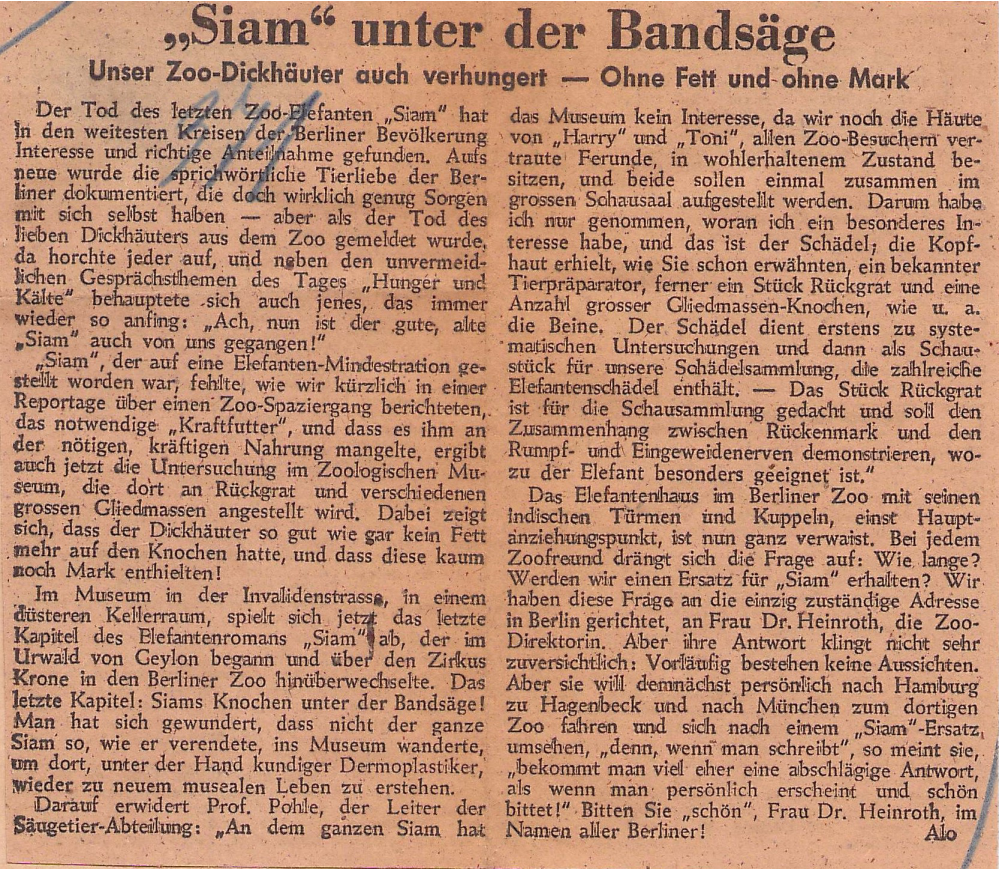


The Afterlife of Zoo Animals

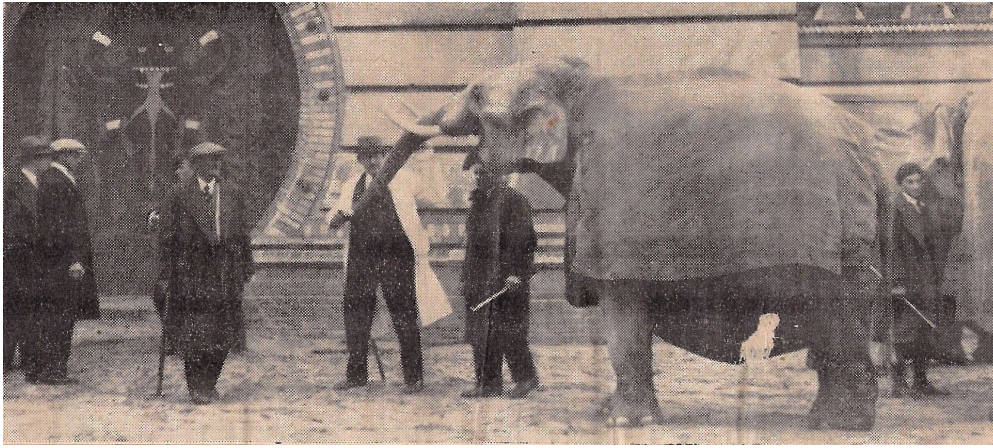
On the trail of an elephant



- Article type: story
- Author: Mareike Vennen
- Copy editor: Carla Welch
- Text license: CC BY-SA
- DOI: 64y2-m311/24

Newspaper article in the *Telegraf* about the reuse of “Siam’s” carcass, 21.03.1947.

