Willkommen im Museum
Making and Unmaking Refugees in the Multaka Project

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Outside the German Historical Museum, I met up with Sawsan,[1] a 25-year-old Syrian who had lived for almost two years in Berlin. Since late 2015 Sawsan had been part of the Multaka team, which offered Arabic-language tours in four museums in central Berlin, the German Historical Museum being one of them. Sawsan explained why she had chosen to work as a guide in this museum. For her, Multaka aims to support 'refugees and newcomers' and help them integrate into German society. The educational museum tours are 'about building this cultural bridge between the refugees and the country they are moving into'. She believes that the German Historical Museum can help them feel a sense of belonging:

> [F]or example, when the people see what Germany has been through after the Second World War, they are going to feel themselves less foreign....So they're not going to feel excluded from this community, because this community has suffered exactly the same as what they are suffering right now.

Sawan was referring to a museum installation in which two films showing aerial views and close-ups of bombed-out German cities at the end of the Second World War play on a continuous loop.

In this chapter, I show how the Multaka project has made museums in Berlin relevant for Arabic speakers, and how this has helped challenge those national institutions as places focusing exclusively on German history and memory and refashion them into places of migration, relatable to people with contemporary transnational lives. I will unpack the ways in which Multaka makes and unmakes differences, project participants refuse or accept the 'refugee' label, and the museums' objects and installations come to represent not only the German past but also the Arab present. I argue that Multaka makes museums into 'contact zones' (Clifford 1997) by inviting marginalised people to provide their own perspectives and expert knowledge and by showing that German and Arabic speakers share material cultures and memories. James Clifford applies the notion of contact zones to museums that work with subaltern groups and use objects to provide an opening for conversation across differences. In contact zones, people from the periph-

ery join those from the centre, and the '*collection* becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral *relationship*' (ibid.: 192, original italics) in which social ties are the critical outcome.

Multaka was founded in late 2015 to train Arabic-speaking migrants as guides at four large, centrally-located museums in Berlin: the German Historical Museum, the Bode Museum, the Museum of the Ancient Near East and the Museum of Islamic Art (the latter two are situated within the Pergamon Museum). The project was a response to the 2015 'Summer of Migration', which saw the influx of migrants and refugees from the Middle East and Africa across the borders of Europe (Kasparek and Speer 2015). For Multaka's founders, museums are 'meeting points" or 'crossroads'—this is the translation of *multaka* from Arabic—bringing together museum objects and people. Amid the forced migration of the mid-2010s, the Multaka project was an expression of *Willkommenskultur*, part of an effort to welcome people forced to flee to Germany initiated by mainstream German society, including private individuals, public institutions and corporate companies (Karakayali 2019) and atone for Germany's past national crimes by protecting those fleeing persecution and war (Bock and Macdonald 2019). *Willkommenskultur* seeks to turn immigrants from social outsiders to active participants, ones who have rights and opportunities and who contribute to cultural diversity (Hamann and Karakayali 2016; Heckmann 2012). Below I show how Multaka gave individuals the chance to work in museums and reduce differences across languages, nationalities and pasts. After exploring the nuances of the term 'refugee', I discuss the guides' use of objects acquired from the home regions of Arabic-speaking migrants. The chapter ends with a section exploring how objects exhibited to represent Germany's past conflicts take on new meanings when linked to memories of people who have recently fled their homelands.

The founding of Multaka

The idea for a project in which guides offer tours in Arabic came from members of the Syrian Heritage Archive, a project affiliated with the Museum of Islamic Art, and was first presented to the museum's director in the late summer of 2015. The initial idea was to provide work for some of the many newcomers who approached the archive seeking employment. Museum staff had already been thinking about how to respond to the sharp rise in asylum seekers fleeing war in the Middle East and how to take action against growing Islamophobia. The museum's director embraced the idea of engaging Arabic speakers as guides in the museum. Shortly thereafter, he met with the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ), which agreed to fund the project. The director then approached the head of the Museum of the Ancient Near East. Like the Museum of Islamic Art, it also houses collections from the former Ottoman Empire, which includes present-day Syria and Iraq, where many migrants were from. Multaka was based on the idea that museums can serve as gathering places for diasporic communities, as hubs connecting the migration histories of objects with those of people (Basu 2011). The head of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Stiftung Preussicher Kulturbesitz), the foundation governing Berlin's state museums, urged the director of the Museum of Islamic Art to include the Bode Museum in the project because its Byzantine collection covers the Christian Middle East. The BMFSFJ funding came from the

