

Red Cross Museums as Media of Historical Communication: An Interview with Rainer Schlösser, Spokesperson of the Association of the Red Cross Museums in Germany (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der deutschen Rotkreuz-Museen)

Sönke Kunkel

Junior Professor of North American History, Freie Universität Berlin; soenke.kunkel@fu-berlin.de

Abstract

An accomplished academic, collector, and long-time Red Cross volunteer, Professor Dr Rainer Schlösser is head of the Red Cross Museum of the Red Cross Chapter Fläming-Spreewald in Luckenwalde. He has directed the museum since 2000. Since 2006, he has also served as official spokesperson of the Association of the Red Cross Museums in Germany, a group connecting thirteen Red Cross museums across Germany. I met Rainer Schlösser in his office at the Red Cross Museum in Luckenwalde. After an extended and insightful tour through the museum we sat down to discuss his ideas and his work at the museum.¹

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Sönke Kunkel (SK): First of all, thank you for taking the time for this interview and thanks for the lively tour through its exhibit! I was wondering if you could perhaps first say a few words about the museum itself: How did it get started and what is it doing?

Rainer Schlösser (RS): Well, like many German Red Cross Museums, we started out with a small collection and a small room, in 2000, and then, over time, gradually expanded. In 2007, we were granted the opportunity to extend the museum to a number of rooms on the first floor, and since 2012 we have the whole first floor available for our exhibits.

The centerpiece of our museum is the permanent exhibit which documents the history of the German Red Cross movement through the times, largely by situating it in the context of its international connections. We also do contemporary exhibits each year, usually framed around specific anniversaries. In 2019, for example, we had an exhibit commemorating the centenary of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent

Societies. Other exhibits have focused on the history of Red Cross posters or the Geneva Convention, but we've also had exhibits on the importance of rescue dogs or the 'Red Cross on porcelain'. Usually we launch those exhibits with an opening night which, each time, is a major social and public event in Luckenwalde. We also engage in several outreach activities. For example, we have a monthly column in the regional Red Cross journal, titled 'The Historical View'. Through this column, we hope to raise more historical awareness for the history of the Red Cross. But, of course, it also serves to draw attention to our museum. Then, we also publish our own book series on the history of the Red Cross, together with the headquarters of the German Red Cross. Another thing we do is to organize tours to historic places like Solferino, Castiglione, Heiden, or Geneva. This is a really popular and successful program, I'd say.

What we are still trying to develop is a line of cooperation with local schools. Students do come in occasionally for project work and we do cooperate with

schools within a format called school medical service days, but we get few visits from school classes. So that's something we may be working on. Finally I should mention that the museum is also a collecting institution. That's something that many people tend to overlook: as a museum, we collect, store, and archive parts of the material and written record of the Red Cross. So we also have a library which serves researchers.

SK: Ah, that's interesting. So you're involved in a wide spectrum of activities. Still I am wondering somewhat about, let's say, the general significance of the institution of the Red Cross museum. Isn't there something old-fashioned and outdated about museums in this world of online communication and new visual media? I mean, how important can a Red Cross museum be in those times?

RS: Well, being a museum director, I would of course say they are extremely important! [(laughter)]

SK: Yes, I see that point [(laughter)] But what exactly is it that makes them so important?

RS: Let me point back to the ten-year anniversary of the Association of the Red Cross Museums in Germany here. I remember that I gave a speech on that occasion, in which I pointed out that big companies like Mercedes, Stollwerck, or Volkswagen – they all have a corporate museum. Why? Because they have realized that a museum offers their customers as well as their employees a powerful tool to build identification with their work and mission. My conclusion back then was that the Red Cross should foster a similar thinking: 'offering identification by way of a museum – that's what we need as well!' And, looking back at the last twenty years, you can really see that more and more people within the German Red Cross movement have started to appreciate not only the importance of our history, but also of the movement's historical museums. Twenty years ago, museums certainly only had a kind of a marginal say within the Red Cross movement, where people were like, 'ah yeah, those few museum directors in their niche, just let them do their thing.' Today, museums are actively involved and asked for in shaping the movement's historical communication. For example, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the German Red Cross, German Red Cross organizations drew widely on the historical expertise of Red Cross museums. The same is happening now in light of the centenary of the German Red Cross's reorganization, to be celebrated in 2021, where Red Cross museums have been asked to stage an anniversary exhibit.