In 1947, the Berlin daily newspaper *Telegraf* reported on the death of “Siam”. Under the headline “Siam under the band saw”, the article described the last chapter of the Indian bull elephant’s life at the Berlin Zoo. I was researching the history of elephant shipments when I came across the moving story of “Siam”. The elephant was shipped to Berlin in the early 1930s from what was then the British colony of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), actually intended for the Krone Circus. However, as “Siam” displayed behavioral problems, the circus deemed him unsuitable for their purposes and gave him to the Berlin Zoological Garden in exchange for a giraffe. “Siam” lived at the zoo from 1933 until his death in 1947.



The Neue Berliner 12 Uhr Zeitung and other newspapers reported on the animal exchange between the circus and the zoo, and on “Siam’s” arrival in his new enclosure, 25.10.1933.

The carcasses of zoo animals, especially large mammals, are usually not simply disposed of. It has long been the case that as much of the carcass as possible is used for other purposes. The same applied to “Siam”, and as with all zoo animals that have this kind of afterlife, his body was not kept intact. Tracing this elephant’s story therefore entails a search for individual body parts, leading us to various different locations.

Colonial Traces

One of the trails leads to the Zoological Museum Berlin, which was a part of the Natural History Museum. According to the aforementioned newspaper article, after the elephant’s body had been cut up and dissected, the museum was to receive the skull for its scientific research collection, and a piece of the backbone for its exhibition.¹ The article went on to report that a private taxidermist named Kriegerowski, who regularly received animal carcasses from the zoo for taxidermy purposes, was to receive the feet, which he combined with tinfoil to make wastepaper baskets.² This is where the trail runs cold, or at least where my research reaches a dead end – as is the case with many objects. The items that ended up in private hands are much harder to locate than those in public collections. The histories of some objects (still) only seem to exist in the form of a paper trail the animals left behind in archives, correspondence, and newspaper reports. That said, the search in the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin has also proven difficult. My colleague Clemens Maier-Wolthausen and I have searched for the skull in many boxes, cupboards, and shelves in the Mammals Collection – thus far, without success.³



Searching the Mammals Collection of the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, November 2020. (Image: Mareike Vennen/MFN. All rights reserved.)

Did the elephant bones not end up in the collection at all? Or are we just unable to find them because the Zoological Museum did not keep systematic or uniform records at the time, and as a result, today it is not always clear where and how incoming objects were recorded? On this, see also [Untraceable](#) and [Recording Worlds](#).

One thing that is clear, however, in “Siam’s” case, the trail leads us into European colonial history. The different stages of his life shed light on what happened to the animals that were brought to Europe from the colonies as gifts, or objects of trade and barter⁴ – like “Siam”, for example, who was brought to Europe from the British colony of Ceylon. [Animal traders](#) such as John Hagenbeck regularly travelled to these regions to capture animals for [zoos and circuses](#), and to recruit people for so-called ‘Völkerschauen’, ethnological exhibitions of people.⁵ Although we still know little about how “Siam” was captured in Ceylon and transported to Berlin, his story is part of the long and problematic history of zoo and circus animals from colonial contexts. Wastepaper baskets made of elephant feet are undoubtedly among the iconic [trophies](#) manifesting different modes of reuse and stereotypical imperial [images of appropriation](#) and domination. Although we do not know where “Siam’s” feet actually ended up, the suggestion that they were made into wastepaper baskets renders them part of this European history of appropriation. And I am reminded once again that the material culture of colonialism can be found in living rooms as well as in research collections. It is as much a part of the history of everyday life, as of the history of Berlin’s museums. Today, we come across material vestiges of colonialism in historical collections, in old photos of 19th and early 20th century furniture, and when strolling through flea markets. This makes me think about what kinds of traces an animal leaves behind, where they can be found, and what this means for my own research and its sources.