federal program *Demokratie Leben*, a key part of the government's strategy for preventing extremism, Islamic radicalisation, hostility towards Muslims and Islam, antisemitism, antiziganism, and discrimination based on sexuality and gender (BMFSFJ 2016). A central element in the funding was a historical reckoning with National Socialism and the socialist regime of the German Democratic Republic. The importance of engaging with Germany's past national crimes led the project founders to invite the German Historical Museum to be its fourth institutional member.

Multaka was, then, realised as an endeavour across four museums, consisting of guided tours in Arabic. It was founded by the heads of the museums and placed outside the established educational programs at a remarkable speed. Two freelance project managers were hired, as were 19 Syrian and Iraqi guides. (Later that number was increased to 25.) Each guide was paid for the tours they gave. The guides varied with regard to age, education, professional experience, religious affiliation, residence status, reasons for coming to Germany and length of time spent outside their home countries. All had university degrees or were studying at a university in the city. The first tours in Arabic took place at the end of 2015; since then, Arabic-language tours have taken place twice a week in all four museums. Many other related events and workshops have occurred in English and German. I conducted an ethnographic study of the work inside and outside the museums between spring 2016 and spring 2017.

A diversity of 'refugees'

On 21 May 2016, the UNESCO World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, the German Historical Museum held an award ceremony for the initiative *Kultur öffnet Welten*, during which the Federal Commissioner for Culture and Media, Monika Grütters, awarded three projects for their work with 'refugees'. Multaka was one of ten projects nominated for an award. In her speech, Grütters stressed the crucial role of cultural institutions in representing Germany's openness towards the rest of the world and their social responsibility to integrate people fleeing crisis regions. She thanked the German Historical Museum for hosting the event, and for exhibiting a history that itself was shaped by migration. In awarding the final prize to Multaka, Grütters praised the director of the Museum of Islamic Art for initiating the project and lauded its use of refugees as tour guides. She herself had participated in a tour.

Multaka's official homepage states that it offers 'Refugees as Guides in Berlin's Museums',[2] and many media outlets, museums, and members of the team refer to Multaka as a project 'by, with and for refugees' (field note 4.4.2016). But this is, strictly speaking, inaccurate. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'refugees' have been defined under international law since the 1951 Refugee Convention, which outlines their basic rights and secure protection and grants them access to assistance from states and international organisations.[3] Most (though not all) of the Multaka guides do not have the official status as 'refugee'. Rather, they are students or have German work permits; one guide even had European citizenship. Multaka was granted funding for 'refugees', but the project participants were concerned with newcomers from Syria and Iraq more generally. Indeed, the emphasis on 'refugees' was not something that every-

one in the Multaka project agreed with. Below I take a closer look at the term's usage and implications.

From the café in the Bode Museum, one has a view down the grand staircase to the equestrian statue of the Great Elector Friedrich Wilhelm von Brandenburg (1620–1688). The Elector invited Jews and Huguenots to live under his jurisdiction, opening up Brandenburg and Berlin to religious refugees (Beuys 2012). I was meeting with Mahoor, a Multaka guide in the Bode Museum, who, before coming to Germany, worked with restoration in the Homs Museum in Syria. She is one of the founding members of Multaka. She also worked in the Syrian Heritage Archive and was present when they devised the idea for the project. After she showed me around the museum, we sat for a coffee in the café. One question was burning in my head. At a team meeting a while back, she had objected to the use of the term 'refugees' to describe tour attendees. I asked her to explain her concerns. 'Naming and labelling people', she replied, is not helpful. 'They are just normal people, they are newly coming here. They just came here recently because of a certain, you know, uncontrollable situation. They didn't choose it.' Indeed, she found the term problematic in the context not only of Multaka but of any of the many projects aimed at newcomers. 'Most of the time...it was kind of using them because of the media, everyone was like, you know...taking photos with refugees, labelling something with a refugee, it´s just benefiting from the situation in a way'. Mahoor was not denying that people want to do good; she just wanted the diversity of the newcomers to be acknowledged rather reducing them to their recent experience of fleeing their homeland.

