

Myth making and the relics of life: Work in Progress for an Exhibition

By

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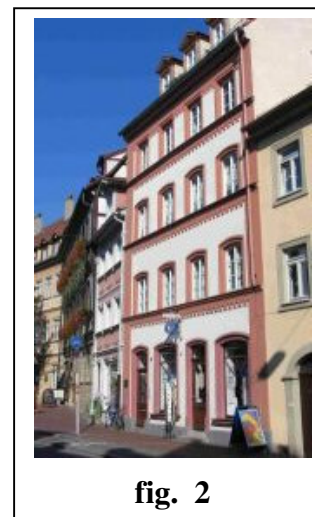
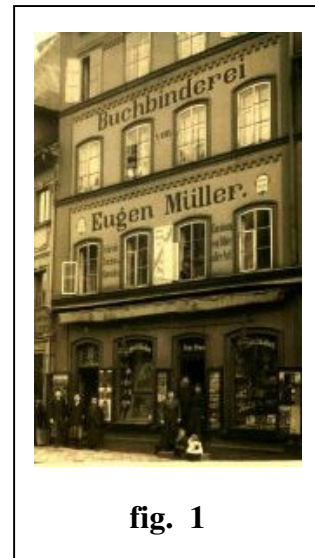
My presentation about the relics of life could begin: “Once upon a time there was living Eugen Müller”. But I don’t want to tell a fairy tale. I want to show, how reality goes by, complexity becomes destroyed, turns to relics of life – and than we are trying to reconstruct them, to give them back the context of their authenticity. I shall try to demonstrate it in seven steps:

1. Three ways of securing the evidence
2. Disturbances
3. Methodological Basis
4. Chaos and Order
5. Research
6. Relationships of Objects
7. Eugen Müller – a Legend?

1. Three ways of securing the evidence

The site:

About 200 metres from our faculty buildings at Bamberg University is situated Kapuzinerstrasse No.10, a recently restored 19th century building, containing both living and



commercial accommodation. Its ground floor is now occupied by a so called “Third World Shop”.

To those – familiar with local history – the initials EM wrought into the iron grill of the house door at the left side offer a clue as to its history. Inside the shop the shelves, dating from the period of historicism, give another indication of its past.



fig. 3

In the museum:

Nowadays in the store rooms of Bamberg’s municipal history museum are several steel cupboards labelled “Eugen Müller”. Each is crammed full of crates and boxes containing tools and paper. Even without the labels one could guess that those boxes once belonged to a bookbindery. A few larger items are also stored,

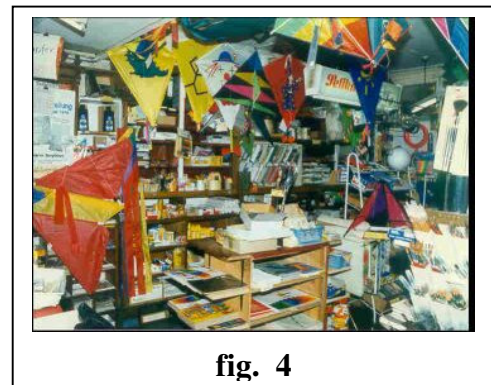


fig. 4

such as a board cutter, a workbench and a stool. Yet other typical items are missing - like a folding tool and a bookbinding frame. Other boxes contain labels for school exercise books, postcards and so on – the remains of a former stationers’ shop.

Social memory:

The name “Eugen Müller” is as common in Germany as “John Miller” is in English-speaking countries. But mention his name to older Bamberg people [- both male and female -] and their eyes will light up. For more than 100 years the name “Müller” stood for a small bookbindery and a stationers’ shop. That



fig. 5

both – bookbindery and shop – are of such extraordinary importance in the town’s social memory is mainly due to “Eugen Müller” (1868 – 1958).

But within the last ten years the inventory of the bookbindery and the shop have become a rather peculiar mixture, apparently thrown together at random.

2. Disturbances

Let's return to the past: In 1996 there was an outcry in Bamberg. It even reached me at my department – I was asked what could be done – yet another one of the once numerous specialist shops in Bamberg was to be closed – **the** Eugen Müller in Kapuzinerstraße 10. At the time “Eugen Müller” was a shop specialised in stationery and artists' utensils, and had been highly popular for generations. The property, having changed hands through inheritance, was to be renovated and re-used for other purposes.

The ground floor of the premises housed the shop and on the first floor of the building was a disused bookbindery, in which Eugen Müller and his son Franz Müller had worked and which was now used as a store room. The whole place was stuffed full, absolutely full of things.

