually in propaganda materials (posters, postcards, and public speeches) through the depiction of a warm, almost familial reception. Alongside the emotional narrative, migration was also portrayed as a rational economic decision. Czechoslovakia was presented as a stable, victorious, and economically prosperous state offering its citizens employment opportunities, fair wages, and social security.⁸⁸

In a similar vein, contemporary propaganda also focused on the resettlement of Handlová. This is evident in numerous articles published in the weekly *Sloboda*, the official publication of the Antifascist Front of Slavs in Hungary. Several of these articles cited letters from settlers already residing in Handlová describing their material well-being, what they were able to afford from their monthly wages,⁸⁹ the furnished houses they received,⁹⁰ and the generous food rations compared to the rest of the population.⁹¹ To address any doubts regarding the ethnic character of the municipality, an article entitled *Ako dnes žije slovenská Handlová* (How Slovak Handlová Lives Today) assured readers that:

[...] the Germans did not want to continue living in Slovakia once they could no longer be the highest authorities and rulers giving orders to the Slovaks. And so, just as they left Slovakia together with the defeated German army, they also departed from Handlová. We do not regret their departure; we want to live solely among Slovaks.⁹²

In this way, the article reinterprets the expulsion of the German population as a voluntary and justified departure, presenting ethnic homogenization as both natural and desirable, and thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of the emerging post-war order.

The impact of this propaganda on Slovak families living abroad is revealed through the memories of narrators who arrived in Handlová after the war as children. In their recollections, they refer to a variety of motivations that led their families to resettle. Economic factors played a particularly significant role, especially the prospect of stable employment in mining and agriculture. Many men who had previously worked in the mines in Hungary (near the villages of Dorog, Sárísáp, Dág, or Kesztlöc for example) chose Handlová because it offered the promise of secure jobs, adequate wages, and social benefits, including housing.⁹³ Families of Slovak farmers from Romania, on the other hand, expected that they would be able to continue their agricultural work in Slovakia and be granted land as compensation for the property they had been forced to leave behind.⁹⁴ This economic framework was often accompanied by a sense of social security and the conviction that Czechoslovakia would provide better living conditions than countries that found themselves in politically and economically unstable situations after the war.⁹⁵

88 HELDÁKOVÁ 2020, pp. 90, 95, 119–120, 146.

89 M. V. Presídlenie sa začína. In *Sloboda*, 12 June 1946, p. 3.

90 Prvé pozdravy z novej vlasti. In *Sloboda*, 2 March 1946, p. 3; CŠ. Zo zápisníka. In *Sloboda*, 13 April 1946, p. 4.

91 R. J. Ako dnes žije slovenská Handlová. In *Sloboda*, 19 June 1946, p. 3.

92 R. J. 1946, p. 3.

93 Interview 4, conducted by Michal Korhel in Handlová, Slovakia on 7 December 2022; Interview 5.

94 E. g. Interview 2.

95 Interview 2; Interview 4.

What emerges from the narrators' accounts is a strong sense of Slovak national identity and how the accompanying feeling of a "return home" played an important role in their families' decisions to resettle. Despite having lived abroad for decades, many families had preserved the Slovak language, traditions, and a conscious awareness of their cultural belonging. For them, resettlement in Slovakia was perceived as a symbolic culmination of national self-awareness and the fulfilment of a long-deferred, generational aspiration to "return to the homeland."⁹⁶ This emotional aspect was further reinforced by official state propaganda and recruitment slogans calling upon Slovaks abroad to return "home." The interviews also contain explicit references to original Slovak family roots, which anchored this sense of belonging in familial memory.⁹⁷

No less significant among the reasons for leaving their original homes outside the borders of Slovakia, as recalled by the narrators from Handlová, were fear and political pressure. Although the resettlement was officially presented as voluntary, the decisions of individual families were often shaped by concerns about potential future reprisals, violence, or forced expulsions. Among Slovaks in Hungary, rumours circulated that those who did not register for resettlement would later be expelled by force and without the right to transfer their property. One of the narrators recalled, "I would put it this way, we did not leave voluntarily. They [the authorities] intimidated people, saying that if they did not go, things would be very different."⁹⁸ Another narrator clarified, "They frightened us by saying that otherwise we would end up leaving with nothing but backpacks."⁹⁹

The settlers' memories also recount instances of illegal border crossings accompanied by fears of violence following the entry of Soviet troops, and of men being taken to labour camps.¹⁰⁰ According to the narrators, local authorities likewise played an important role in promoting "voluntary" resettlement, thereby exerting additional social and administrative pressure on Slovak communities living abroad.¹⁰¹