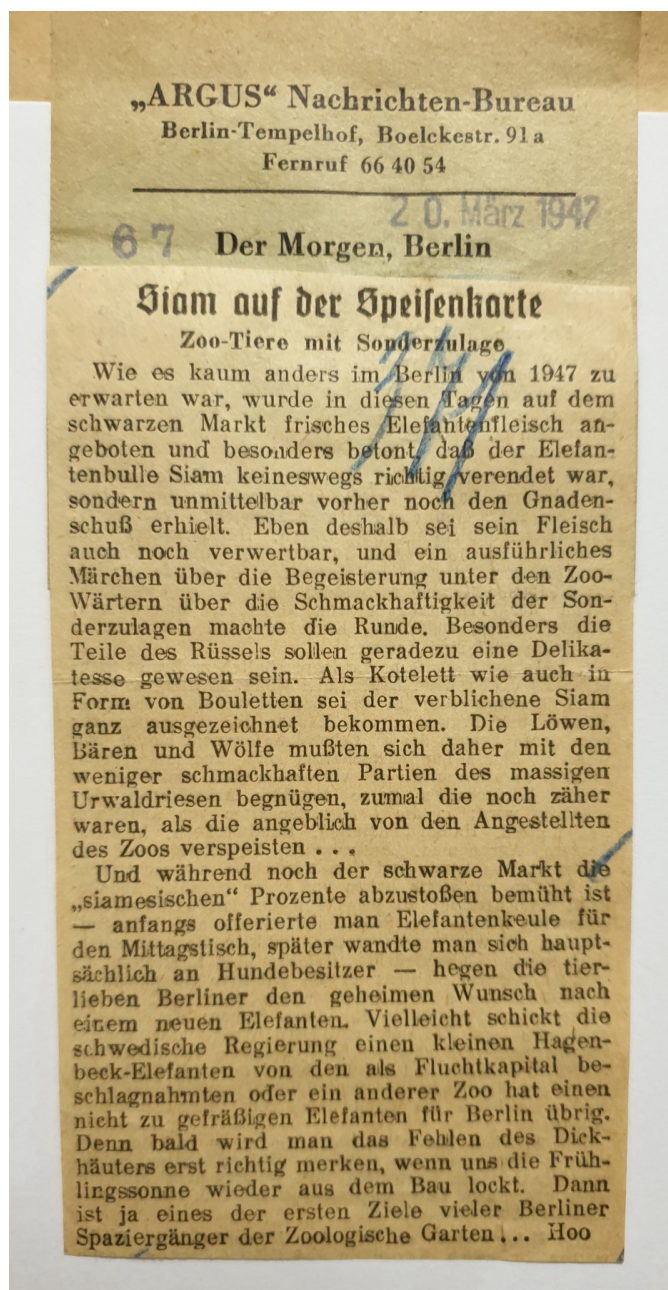
Feeding and Eating

Meanwhile, another trail takes me to postwar Berlin, where those parts of “Siam’s” carcass that were not eligible for taxidermy were reused in other ways. This was mainly due to the chronic [supply shortages](#) the city faced during that period. When the *Neue Zeitung* headlined: “Siam’ = 2.5 million calories”,⁶ it was not only referring to the hundredweight of hay the elephant ate daily. The meat of the 7-ton bull elephant was now itself put to use as feed for the lions in the zoo – “for whom the demise of their large neighbour means a special calorie-rich meal allotment”, as the *Neue Zeitung* commented.⁷ See also [Winter Hardship at the Zoo](#).

Especially in the first years after the war, the zoo did indeed repeatedly struggle to [feed](#) its carnivores. They predominantly used horse meat for this purpose: sometimes ‘good meat’, but mostly carcass meat, which was allocated by the health department via traders.⁸ For carcass processing, a special knackery with a steam boiler was even set up next to the feed kitchen in the zoo in 1948.⁹ Berlin Zoo had to pay comparatively high sums even for this low-quality meat, as Katharina Heinroth learned from enquiring at other zoological gardens in Germany. Most zoos in West Germany no longer used carcass meat at all because of its inferior quality and the risk of infection for the zoo animals. They either received feed meat from slaughterhouses, or meat from what was known as the ‘Freibank’, an institution that specialised in the sale of meat from animals that had had to be slaughtered due to an accident or emergency. Their meat was classified as inferior, but not harmful, and thus only fit for consumption to a limited extent – which meant that prices were correspondingly lower.¹⁰ Most zoos paid a maximum of 0.36 West German marks per kilogram for free range and feed meat (\approx €0.93 in 2021.) Berlin Zoo, by contrast, had to pay an average of 0.70 West German marks even for a kilo of carcass meat with bones (\approx €1.80 in 2021). In the Eastern sector on the other hand, carcass meat with bones cost the equivalent of only 0.20 West German marks (\approx €0.51 in 2021).¹¹