Time was pressing, yet a lot of talking was done, even a bookbinding museum was suggested– in an emergency opening a museum always seems the obvious solution. Finally it was decided to present the inventory to the municipal history museum which had already taken over a number of disused inventories of the town's workshops. But there

comes the point when the store rooms are full and alternative storage has to be found. There was no time for any kind of stock-taking as the rooms had to be vacated. We - a member of my staff and me - spent a few hours documenting the state of the bookbindery as best we could.

And also a local group of people interested in the preservation of old Bamberg undertook the packing. Expert advice to take everything seemed neither imaginable nor practicable. So seemingly irrelevant items, such as a drawer full of pieces of paper – which nevertheless showed the mentality



fig. 6



fig. 7

and practical turn of mind of the craftsman who would even have a use for the smallest scrap of paper – were thrown away, along with the porcelain advertising figure from a well-known producer of writing utensils.

And more bad luck: because of a burst pipe in the warehouse serving as a provisional store room, water seeped into the plastic foil-covered pallets– disastrous for the paper. So the collection was depleted even further before it finally came into the care of the museum.

The original “stratification” suffered several disturbances: the secondary use of the bookbindery as a store room, changes in stock after the shop was taken over by Eugen Müller’s son Franz after his death and yet again by another person up to 1996. The provisional storage brought further serious disturbances, aggravated by the water damage.



fig. 8

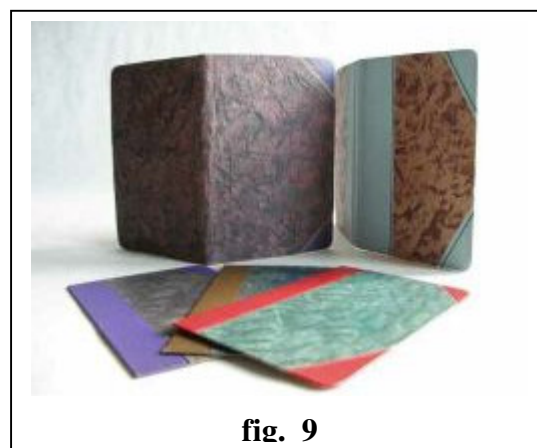


fig. 9

These are hardly ideal circumstances for a museum exhibition. But the fate of the present collection which can be reconstructed shows how things are: we have storage rooms full of objects which somehow have been saved and which we now have to get to “talk” to us because their original context has been lost.

3. Methodological Basis

At the department of European Ethnology we have two main ways of interpreting sources: historical methods for the past and empirical methods for the present.

The first source pool includes written evidence from the archives, pictorial records of all kinds and of course *realia*, objects of the material culture i.e. items of daily use and cult objects,



fig. 10

in so far as they are not included in group one, the written witnesses, or in group two, pictures of any kind. The material relics of life form the centre of a future exhibition and around them we have to reconstruct the context of their primary existence, to recreate their former relationship with each other and with the former customers, or at least to make it visible.

The second source pool – that of empirical methods – does not exist in any material form. Perhaps something ought to be said here about the term “oral history” as we understand it in our respective subject – but there is no time for that. In a short way, I group under this term all those oral records which - usually together with historical sources – contribute to put things back in their original context, to decoding them.

The methodological approach requires an awareness that the sources revealed by fieldwork would not exist without research – unlike the first source pool. This process forms the platform on which they are generated. Observation, oral and written questionnaires in all their methodological modulations – they all are possible means of reconstructing life in the past for which objects are the witnesses.

4. Chaos and Order

Our seminar started with a short report about the demise of the institution “Eugen Müller” at Kapuzinerstraße 10 and about the future fate of the inventory of the shop and the bookbindery. This was followed by a slide show of some of the pictures taken in 1996. The first impression of our students was that of absolute shock. Shop and bookbindery were in a totally chaotic state. Finding structure and order was an



fig. 11

important step towards finding a harmonious and practical concept for an exhibition.

This we have now subdivided into eight headings:

1. *From luxurious bindings to paperback* – books and cover
2. *Of sewing frames and fillets* – the bookbinding trade
3. *Between art and applied art* – Bamberg’s bookbinding industry
4. *The Kapuzinerstreet N° 10* – living and working
5. *Order in chaos* – the bookbindery

6. *Where pens met kites* – the stationer's shop
7. *The Müllers* – living for the shop
8. *Suppliers, customers and colleagues* – a network of relationship

5. Research

It's obvious that the research strategies we had chosen of were not aimed at producing quantitative results, but qualitative ones, an aim which could only be successfully achieved by combining historical and empirical research.

As usual with projects involving learning and teaching about research to the students, who are involved, not only the subject itself, but also the methods, are new.