Mahoor's concerns are similar to those of others in cultural education who have criticised institutions for not recognising the diverse identities of migrants and for reducing them to mere beneficiaries instead of enabling them as active participants (Mörsch 2016; Landkammer 2017; Lynch 2017). In this way, they have argued, cultural projects may risk amplifying inequalities by pre-defining refugees as a 'target group' and categorising them solely in terms of migration and flight. This logic tends to be especially pronounced in the language of project funding (Mörsch 2016).

In 1943, Hannah Arendt also objected to the use of the term 'refugee' to describe immigrants. 'In the first place, we don't like to be called "refugees"' (Arendt 1996: 110), she observed, arguing that insistence on the term disregards their efforts to belong and overcome violent pasts. Members of Multaka rarely use the term 'refugee' as a marker for self-identification, and, even though the funding of Multaka was earmarked for 'refugees', it did not preclude the involvement of people who fell outside that category. As one guide with whom I spoke put it, 'I'm not a refugee. I didn't flee'. She always wanted to move to Germany, where her sister had settled long before the war. Nevertheless, some guides, Mahoor among them, argued for preserving the term but using it in a wider sense: 'We´re all refugees. I have a different status, but I´m a refugee, I´m not in my home, so I´m a refugee.' Another guide explained that if one understands refugees as people who cannot return to their home country, he also counts as a refugee. This, he felt, was the definition of refugee that Multaka preferred.

A more expansive sense of who counts as a refugee is one way for the guides to escape the confines of the term. But they also want to demonstrate that their lived experiences of migration goes beyond legal status and so to reimagine the idea of the refugee in much the same way that they have sought to do with museums themselves.

Gearing the tours to refugees in this broader sense affects who participates. As an episode I observed shows, participants need not always be Arabic speakers. On a very hot day in late August of 2016, a crowd assembled in the Aleppo room of the Museum of Islamic Art for a tour. Within moments, the inadequacy of the museum's air conditioning became uncomfortably apparent. The guide had to simultaneously translate from Arabic into German for the group's German-speaking escorts but many in the group spoke neither Arabic nor German. I was told that they were part of a project in Brandenburg preparing refugees for the job market. Several in the group spoke Farsi, so one participant volunteered to translate. But she spoke English, a language in which the guide was not fluent, so a Syrian man offered to translate from Arabic into English. After they figured out who was doing the interpreting—from Arabic to English to Farsi—the tour could finally commence, and we could leave the unbearably hot Aleppo room. As I followed the group around in the museum, one man seemed especially inattentive and detached. I asked him if there was anything he found interesting on the tour. He shrugged and told me in broken English that he was from Pakistan and spoke only Urdu.

There is another recurrent category of visitors that I encountered on the tours: Arabic speakers who are not refugees but from countries like Israel, Egypt or Canada. They take part because they are Arabic native speakers and because the tours are for free. These different types of visitors are well known among Multaka organizers and guides, and they have prompted discussions about whether the program should be open for people with language skills other than Arabic, and whether Multaka should attract *all* Arabic speakers in Berlin, no matter their legal status. The composition of the participants made clear that interest in the project went well beyond its original target audience, suggesting that demand for Arabic-language information in museums was greater than previously assumed.

Old museums in new use

The Multaka guides have professional backgrounds in law, engineering, architecture and other areas. Although some are trained in archaeology or Islamic studies, few of them had much experience working in museums before joining the project. This was not seen as a disadvantage because the tours emphasise dialogic interpretation, in which guides focus less on providing art historical context for the objects than on acting as mediators between the objects and the visitors (Lielich-Wolf and Avenarius 2008). In the following I show how the museums in the Multaka project centre on objects and their entangled histories in times of transnational identity-making (Macdonald 2003).