A further problem for the zoo was that the carcass meat produced in the Western sectors did not come close to meeting the zoo’s needs. The number of horses slaughtered at times declined to such an extent that only about half of the zoo’s horse meat requirements could be met.¹² Meat from zoo animals was therefore a welcome addition to the feeding plan – and this was not the first time such a phenomenon had occurred. Food shortages are always an issue in times of crisis, which could even lead to a form of ‘triage’ among the zoo animals, as it did at Leipzig Zoo, where during the First World War, “less valuable animals had to be slaughtered in order to obtain feeding meat for the better animals”.¹³ See also [Logistical Metabolisms](#).

The lions at Berlin Zoo received some of the elephant meat. About 20 pounds also entered human supply circuits – or more precisely, it ended up on the black market, and from there allegedly on the menu at a Berlin restaurant. When zoo employee Karl Wolf Jr. reported that he had been offered elephant meat at a price of 65 Reichsmark per pound,¹⁴ the police immediately began an investigation. Wolf was ordered to buy the meat and report to the zoo. He duly turned up with five pounds of meat, which a resident in his building had sold him in front of the Savarin Restaurant for a price of 325 Reichsmark (\approx €1,040 in 2021). One of the zookeepers was accused of stealing the meat and selling it under the table.¹⁵ The elephant had gone from being an animal for display to a source of meat. When the press got wind of the matter, they printed articles under headlines such as “Elephant à la carte” and “Siam on the menu”.¹⁶



The daily newspaper Der Morgen reports on the illegal sale of elephant meat, 20.03.1947.

While the newspapers speculated half ironically about whether every zoo employee could “cut off a slice” and make themselves chops or meatballs, the repurposing of animals for food was purely an existential issue during times of need. Two years earlier, the management of Antwerp Zoo had decided to slaughter three fallow deer calves due to food scarcity. They were then put up for sale at the central market hall in Brussels.¹⁷

Just how great the need was among the people of Berlin in the first postwar years is also revealed by a whole series of letters received by the zoo shortly after “Siam’s” death, enquiring about the possibility of using his remains for other purposes. Some wanted to know if the tusks could be sold and the skin used to mend clothes; others asked if the elephant meat was suitable for human consumption.¹⁸ In addition, theft at the zoo was on the rise at the time: vegetables were secretly uprooted from the gardens, carp were fished from the

restaurant pond, and even live animals such as donkeys, sheep, deer, as well as dairy goats, rabbits, and chickens were stolen.¹⁹ “These nocturnal thieves are not even particularly choosy; they take everything, from porcupines to rats“, remarked the *Tägliche Rundschau*. Katharina Heinroth was also quoted as commenting: “The porcupine probably went into the cooking pot.”²⁰ Here, too, the zoo was like a microcosm of greater Berlin, where in the neighbouring Tiergarten and in the fields, the theft of vegetables and potatoes was increasing to such an extent that the police were concerned for the population’s food supply. Anyone who was caught risked facing a harsh prison sentence.²¹

An Elephant’s Paper Trail

“Siam’s” story tells not only of how animals end up in zoos, but first and foremost of various forms of (re)use. Zoo animals are part of different cycles of (re)use at different times. “Knut”, probably Berlin Zoo’s most famous polar bear, who was born in the zoo in 2006 and has been on display in the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin since his death in 2011, has been a zoo attraction, a climate ambassador, and a licensed brand. The elephant had gone from being a wild animals to “Siam” the circus and zoo attraction in the 1930s. He may then very well have gone on to be part of a scientific research collection, as well as – if the newspaper report is to be believed – a decorative object in the style of a colonial trophy , and finally a source of meat for animal and human consumption. The story of “Siam’s” life and afterlife, reconstructed from his paper trail, is a story that is at once local and global; it is a chapter of Berlin’s postwar history, and part of a global history of colonialism.

