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The German Way of Slimming

On the situation of the Museum Foundation for Posts and Telecommunications

I must admit that the title "The German Way of Slimming" sounds like an advertisement for the latest efforts to combat obesity in Germany – rather than a contribution on the practice, problems and prospects of our museum.

Yet there are distinct parallels!

Slimming can be good or sometimes bad for your health; it can change your aesthetic appearance or have a much more fundamental effect; it can release new energies but sometimes weaken your body.

As a rule, however, before you go on a diet you will have reached a certain degree of physical corpulence, portliness or even obesity, often due to a lack of movement, a sweet tooth, a penchant for the more pleasurable things in life – and here my comparison no longer fits, because this is one trap we have not fallen into, despite the museum boom in the 1980s and 90s.

Dear colleagues, let me describe the kind of slimming diet we at the Museum Foundation for Posts and Telecommunications are currently having to submit to in these times of empty coffers.

Since two CECOMM conferences have already been held in Berlin and Frankfurt/Main, I shall not go into the Foundation's objectives, but focus on the structural problems and prospects.

The Museum Foundation for Posts and Telecommunications is a directly federal public foundation. It was formed in 1995 in the course of the post office reform and runs a total of four museums in Berlin, Frankfurt/Main, Nuremberg and Hamburg; the Foundation's central administration and the philatelic archives are in Bonn, which is the seat of the Foundation.

The Museum Foundation is financed by Deutsche Post (the German Post Office) and Deutsche Telekom, which were converted into private limited companies, also in the course of the post office reform. The law creating our Foundation states that the two companies must together cover the annual financial requirements of our museum work. A committee acts as the administrative council. This body outlines the Foundation's budget and the basic principles of our museum work. It is made up of three representatives respectively of the Federal Government,

Deutsche Post AG and Deutsche Telekom AG, plus two representatives of the German Museum Association and one from the Bundesrat, the upper house of parliament.

The origins of the collections and museums go back to the 19th century. The first post museum in the world was founded in Berlin in 1872. The building was opened in 1898 as the 'Reichspostmuseum' and became the Post Museum of the GDR between 1947 and 1989.

During the division of Germany, a West German post museum was set up in Frankfurt/Main; many of the exhibits that had been removed from Berlin for protection during the war were transferred there.

The Communications Museum in Nuremberg is based on an independent separate Post and Telegraph Exhibition which has been running since 1902. The museum, which is integrated into what used to be the Transport Museum and is now the DB Museum of the Deutsche Bahn AG (German Railways), is thus one of the oldest museums on the history of technology in Germany.

The history of the Hamburg Communications Museum also goes back to 1937. Today it is housed in a former Post and Telegraph Office building with a long tradition.

After the formation of the Museum Foundation, the existing museums and collections were restructured and concentrated in the four museums mentioned above.

There has thus been considerable investment over the last 10 years. This has included

- the renovation and opening of the Berlin building with a new programme in 2000,
- the updating and modernization of the permanent exhibitions in Frankfurt, Hamburg and Nuremberg,
- the renovation of the Berlin warehouse building, which will be completed this year,
- the **construction** of a large warehouse building in Frankfurt,
- and the renovation of a warehouse in Nuremberg.

Up to now we have had

- a staff of 110,
- an administrative structure and IT network that is in line with the present-day tasks of a museum,
- renovated buildings and modern, permanent exhibitions that attract considerable public attention nationwide,
- an extensive programme of events,
- and not least a financial basis that made these tasks feasible,

so that professional, progressive and long-term museum work has been possible.

But then the crisis came at the end of 2002!

The financial backing was to be cut by a third and structural changes made.

This made it necessary to slim down, with the result that the two smaller museums have had to struggle to survive, and the entire Museum Foundation has been restructured to meet the following requirements:

- to cut annual subsidies by 20%,
- to keep all 4 museums open,
- to establish shop-window solutions in Hamburg and Nuremberg,
- to make staff cuts,
- to merge the collections, and
- to close down the head office.

At present we are in the middle of a restructuring process, which – to stick to the metaphor we have been using – only allows slender fare. This involves:

- a 22% workforce reduction caused by the closure of the head office,
- the relocation of personnel and finance tasks to competence centres,
- the closure of the collection departments at the Hamburg and Nuremberg museums,
- the scaling down of our exhibition work.

Nevertheless,

even under the given conditions, and even under this slimming regime, we are expected to – and must – maintain our professional, progressive and long-term museum work, indeed we will improve it wherever possible and look for new ways of doing things. For example, we will be creating new jobs in the fields of event, fundraising and volunteers management, so that we can tap additional financial and personnel resources.

In this way we hope that, in the end, we will keep fit and continue to cut a fine figure in the competition among museums!