The strategies used in museums to connect with participants vary from institution to institution, but they all seek to link objects to visitors' lived experience, and in this way facilitate their entry into German society. By granting Arabic-language access to the museums and by showing how cultures from the Middle East are represented and valued, the Multaka guides aims at helping the newcomers belong and feel included.

12.1 *Multaka tour in the Bode Museum. Photograph by Milena Schlösser. Reproduced courtesy of Museum für Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.*

While I was accompanying Mahnoor on a tour, she stopped in front of one of the museum's most popular attractions—a golden mosaic apse from Ravenna depicting a young Christ. She asked the visitors to relate the mosaic to a building in their home country or city. Some said that mosaics like that exist on numerous churches and villas in their town of Idlib, a place that flourished during the Byzantine Empire. Mahnoor pointed out the similarities to the Umayyad Mosque, the great mosque of Damascus, with its golden façade and nature ornaments. I asked her why it was important for her to connect the museum in Berlin with the previous experiences of the participants on her tours. 'I think it´s about creating a stronger way to connect to here, to the object itself and to the place' she told me. 'When they feel there is a connection, not only with the object itself, they have something similar, they have something they feel is like home'. Mahnoor uses the objects that are from the participants' home countries (or that are similar) to help them feel less foreign in Germany and offer them a way of belonging in Berlin.

Another Multaka guide I met is Farah, who works at the Museum of Islamic Art. An architect, she sees the museum as the material outcome of the meeting between Islam and the local communities in which Islam has come to play a central role. She believes that the exhibition of objects can show the diversity of the regions that the museum represents, a diversity that dates back to pre-Islamic times. In the museum, visitors can experience art from the Alhambra palace made of local Spanish cedar wood next to a niche from a Jewish home in Damascus. For her, the locality of the objects is crucial; she argues that many of the objects in the exhibition have little or no connection to Islam. Instead, Farah presents the objects not as objects of Islamic art, which is foreign to the lives of

many Muslims today, but as objects that, like them, have crossed borders on their journey to Berlin.

According to the anthropologist Talal Asad, to understand Islam in Europe we have to understand how Europe is constructed by Europeans in a way that misrepresents Muslims, who are 'included within and excluded from Europe at one and the same time' (Asad 2013: 11). Europe today is considered primarily Christian, and as such is defined, implicitly or explicitly, in opposition to Islam. Museums can mirror these broader societal representations. As the curator Mirjam Shatanawi argues, museums of Islamic Art tend to place 'the greatness of the Muslim world in the past' (Shatanawi 2012: 179) by emphasising their 'origins in (colonial) collecting practices of the 18th and 19th century' (ibid.: 178) and privileging objects made before 1800. This is the case for the permanent exhibition of the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin. To make the museum more interesting for contemporary newcomers, Farah and the other guides downplay its focus on art and instead emphasise the religious diversity of the communities and regions where Islam was the dominant religion. Farah argues that Islam is inextricably linked with migration—the Islamic calendar begins in the year that the prophet Muhammad migrated from Mecca to Medina. At the beginning of every tour, she asks visitors where they come from and lets their answers determine her choice of objects. When she has visitors from Iraq, she makes sure to talk about Samarra, as she knows that it will pique their interest. She'll say, 'Let´s go to Aleppo, or let´s go to Spain'. She tells visitors that they, like her, 'are immigrants'. She wants to drive home the message that 'it´s not only a good chance for Syrians to come here; it´s a good chance for Germany…Just as all these ideas migrated from one place to another…we did too.' The past movements of people, ideas, and skills across the Muslim world created the wealth of beautiful objects on display in the museum. For the Multaka project, the movement of people from the Middle East to Germany today stands to be no less enriching.

But understanding museums as contact zones assumes a centre and a periphery, an opposition between the places where objects are kept and the places where they are collected (Clifford 1997). And when people from areas where objects were once collected interact with collections, their interpretations can come into conflict with the official stance of museums.