SK: How do you explain this change?

RS: I think German Red Cross organizations have really begun to see that doing history is not something old-fashioned and backward, but carries real value for building motivation and identification on the part of Red

Cross volunteers. It gives our work a broader meaning. For a normal Red Cross volunteer, when she or he sees a historical object within a museum or holds it in his hands, this can really make a difference in fostering commitment, particularly if he has grown up with that object or can connect to it in some other way.

SK: So this means that museums are mainly there to communicate history to Red Cross volunteers?

RS: I'd say they are about both: building historical awareness among Red Cross volunteers, but also within the wider public. The Red Cross is an organization with a wide range of tasks and responsibilities, but few people are aware of what the Red Cross is actually doing. Visitors often have a moment of surprise here at the museum: many come in knowing the Geneva Convention, but they don't connect it with the Red Cross. And then they are stunned to learn that the Convention was the masterpiece of the Red Cross right at its beginning! Or they come in thinking that the Red Cross is a state-funded organization, and, to their surprise, then find out that it has to raise its own funds and donations. Or they think that Red Cross and Red Crescent are different organizations because they use different symbols. And so on. So here the museum is about historical education: it serves to make clear that the Red Cross is not just about ambulances or blood transfusions but has a wider mission that has grown over time.

SK: Let us talk about the specific visual mediality of the museum. How can museums compete with television documentaries or the newest history short film put out on YouTube?

RS: I think one of the strongpoints of a museum is that it allows a direct, aesthetic encounter with the visual material object itself. That's something that digital media, photography, or television cannot make up for. When I see on display an original letter written and sent by Henry Dunant, then I know that this concrete material letter has been in the hands of Dunant as well. There's a certain aura or spark attached to the letter which connects me with it, creating a much more immediate and intimate connection to the founder of the Red Cross that no other medium can generate. And the same goes for other objects. When I see medical equipment, and know that this equipment has been in actual use on a historical battlefield, it has a completely different emotional meaning for me than if I see the same object in an online collection. So what the museum offers me is what I would describe as the 'aura of the original', the immediate aesthetic visual experience of a historical object. And other visual media don't offer me that experience.²

SK: What does this mean for the way the museum works as a medium of humanitarian and historical communication?

RS: First of all, I would say it means that you should not reduce the museum and its exhibits to films, touch screens, or virtual presentations. A museum needs a collection of things and objects it can present and that should form the point of departure of its work. But it's not about simply putting something in a glass case either. The challenge is to present objects in a way that creates wonder and astonishment on the part of the viewer. This does not necessarily have to involve films or audio examples. For example, if I want to get across that Red Cross disaster aid often involves the building of tent cities, then I find it a modern form of display to put up an actual tent within the museum hall to allow viewers to experience hands-on what those look like, what they feel like, what things they contain.

On the other hand, we of course also use electronic media. We show films and interviews. We also have a station where visitors can listen to original records recorded by German soldiers to send their wishes home during World War II. You certainly need those kinds of things, but you have to be aware that they do have their own problems: the media equipment may stop working, it may break down, and then you have to replace it, which means it creates costs that you have to refinance.

SK: How do you decide what objects you put on display?

RS: The first criterion is whether an object fits with the main themes of our museum: the importance of Henry Dunant as the founder of the movement; the centrality of the Geneva Convention; the international connections of the Red Cross – that it's an international movement; the local and regional work of the Red Cross. So objects have to fit in here in any way. Then we also ask ourselves what viewers may be interested in. What message could an object get across? Is it original and meaningful? Does it have an aesthetic quality to it? You also have to think of the stories you can tell around an object, for it's often the stories and anecdotes that capture visitors and linger on.