Consultation and evaluation of specialist literature together with a combined study of objects, research in archives and fieldwork resulted in the present concept for the exhibition as follows:

- **Documenting and cataloguing**
 - of the relics of the bookbinding and the shop using electronic data processing
- **gaining general basic knowledge about**
 - the history of book covers
 - the history of the bookbinding
 - trade tools and work processes
- **exploiting historical sources of**
 - the history of bookbinding in 19th and 20th century Bamberg
 - the history of the Müller family
 - bookbinders in Bamberg
 - the history of Kapuzinerstraße 10
 - volume of orders for the bookbinding
 - Eugen Müller's status within the Bamberg bookbinding industry
- **Acquisition of specialist field study knowledge with regard to**
 - working processes of local bookbinders
 - the present situation of the bookbinding trade
 - evaluations and assessments by insiders
 - customers' reminiscences

6. The Languages of Objects

The central question of this symposium, “*Can Oral History Make Objects Speak*”, goes beyond the language of objects as they speak to us through their material, shape and function. It aims to extend their ability to testify, something which can only be done selectively on a pragmatic basis, or with symbolic inference, which attests them a representative function. In our case we have three levels of information, the one



of the owner of the premises nowadays, that of the craftsmen, working still in their bookbindings, and the social memory of the customers. Structured interviews, which had been based on a general guidelines questionnaire, proved useful when interviewing these experts. They outlined the areas of questioning, gave the young researchers – working in groups – the necessary self-confidence and yet remained open enough for flexible discussions, to be able to integrate anything unexpected. These meetings taught the students to evaluate correlation between actions, tools and products, and to pay attention to the mentality of their interview partners and to keep an open mind for glimpses into life experiences and opinions.

The owner of the property:

Only two things continue to link the building with its former owners: the division into living quarters and commercial use, which still exists, and the emblem ‘EM’ on the door to the living part of the house. After viewing the site and comparing it with the pictures taken in 1996 we attempted to include the present owner of the property in our project and to ask him about the most recent history of the building.

As a result we gained access to the renovated house by the new owner, to his knowledge and we get the opportunity to study plans and other sources, which consolidated the history of the house.

Colleagues:

To learn more about bookbinding we contacted working bookbindings as well as former colleagues in the business. They helped us to understand not only work processes and the handling of tools, but also to reconstruct the interior of the

bookbindery at Kapuzinerstreet No. 10 and to find out what individual items of its inventory were used for. (a) Neither the objects, out of context in the museum, nor their relation to the photos taken in 1996 could have intensified the insight into how the bookbindery was formerly run as was now possible.

The same applied to the numerous materials and their classification systems (b), the tools which were still showing signs of use, the work regulations and the dusty master craftsman's certificate all saved from the former inventory of the bookbindery. The

guided interviews told us about life and work [of bookbinders] as well as the changes affecting the trade through new mechanised bookbinderies doing large-scale orders such as the binding of account-books or the "invention" of the paperbacks etc. The same is also applied to the role of the stationer's shop, which completed the income, and replaced the bookbindery at least totally.



fig. 13

Customers:

We already had mentioned the reaction of former customers. Again and again they remembered the atmosphere of the shop, which was felt to have been unique. The shop itself must have been a veritable treasure trove.

This was impressively confirmed by the personal letters full of memories we received after putting an article in the paper. The evidence from these letters, together with the objects in the museum, illuminated the person of Eugen Müller and the institution of "Eugen Müller" in a way, which gave a more solid background to the development of myth, growing up in the town of Bamberg.

In excerpts are following the reminiscences of three former customers:



fig. 14

1. born 1944, female

‘I was born in 1944 and in 1950 started at the *Martinsschule*. My mother took me to buy my school things at “Eugen Müller.” ... It wasn’t a big shop – it had high shelves, dark panelling, a wooden floor, a massive desk, drawers full of exercise books, pens, paper etc. There was a smell of chalk, of wax and paper ... everything was sorted into seasons: Christmas wrapping paper, cards, streamers, confetti, small colourful paper balls – in spring there was coloured paper and paper to make Easter bunny pictures – in the autumn transparent paper for kites and lanterns for St. Martin. They stocked absolutely everything: string, glue, cardboard, paper bags, scissors, cut-out



fig. 15

models in so many varieties you don’t find nowadays ... pen holders and nibs, fountain pens for school, crayons, plasticine[®], pencils with and without erasers, ink- and paint boxes, brushes – E.M. stocked all. The teachers bought their “*Fleißbildchen*” there - little pictures given to school pupils for merit. Later, when Franz Müller and his wife took over the shop, the range became wider and more modern. I remained a faithful customer, taking my three children along. Herr F. Müller and his artistic wife were friendly, patient and always ready with good suggestions to advise and to serve their small but important customers and we were allowed to rummage through the boxes with craft books and read them. When Frau Hölzlein took over the shop in the 1980s the range changed again – but the wonderful shop interior stayed the same ... and of course the machines, the cutters and other things stationers and bookbinders need ...”