Similar to the recollections of German children leaving Handlová, the memories of Slovak children arriving in the town highlight the journey itself as a formative experience. Their accounts vary according to the mode of arrival, whether through officially organized resettlement or illegal border crossings. Most families travelled by train, often in freight or cattle wagons. Some narrators recall sharing a wagon with their furniture,¹⁰² while others describe livestock and belongings being transported separately.¹⁰³ The route and duration depended on the place of departure. For some, the journey lasted several days or a week, for others, even years. This was the case of Slovaks from Romania, who were initially relocated by the authorities to the Czech borderlands in 1949, they later moved to Moravia and arrived in Handlová only in 1953.¹⁰⁴

96 Interview 1, conducted by Michal Korhel in Handlová, Slovakia on 13 August 2022; Interview 2; Interview 4.

97 Interview 4; Interview 6, conducted by Michal Korhel in Handlová, Slovakia on 11 December 2022.

98 Interview 6.

99 Interview 5.

100 Interview 1.

101 Interview 6.

102 Interview 6.

103 Interview 5.

104 Interview 2.

Although families were not separated, the journey to Handlová, as was the case with transports to Germany, was both emotionally and physically demanding. Older generations perceived it as a time of hardship and sorrow, while children experienced it more as an adventure.¹⁰⁵ Yet there are also negative emotions in their narratives, linked mostly to the arrival itself. The images presented abroad of Slovakia had little in common with reality. Some settlers reportedly refused to leave the train, and several children recall their mothers crying after arrival, as was the case of the narrator from the beginning of this article, whose mother could not come to terms with reality in Handlová.¹⁰⁶ Many parents were shocked and could not imagine where they had come to. One mother was so distraught she “grabbed her head” and insisted she would not stay, demanding they be taken back to Hungary, finding the landscape and climate utterly alien.¹⁰⁷

The allocation of housing to incoming families represents a particularly revealing moment in this process of spatial transformation. Settlers did not enter an empty landscape but moved into dwellings shaped by the lives of previous inhabitants. Although the narrators do not always elaborate on the material remains they encountered, their accounts of assigned apartments, cramped interiors, or unfamiliar domestic arrangements point to a subtle confrontation with an inherited environment. In this sense, the act of “settling” can be understood as a process of dwelling that gradually transforms space into place through everyday practices.¹⁰⁸ At the same time, the fact that people rarely talk about the German history of these homes may itself be meaningful. It may show, as Edensor suggests, that signs of the past are not equally visible in the places where people live.¹⁰⁹ The former presence of German inhabitants persisted not necessarily through explicit remembrance, but through the materiality of space, which settlers adapted, normalized, and incorporated into their own lives.

The social reality of Handlová also failed to match expectations. The experience of returnees sharply contrasted with the idealized image they had been promised. Instead, it was marked by pressure, social tension, and disappointment with the living conditions.¹¹⁰ A contemporary article in the weekly *Sloboda* featured a dialogue with a newly arrived schoolgirl from Hungary who struggled to speak Slovak but was warmly welcomed by her classmates, “Your teacher is already proud of you. [...] You are happy to be truly at home.”¹¹¹ The narrators, however, recall no such joy. On the contrary, some felt socially excluded and stigmatized as “repatriates” because of their perceived foreign origin.¹¹²

Within these accounts, a clear contrast emerges between the uncertainty of parents and the children’s spontaneous ability to adapt. Children quick-

105 E. g. Interview 2.

106 Interview 5.

107 Interview 6.

108 CRESSWELL, Tim. *Place: A Short Introduction*. Oxford : Blackwell, 2004, pp. 8–10 and INGOLD 2000, pp. 185–186.

109 EDENSOR 2005, *Industrial Ruins*, pp. 139–145.

110 KORHEL 2024, pp. 753–760.

111 SARVAŠ, Andrej. Medzi prinavrátеныmi. In *Sloboda*, 3 May 1946, p. 3.

112 Interview 3, conducted by Michal Korhel in Handlová, Slovakia on 30 November 2022; Interview 4; Interview 5.

ly learned the language and social norms of their new environment, recalling school life, play with peers or miners' celebrations. In their memories, Handlová became a place of a "second childhood," where an initially foreign setting gradually turned into home. At the same time, their narratives preserve the image of the "old home," a nostalgically idealized place beyond Slovakia that remained part of family memory and intergenerational storytelling.¹¹³

The distinctiveness of these childhood memories lies in their non-ideological character. Unlike contemporary propaganda, which framed resettlement as a nation-building act and a triumphant "return home," children's narratives reveal the everyday realities of displacement, stripped of any political meaning. Their focus is not the nation, but family, school, and play, which were the core spheres through which new identities were formed. These recollections represent a kind of "silent memory"¹¹⁴ of post-war migration, a memory neither heroic nor ideological, but authentic, sensory, and deeply personal. They illuminate how the resettlement process was lived and remembered, and how in children's minds, the idea of Slovakia as a "new yet one's own" homeland gradually took shape.