SK: Do you have any role models here?

RS: There are certainly role models and examples that we adapt from other museums, how to stage objects, how to show them, how to do the framing, and so on. But those role models are not limited to Red Cross museums. The banner technique we use in one room to spotlight the principles of the Red Cross, for example, is something I saw in a small city museum in Gera. There's also a lively exchange with the international museum in Castiglione and the one in Heiden. So I'd say, the way we present our objects draws inspiration from a wide variety of museums.

SK: Does digitization change the way Red Cross museums work?

RS: Yes and no, I would say. One of the things we have done over the last years is to digitize our museum

collection so that you can do a virtual tour through the museum online. Being able to look at an object presented in an online collection without having to travel to the actual museum is of course a nice and useful feature. Then we are also working on developing a museum app which serves as a kind of digital audio guide for visitors. Those are nice add-ons, I think, but the real center of the museum is its collection: that's what defines it. Where should the objects you show online go otherwise? You cannot have a virtual museum without a real collection.

Another area where digitization affects us directly pertains to our library catalogue. The general expectation today is certainly that a museum should have an online catalogue detailing the historical sources it houses. We've come a long way here in our museum, I think, but digitizing the catalogue is more complicated than one may think at first hand because it costs money and you have to find qualified staff to do that.

SK: Speaking of staff and personnel, one thing I was wondering about is whether you work with professionals – museologists, trained museum staff, museum educators, and so on?

RS: This differs across German Red Cross museums. In our own case, here in Luckenwalde, we worked together with an expert from the regional museum association when we set up the museum. So we got a good deal of advice on how to organize exhibit spaces and so on. The director of the association is now also a member of our museum trust and helps out when we reconceptualize things or write grant proposals. Other museums work together with public expert services or they hire museum specialists when organizing new exhibits. Within the Association of the Red Cross Museums in Germany, we also invite museologists and professional museum practitioners to our annual conference in order to learn from them and organize a dialogue.

SK: Let's close with a look to the future. Where do you see Red Cross Museums moving these days and what should the future museum look like in your view?

RS: Well, I would say that there's much ground for optimism and encouragement! Red Cross museums are now well established within Germany, but there's also much happening now internationally. Some years ago, for example, the chief archivist of the ICRC Archives started organizing a series of international conferences of Red Cross archivists and museum leaders. The next such conference, incidentally, will take place in Berlin and Luckenwalde in 2022. I have also heard of plans for new Red Cross museums and exhibits in Lisbon, Oslo, and Tokyo. So I think we will see much more activity in the museum field over the coming years!

On the other hand, one challenge many German Red Cross museums will face in the next decade or so is building up the next generation of museum leaders.

Many museums have been set up some time ago by collectors who are now at retirement age and cannot run the museum indefinitely. So we will have to find or train qualified staff that will be able to take over in a number of years.

But what the Red Cross museum of the future will look like? In my vision, that museum would not look much different from what we are already doing now. But I would like to have a much bigger museum, with more space and more thematic rooms. What we should keep in mind is that the Red Cross plays a major role within our societies and has done so historically in a number of fields – not only in international humanitarian law, but also in social history, cultural history, the history of the women’s movement or pacifism, the local history of regions and places. Representing and communicating the historical centrality of the Red Cross, its importance

to our society, the way its importance was reflected in arts, literature, culture, and the historical variety of its contributions to the course of our societies – that’s something, I think, the Red Cross museum of the future should be doing. But for that it would definitely need more space that allows it to show more of its collections!

SK: Thank you so much, Professor Schlösser!

Notes

- 1 See here for a virtual tour through the museum: www.drk-flaeming-spreewald.de/luckenwalde/rotkreuz-museum.html (accessed 3 August 2021)
- 2 It should be noted, though, that original historical films or other audiovisual materials may create a similar experience and are used in this way in the museum in Luckenwalde – see the next paragraph.