2. born 1935, female

“Eugen Müller”: thinking of Eugen Müller’s shop, when I walk past today, is almost a declaration of love when I think of the days gone by.

I was born in 1935 and after the war in 1945 I was ‘one of the first post-war pupils at the “*Englische Fräulein*” high school. Everybody was poor – there was no money – no materials– no books and so on .

Where could we get a sheet of paper, or paper for drawing for just a few *Pfennige*? Only at Eugen’s . He always had an open ear for our needs, he got things from his store at the back and showed them to us, we were allowed to touch everything, turn it over, look at it. Whenever we needed anything for our drawing lessons *Mater Michaelis* just told us to “go to Eugen Müller”.

When the grammar school (the present *Clavius grammar school*) reopened (it had been used as a military hospital) boys came to Eugen’s, too. Sometimes they just went in to see their “favourite”. Eugen knew that and just smiled.

... He was one of us. ... I remember wanting to buy a piece of green silk paper. He showed me silk paper in all colours. I was allowed to touch it and to look through all the sheets. But I only had enough money for one sheet. He looked at me and said: “Look, the yellow one is a bit damaged, I’ll give you that for free.” ... I thanked him profusely. He stroked my head and said; “That’s alright.” ... When his shop closed years ago I was very sad. Something was past that had been part of us. But every time I walk past the shop (we pass the shop) we talk about our experiences with E.M. and as long as we all talk about him and remember, he lives on.

3. born 1935, male

I was a pupil at a Bamberg grammar school, whose life was disrupted by the war, and I always took my bike to buy exercise books and other school things at Eugen Müller’s stationery shop. It was the best-known shop in Bamberg where after the fall of the Third Reich you could buy any exercise books and stationery.

... Once I went into Eugen Müller’s shop in Kapuzinerstrasse without much hope to buy an arithmetic exercise book, as I only had pre-1948 Reichsmark. When I opened my schoolbag to get out this worthless money, the grey-haired old man saw the two red apples I had in my bag and said: “Boy, keep that useless lot of paper. Just give me the apples, they are worth three exercise books to me.” In those hard post-war years food was much in demand for bartering, especially by townspeople.

I remember with pleasure the elderly gentleman Eugen Müller with his sense of humour and our frequent friendly conversations in his shop while he was working there.”

7. Eugen Müller – a legend?

Two generations of the Müller family lived and worked in the house at Kapuzinerstrasse 10: Eugen Müller was followed in the bookbindery by his son Ignaz Müller and in the shop by Franz Müller. It is Eugen Müller, that people still talk about mostly. His memory is engraved in their minds not just because of the name was formerly on the facade of the house or later above the door, on bills and on notepads. But also “Eugen Müller” is used like an institution, which includes also the time of Franz Müller in the shop. This shop with its wide range of goods was a local centre for children and adults alike and remained well after his death in 1958 until the present day –even

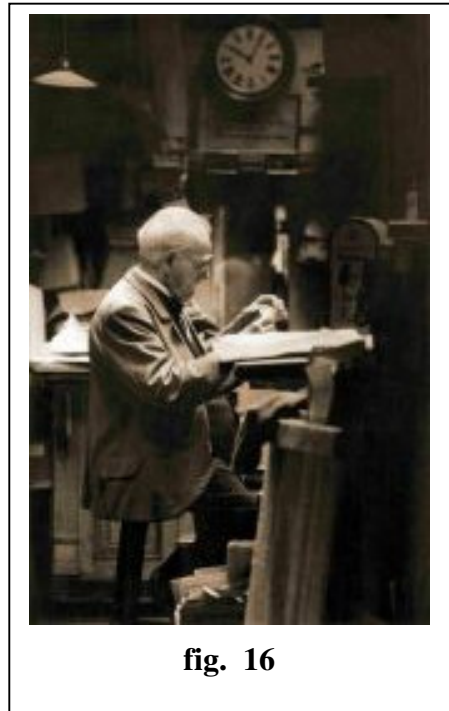


fig. 16

when it had lost its former importance as a bookbinding business –in the memories of the middle aged Bambergers “**the** Eugen Müller”. They don’t remember only their knowledge about the items to sell, they even seem to be interested more to tell the little things, which happened there. The even older people, who knew Eugen Müller and his wife personally, and whose memories bring them back to life, convey even more strongly something of the unique atmosphere of the shop, which seems to spread its aura to the bookbindery as well. Thus shows both inventories in a different light as they combine to support the legend “Eugen Müller” - and in return reflect on the objects as the relics of an extensive biography, recalling the context of everyday life.

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