At the same time, the afterlife of “Siam” reveals the gaps in the records. These can be found in different forms of records, in zoo records, inventory books or databases. These empty spaces, in particular, raise many questions – about when zoo animals are given as feed or eaten; whether they are disposed of, mourned, or recycled after death, and how they become scientific objects, exhibits, trophies, or a source of meat. What forms of labor are involved, what forms of care, and what rationale for and approaches to (re)use? These questions can be asked of other case histories as well, for example in The Worlds We Make and Silk Culture. This leads me back to the question of the traces an animal leaves behind, the ways in which it is possible or impossible to reconstruct (hi)stories on the basis of its paper trail, and what this means for my research, its sources, and the limits of historical reconstruction.

Footnotes

1. “Siam’ unter der Bandsäge”. *Telegraf*, 21.03.1947;↵
2. Cf. “Siam’ unter der Bandsäge”. *Telegraf*, 21.03.1947; and “Tierausstopfer filmt als Eisbär: Ein Präparator, der nur lebende Tiere liebt”. *Der Abend* [Berlin], 29.07.1947;↵
3. Sincere thanks to Frieder Mayer, Christiane Funk, and Katrin Spitzer for helping me with my search.↵
4. Cf. Marianna Szczygielska. “Elephant Empire: Zoos and Colonial Encounters in Eastern Europe”. *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 5 (2020): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2020.1780280>; see also [Catching Animals](#);↵
5. Cf. John Hagenbeck. *John Hagenbecks abenteuerliche Flucht aus Ceylon*. Leipzig: Deutsche Buchwerkstätten, 1917. Of the now extensive literature on the connection between zoological gardens and “Völkerschauen”, see, for example, Clemens Maier-Wolthausen. *Hauptstadt der Tiere: Die Geschichte des ältesten deutschen Zoos*. Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2019; Utz Anhalt. “Tiere und Menschen als Exoten: Exotisierende Sichtweisen auf das ‘Andere’ in der Gründungs- und Entwicklungsphase der Zoos”. Dissertation, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Universität, Hanover 2007; Oumar Diallo and Joachim Zeller. “Zoologischer Garten, Hardenbergplatz 8”. In *Berlin – Eine (post-)koloniale Metropole: Ein historisch-kritischer Stadtrundgang im Bezirk Mitte*, Farafina e.V. Berlin-Moabit (ed.). Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, 2021: 168–175; Lothar Dittrich and Annelore Rieke-Müller. *Carl Hagenbeck (1844-1913) Tierhandel und Schaustellungen im Deutschen Kaiserreich*. Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 1998; Caroline Schmidt-Gross. “Tropenzauber um die Ecke: Völkerschauen bei Hagenbeck”. In *MenschenZoos: Schaufenster der Unmenschlichkeit*, Pascal Blanchard, et al. (eds.). Hamburg: Les éditions du Crieur Public, 2012: 172–178;↵

