PRESS RELEASE
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Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation receives first large-scale exhibit for its permanent exhibition

On Thursday the 26th of February, the chairman of the Foundation Center Against Expulsions, Erika Steinbach MdB, in the presence of German Federation of Expellees President Bernd Fabritius MdB, handed over a historic chapel wagon to the Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation, its first large-scale exhibit for the permanent exhibition. Since 1950, the organisation Church in Need used this wagon to provide aid supplies from the Belgian and Dutch population to Germans who were expelled from their homes. The “mobile church” also served to provide spiritual services to Catholic expellees living in diaspora. Belgian Father Werenfried van Straaten initiated the project.

Andrea Moll, the exhibition curator at the Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation, said: “This initiative by Father Werenfried is a remarkably early, and up until now largely unknown, gesture of reconciliation to his German neighbours in the early post war period. The exhibit is a major win for the permanent exhibition, because it enables us to tell the not always simple story of the integration of refugees and expellees after the Second World War.”

Erika Steinbach MdB, chairman of the Foundation Center Against Expulsions, said: “We have a particularly strong commitment to supporting the development of the Foundation’s documentation center by donating this chapel wagon. The wagon is a symbol of the important spiritual work with expellees that was conducted by the Catholic and Protestant churches.”

The chapel wagon is a 14-meter-long, two-meter-wide, three-meter-high renovated railway car weighing five tons that is moved by means of a semi-trailer truck. The wagon will be restored in an aircraft hangar in Werneuchen near Berlin before its presentation.
Background:
In 1950, the Catholic organisation Church in Need initiated regular dispatches of chapel wagons with the goal of collecting and distributing aid supplies for destitute German refugees and expellees. A total of 35 of these wagons were sent out several times each year for a few months from the headquarters in Königstein im Taunus, Germany. Werenfried van Straaten, a Belgian Premonstratensian Father, started this campaign. Beginning in 1947, he was very successful at carrying out fundraising campaigns for German refugees among the Belgian and Dutch populations. The chapel wagon mission and other campaigns, such as “God’s wagons” or the mission of the rucksack priests, pursued the goal of reaching the many Catholics in the western zones of occupation who had been expelled and lost their confessional milieu, thereby losing their social cohesion and living in a diaspora. Religious services and confession were performed by members of the Premonstratensian Order and priests who had themselves been expelled from their homeland. The Church in Need fleet expanded over time to include smaller vehicles. The chapel wagon mission was expanded in the late 1950s to include church-building projects and was later replaced. The last wagon journey took place around 1970. Charitable and pastoral aid for German expellees was the first initiative of a Catholic aid organisation that is active today worldwide: the pontifical foundation Church in Need.

Erika Steinbach MdB, with Federation of Expellees President Bernd Fabritius MdB in attendance, hands over the key and license plate of the chapel wagon to exhibition curator Andrea Moll. © Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation, photo: Thomas Grabka

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