On one tour I accompanied in the Museum of the Ancient Near East, Farah made her first stop in front of the Ishtar Gate. She usually starts here because she has to pass by the gate on the first floor to reach the Islamic art collection on the second floor of the Pergamon Museum's southern wing. The 14-meter-tall gate stood at the entrance to the ancient city of Babylon. Built in the 6th century BCE, it was excavated in the early 20th century by German archaeologists and later brought to Berlin. The excavation site is shown on a map next to the gate in the museum. Farah told me how some visitors react when they enter the museum: 'If they are from Iraq… first they are very happy, sometimes just to see the map. And then they ask how [the Ishtar Gate] ended up here…. And sometimes they ask very concrete questions such as; on whose authority was it acquired? You know, these types of questions, and it leads to big discussions'.

12.2 Multaka tour in the Museum of the Ancient Near East. Photograph by Wesam Muhammed. Reproduced courtesy of Museum für Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

According to the Multaka guides, issues of ownership are on the minds of many visitors. Farah stressed this point several times. She led me to the upstairs hall of the Museum of Islamic Art and gestured at the Mschatta Facade: 'When I say it's a gift, they start to laugh'. The idea that the facade, part of a 6th-century Sasanian palace, was a gift from the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire Abdul Hamid II to the German Kaiser Wilhelm II causes much amusement among the attendees of her tour. Evidently, their understanding of history diverges from the version told by the museum.

The participants and guides regard the objects as part of archaeology's long history of entanglement with Western colonial and neo-colonial interventions in the Middle East. The objects from the Ottoman Empire precipitate conversations about whether the museums have the right to keep them, how they came to acquire them, and where they originated. Moreover, many immigrants and refugees arrived in Germany with memories of the recent destruction of their heritage. They witnessed the detonation of the Baalshamin temple in Palmyra in 2015, amid other acts of destruction receiving global media attention (De Cesari 2015). Off the back of these experiences, they want to talk about the security situation in the Middle East and the illicit trade in antiquities that helps fund conflicts in the region. Even though the guides clearly state that the museums are not involved in current illegal activities, the visitors want them to acknowledge the consequences of past practices and want Western museums to engage with the dark elements of their history.

12.3 Multaka tour in the Museum of Islamic Art. Photograph by A. R. Laub. Reproduced courtesy of Museum für Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

Multidirectional memory

Relating the migration of objects to the migration of visitors and guides is one way that Multaka has made the museums meaningful to people from the Middle East. Another way is by identifying commonalities between German history and the experiences of tour participants. Multaka guides connect museum objects with their own stories and those of the visitors, with pasts shaped by migration and conflict, with memories of Syria and Iraq and visits to local mosques. The aim is to generate a kind of knowledge that is different from that produced by curators, something more personal and less reliant on expertise.

While meeting with Sawsan at the German Historical Museum, I saw an example of how this could work. She showed me two 19th-century paintings of ships caught in storms, which she uses to 'open a whole new level of discussion' in her tour groups:

> It always starts with the same joke: What do you think that is? What do you think is happening? And then they always, always answer the same way: *ha ha* Syrian refugees, *ha ha* refugees going through from Izmir…This is the pram, the small boat they use. And the funny thing is that the refugees are not from Syria or Iraq but from Germany.

For Sawsan and her tour groups, humour turns the traumatic lived experiences of refugees into a lens through which to understand the German past and to relate personal memories to German history.

12.4 Multaka tour in the German Historical Museum. Photograph by Milena Schlösser. Reproduced courtesy of Museum für Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

The sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (Halbwachs 1967) has argued that memory, because it recalls a lived past, is a collective endeavour that fosters belonging. Memory may be stored consciously or subconsciously, but its telling is only possible when the collective means to reconstruct it are at hand. For this reason, shared memory is a social act that builds collective solidarity. A cultural memory consisting of texts, images and rituals that are collectively maintained and shared creates a sense of belonging to a certain society or culture (Assmann 1988). Museums are places where cultural memory is made, preserved, and remade, not only over time but also across nationalities and geographical borders (Cesari and Rigney 2014). The task of Multaka's tours is to take shared memories and link them to museums and thus give the latter new relevance for broader publics. The guides acknowledge the importance of the national frameworks in which the museums exist, but they also recognise that many of the memories in the Multaka project arose in another framework altogether.