6. “Siam’ = 2,5 Millionen Kalorien”. *Die Neue Zeitung*, 22.03.1947. The lions then immediately had “their rations cut by the magistrate”, claimed the *Tagesspiegel*; cf. “Spinat oder Hirsche: Ein Frühlingsspaziergang durch den Berliner Zoo”. *Der Tagesspiegel*, 03.04.1947. [↗](#)
7. “Siam’ = 2,5 Millionen Kalorien”. *Die Neue Zeitung*, 22.03.1947. [↗](#)
8. Cf. AZGB O 0/1/3. [↗](#)
9. Cf. Aktien-Verein des Zoologischen Gartens Berlin. *Geschäftsbericht 1948*. Berlin: 1949. [↗](#)
10. The Freibank, especially during times of scarcity, worked to reuse as many animal products as possible; this strategy had been abandoned by the 1990s though. [↗](#)
11. Cf. AZGB O 0/1/284. The equivalent amounts for 2021 were calculated based on the record for 1948 using a conversion table from the Deutsche Bundesbank. Cf. “Kaufkraftäquivalente historischer Beträge in deutschen Währungen”. Bundesbank 2021. <https://www.bundesbank.de/resource/blob/615162/d55a20f8a4eced6d1b53e01b89f11c4/mL/kaufkraftaequivalente-historischer-betraege-in-deutschen-waehrungen-data.pdf> (10.8.2021). [↗](#)
12. Cf. Magistrate of the City of Berlin, Hauptamt Veterinärwesen (main veterinary office) to the Zoological Garden Berlin, 06.09.1946, AZGB O 0/1/3. While an average of about 1.685 kg of carcass meat was available each month, the zoo’s monthly requirement according to its own calculations was 3.200 kg. The zoo therefore had to buy almost 1.400 kg of good slaughter meat per month at a price of 1.40 West German marks per kg. Cf. K. Heinroth to Dr. Schönwetter, Magistrate of Greater Berlin, 24.01.1950, AZGB O 0/1/3. 1.40 West German marks in 1950 is equivalent to approximately €3.88 today. Cf. “Kaufkraftäquivalente historischer Beträge in deutschen Währungen”. Bundesbank 2021. <https://www.bundesbank.de/resource/blob/615162/d55a20f8a4eced6d1b53e01b89f11c4/mL/kaufkraftaequivalente-historischer-betraege-in-deutschen-waehrungen-data.pdf> (10.8.2021). [↗](#)
13. Johannes Gebbing (ed.). *50 Jahre Leipziger Zoo, 1878–1928*. Leipzig: Selbstverlag des zoolog. Gartens, 1928: 36. On mass slaughtering cf. Anne Roerkohl. “Die Lebensmittelversorgung während des Ersten Weltkrieges im Spannungsfeld kommunaler und staatlicher Maßnahmen”. In *Durchbruch zum modernen Massenkonsum: Lebensmittelmärkte und Lebensmittelqualität im Städtewachstum des Industriezeitalters*, Hans Jürgen Teuteberg (ed.). Münster: Coppenrath, 1987: 309–370. [↗](#)
14. The price quoted varied between 20 pounds for 400 Reichsmark (≈ €1280 in 2021). Cf. “Auf den Spuren des Elefanten”. *Der Kurier*, 07.02.1948; Zoological Garden Berlin to the Kriminal-Kommissariat Tiergarten (the criminal investigation department for Tiergarten), 10.05.1947, AZGB O 0/1/143. [↗](#)
15. K. Heinroth to the criminal investigation department for Tiergarten, 10.05.1947, AZGB O 0/1/143. Cf. also AZGB O 0/1/44. The equivalent amount for 2021 was calculated based on the record for 1947 in a conversion table from the Deutsche Bundesbank. Cf. “Kaufkraftäquivalente historischer Beträge in deutschen Währungen”. Bundesbank 2021. <https://www.bundesbank.de/resource/blob/615162/d55a20f8a4eced6d1b53e01b89f11c4/mL/kaufkraftaequivalente-historischer-betraege-in-deutschen-waehrungen-data.pdf> (10.8.2021). For press coverage cf. for instance “Prozeß um Elefantenfleisch”. *Tagesspiegel*, 07.02.1948; “Elefant à la carte”. *Die Tagespost*, 10.02.1948. As early as 1945, the Berlin police, citing health risks, had issued a decree to “refrain from purchasing meat on the black market”. Cf. “Unterlassung des Erwerbs von Fleisch am Schwarzen Markt, Berlin, den 17. Juli 1945”. *Verordnungsblatt (VOBl.) der Stadt Berlin 1945*, No. 5., September 1945: 67. [↗](#)
16. “Siam auf der Speisekarte: Zoo-Tiere mit Sonderzulage”. *Der Morgen*, 20.03.1947. [↗](#)
17. Here, too, a court case followed; cf. “Damhirsch-Prozeß”. *Rhein-Zeitung*, 23.04.1947. [↗](#)
18. Cf. H. Schäfer to the administration of the Zoological Garden Berlin, 11.03.1947, AZGB O 0/1/143; H. Mrozeck to the administration of the Zoological Garden Berlin, 08.03.1947, AZGB O 0/1/87; W. Gronau to the administration of the Zoological Garden Berlin, 10.03.1947, AZGB O 0/1/86. [↗](#)
19. Cf. Zoological Garden Berlin to the command of the Schutzpolizei, 01.04.1947, AZGB O 0/1/143. Criminal investigations were unsuccessful in all cases. Cf. also Zoological Garden Berlin to the 31st Police Precinct, 13.02.1947, AZGB O 0/1/143; and AZGB O 0/1/274: “On the night from 12 to 13 February, an adult dairy goat was killed in a locked animal enclosure on the grounds of the Zoological Garden, butchered on the spot and stolen, its entrails left behind.” [↗](#)
20. Daniel de Luce. “Lebensmittelkarte 5 im Berliner Zoo”. *Tägliche Rundschau*, 17.12.1946. [↗](#)
21. “Gemüse- und Kartoffeldiebstähle”. *Verordnungsblatt (VOBl.) der Stadt Berlin 1945*, No. 7, 20.9.1945: 93. [↗](#)