Comparing Children's Memories: Between Departure and Arrival, Loss and Beginning

The memories of the German and Slovak children of Handlová represent two interconnected yet experientially distinct perspectives on a single historical process of migration. On one side were the children expelled from the town, for whom departure symbolized the loss of home, security, and a world shaped over generations. On the other were the children arriving to those same streets and houses, carrying expectations of a new life but often accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and estrangement. What unites both groups is the specifically childlike perspective; sensory, fragmented, and emotional. Through the prism of children's memories, grand historical events intersect with everyday life, family, and immediate experience. Placing these two sets of narratives side by side reveals both resonance and dissonance. Moreover, it allows us to grasp how migration was simultaneously a process of dispossession and of reconfiguration, be it emotional, spatial, and cultural.

The similarities between these two sets of memories are most evident in the realm of bodily and emotional experience. For both German and Slovak children, the journey constituted the central moment of their migration experience. In both cases, narratives contain depictions of train transports, overcrowded wagons, and an unknown destination. The journey represented a liminal space

113 E. g. Interview 5; Interview 6.

114 The concept of "silent memory" refers to traumatic recollections that resist verbalization and integration into a conscious narrative. Its theoretical foundations are rooted in trauma studies, drawing specifically on Cathy Caruth's work on the "unclaimed" and literal nature of traumatic recall, which bypasses immediate understanding (CARUTH, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), and Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out"—the silent, repetitive reliving of trauma—and "working through"—the process of translating that silence into a representable history (LACAPRA, Dominick. *History and Memory after Auschwitz*. Ithaca; New York : Cornell University Press, 1998).

between the “old” and the “new” world, where fear mingled with curiosity and tension with anticipation. The motif of the parents’ physical and psychological exhaustion is equally shared, including emotions the children perceived and internalized, like tears, silence, and the chaos of departure and arrival. At the same time, both types of accounts reveal a child’s ability to adapt and to find meaning in play or in forming new social relationships, which lightened the weight of the situations experienced by adults.

The differences between German and Slovak memories, however, are fundamental in their moral framework and in how experience is interpreted. For the German children, the dominant motif is loss; of home, possessions, relatives, and an identity tied to a space that became inaccessible after 1945. Their narratives take on a tone of retrospective mourning, in which images of childhood (the house, the garden, play, animals) transform into symbols of an irretrievable past. Slovak children, in contrast, remember Handlová as a place of uncertainty but also of tangible beginnings. While they recall an unfamiliar environment and social distance, their memories gradually shift from feelings of alienation toward the creation of a new home.

Whereas the German children’s recollections bear clear features of the collective narrative of the “loss of homeland,” the Slovak narratives are intertwined with the discourse of “returning home.” This distinction is not only emotional, but also ideological. Although the German children were often unaware of the broader political context in which their displacement occurred, their retrospective accounts reproduce key elements of the post-war expellee discourse in which forced migration is framed as an experience of unjust victimhood, marked by sudden rupture, loss, and the moral innocence of those affected. This perspective is not necessarily the result of conscious interpretation, but reflects the influence of family narratives and the wider communicative memory in which these experiences were later embedded. In contrast, the recollections of Slovak children, while likewise grounded in everyday experience, resonate with the official post-war rhetoric of “rebuilding” and “return,” in which migration was presented as both a national duty and an opportunity for renewal. Even where narrators recall disappointment, hardship, or uncertainty, their accounts often retain traces of this interpretative framework, particularly in the emphasis on adaptation, settlement, and the gradual normalization of life in a new environment. Yet in their individual recollections, this motif becomes a personal story of adaptation and integration.

Beyond emotional and narrative differences, the memories of German and Slovak children also reflect fundamentally distinct relationships to space. For German children, Handlová appears as a closed and inaccessible place, transformed in memory into a lost homeland whose material reality can no longer be experienced. Their recollections fix the town in images of departure, imbuing houses, streets, and landscapes with the status of an irretrievable past. For Slovak children, the same environment initially appears as unfamiliar and often disappointing, yet gradually becomes appropriated through the everyday practices of living, schooling, and social interaction. In this sense, Handlová

was not simply a shared location but a differently encoded space; a site of loss for some and of gradual domestication for others. As Tuan suggests, such differences reflect the ways in which place is constituted through experience and attachment rather than through physical location alone.¹¹⁵ The transformation of the town thus involved not only the movement of populations, but also a shift in the meanings attached to its material fabric, as spaces once embedded in one cultural context were reinterpreted within another. The interconnection of children's memories reflects the broader post-war history of Central Europe, a history of displacement and replacement, but also of gradual domestication and the search for some equilibrium between past and present.