Museums and their collections are places where meaning is collectively constituted (Crane 2010) and belonging is shaped through shared recollection. As literary scholars Michael Rothberg and Yasemin Yildiz argue, '[M]igration is never a one-way process of integration: migrants have brought memories of their own—sometimes traumatic—national and transnational histories into German space…' (Rothberg and Yildiz 2011: 37). In this regard, Multaka encourages belonging through acts of memory: connecting to a 'German' history means actively engaging with a collective memory. Rothberg and Yildiz argue that performing memory is a way of creating belonging and widening the boundaries of collectives.

Sawsan stressed to me that Germany's history in the 1930s and 40s was particularly applicable to the current situation in Syria. 'The interesting thing', she observed, as we stood in front of a wall of photos and posters from the German elections of 1933,

> is that you can see armed soldiers holding pictures of Hindenburg and Hitler, which gives you an insight that maybe the elections weren´t as free as they were presented as. Because, of course, weapons are scary, yeah? And we suffered from that in Syria every time there was an election. We hadn´t had elections before but in the most recent election, actually the first presidential election, there were people, they were actually secret service people standing at each box, and they were actually looking at what people, at who people were voting for. So you don´t want to die, you´re going to pick Bashar al-Assad. Yeah? It´s just this idea of soldiers with pictures being present. Because it should be a democratic process, there shouldn´t be any soldiers or arms involved in the voting, which is really personal. I find this very interesting, and people say: 'Ahh just like us, just like us, just like us'. They always have the same comment: 'it´s just like us'. And this actually gives people a chance to understand the German community more, because the German community 50 or 80 years ago actually suffered from the same political repression that we suffered from, and they are actually feeling this connection, which makes them feel less foreign in the country.

Drawing on memories of the participants to make sense of photos taken in Germany in 1933 is a form of 'multidirectional memory', in which recollections of the past are 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative' (Rothberg 2014: 176). Rothberg argues that memory need not be understood as competitive—a zero-sum struggle between the histories and victimisations of different social groups. Memory, he maintains, is not exclusive to any particular group and cannot be claimed as such; rather, historical events can be used to articulate and give meaning to other events, past or present. In other words, we are shaped not only by our own lived past but also by how we connect our past with histories that we do not consider our own. This makes the public sphere into a discursive space where 'both the subjects and spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction' (Rothberg 2009: 5). But connecting memories across time and space without making them redundant is a difficult balancing act.

At the end of a tour in the German Historical Museum, I found myself in front of a series of aerial photographs showing the destroyed cities of Nuremberg and Dresden. Standing next to me was a tour participant. I asked him if the images give him hope that Syria could be rebuilt and one day become like Germany, an economically powerful country that people flee to and no longer from. The young man shrugged and said he found the idea encouraging, but believed there was little hope for Syria.

Conclusion

Multaka challenges the idea that the term refugees refer entirely to displaced persons and asylum seekers and that permanent exhibitions at national museums must repre-

sent an enduring national identity. The project guides make transnational connections by emphasising the similarities between the trajectories of the objects and the tour participants while pointing out the commonalities between the cultural heritage in the Middle East and that cherished in Berlin. For them, political history is multidirectional, capable of linking memories across time and space. Multaka aims at making Arabic-speaking newcomers in Germany feel welcome by removing the language barrier and making museums more accessible. The tours alert them to the similarities between the German past and the Syrian or Iraqi present, but they also point out the differences and the lessons that can be drawn from them. The connections between archaeological objects and current conflicts in the Middle East also make visitors aware of the museums' past. Of course, the interconnected perspective fostered by the tours, where the centre and the periphery merge, is not reflected in the museums' permanent exhibitions, which limits what the guides can do. Nevertheless, stressing shared ties to archaeological objects can decrease the sense of difference between Germans and new arrivals from Syria and Iraq and help them feel at home. Understanding the shared heritage can help newcomers feel that they too belong in Berlin.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   For the sake of privacy, all names have been changed by the author.
2   Multaka – Concept and Content. https://multaka.de/en/concept/ (accessed 5 August 2021).
3   UNHCR Viewpoint: 'Refugee' or 'migrant' – Which is right? https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/7/55df0e556/unhcr-viewpoint-refugee-migrant-right.html (accessed 5 August 2021).

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