Conclusion

The juxtaposition of these childhood recollections brings us to a broader insight. When viewed through the prism of childhood, migration history becomes less about nations and more about human continuities across rupture. The memories of German and Slovak children of post-war Handlová reveal that the history of migration cannot be understood merely as the movement of populations, but above all as a process of profound transformation of individual and collective identities.

Through childhood narratives, where personal experience intertwines with broader social and ideological frameworks, Handlová emerges as a space in which two contrasting yet interconnected mnemonic horizons converged: the memory of loss and the memory of beginning. In this sense, the town was not only the site of physical relocation, but also a symbolic terrain upon which a new social and cultural structure was formed. The post-war replacement of populations entailed a transformation of social structures, and also of the meanings attached to space. The houses, streets, and workplaces left behind by German inhabitants became the settings of new lives, yet they also constituted a latent layer of historical presence that shaped, even if implicitly, the experiences of the incoming settlers. In this sense, the town functioned as a site of cultural re-signification, where the material remnants of one community were incorporated into the lived realities of another. By linking individual recollections to these spatial processes, the present study highlights how memory and belonging are not only narrated, but also grounded in the material environment. Handlová can thus be understood as a palimpsest of post-war Central Europe, in which loss and beginning are inscribed into the same landscape, producing a shared yet asymmetrically experienced history.

For German children, Handlová represented primarily a point of departure, a lost home transformed in memory into an idealized past. Their recollections offer unique insights into migration processes unfolding within the wider context of Central Europe's ethnic and political reconfigurations. These testimonies trace the multiple stages of displacement, from wartime evacuations organized by German authorities, through internment in camps, to the final

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deportations of 1946 and subsequent migration to West Germany in the 1960s. While the memories share recurring motifs of suffering, hunger, cold, and family separation, they also reveal children's capacity for adaptation, play, and the creation of new social ties even under extreme conditions. Unlike the dominant West German discourse of expulsion, which situated the Germans as innocent victims of historical injustice, the memories of children from Handlová capture the ambivalent dimensions of this process, such as the use of coercion by German authorities themselves, multiple displacements, and later stigmatization as refugees in their new environments. Their narratives thus expand the framework of the traditional expulsion discourse. Instead of a one-dimensional trauma, their stories reveal a complex, multi-layered, and culturally hybrid process in which the loss of home intersects with gradual domestication and the search for identity in post-war Europe.

The memories of Slovak children who arrived in Handlová with their families after the Second World War capture a distinct facet of post-war resettlement in Slovakia. Against the backdrop of sweeping ethno-demographic transformations, population exchanges with Hungary, and the re-emigration of Slovaks from the Balkans and Western Europe, Handlová became a model case of economic reconstruction and national homogenization. The propaganda that accompanied these relocations appealed to a national sentiment and economic rationality, cultivating the image of a "return home." Yet when viewed through the eyes of children, the carefully constructed narrative of "return" begins to unravel. Their recollections expose the distance between state rhetoric and lived experience, revealing how resettlement was felt rather than prescribed. The ideological frame dissolves, as the settlers' arrival was often marked by shock, uncertainty, and a sense of strangeness. While parents experienced disappointment and fear, children adapted more readily, forming social bonds, learning the local language, and integrating into their new surroundings. Their accounts reveal the everyday reality of resettlement devoid of heroism and national mythology, centred instead on school, play, and family as the core spaces of belonging. These recollections constitute a "silent memory" of post-war migration, transforming state-directed settlement into a deeply personal story of finding home and identity in a land that was new yet gradually became one's own.

The comparison of German and Slovak memories uncovers an asymmetrical but mutually intertwined structure of remembrance. Both groups grew up within different political systems and mnemonic cultures; the West German discourse of expulsion and the Czechoslovak discourse of returning home. Nevertheless, their childhood narratives share a similar emotional logic; the search for meaning in a disrupted world, the need to comprehend the past through family memory, and the gradual reconstruction of belonging. Rather than expressing antagonism, these memories reveal parallel trajectories.

From this perspective, Handlová becomes a microcosm through which the post-war history of Central Europe can be read "from below." The children's recollections reflect not only the transformation of a single town, but also the

intertwined processes of forced expulsion, state-organized resettlement, and social reordering that reshaped Central Europe after 1945, linking experiences of loss, displacement, and adaptation across newly configured national spaces. Here, childhood memory serves as a distinctive historical source, not merely a supplement to “grand history,” but an autonomous mode of reflection that connects body, emotion, and time. In this sense, the memories of Handlová speak not only of the past, but also of the enduring need to interpret migration history as shared, rather than an exclusively national experience.

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