

## **Dispossession: The Plundering of German Jewry, 1933-1945 and Beyond**

**Veranstalter:** Jonathan Zatlin, Boston / Christoph Kreutzmüller, Berlin, Project: „Economic Racism in Perspective“

**Datum, Ort:** 09.11.2014–11.11.2014, Boston

**Bericht von:** Laura Meier-Ewert, Kommission für die Entschädigung der Opfer von Enteignungen aufgrund der antisemitischen Gesetzgebung während der Okkupationszeit, Französische Botschaft Berlin

Organized by Jonathan Zatlin (Boston) and Christoph Kreutzmüller (Berlin) as part of a wider project on Economic Racism in Perspective, an international conference at Boston University brought together scholars as well as professionals involved in the restitution of property stolen from Jews. The aim was to shed light on the expropriation of Jews in Nazi Germany. A variety of panels examined the different means of expropriation and dispossession employed by the perpetrators, while also telling the story of the victims.

Starting with an analysis of the November 1938-Pogrom, CHRISTOPH KREUTZMÜLLER (Berlin) stated in his opening keynote that many players at the local and national levels shaped the process of destruction of Jewish commercial activity, but it was not a linear process following a set plan. While in small towns blockades and violent assaults already had devastating effects by the mid-1930's, the number of companies run or owned by Jews had hardly declined in the big cities, especially in Berlin. This situation changed radically with the massive violence and plunder in November 1938. Nevertheless, some Jewish businesspeople could maintain their businesses, sometimes until the moment of their deportation. Destruction of the Jews' economic existence was an integral part of the process of their persecution and murder. The assault on their economic existence lasted the longest and sometimes continued after their murder.

Setting the stage, ALBRECHT RITSCHL (London) examined the infrastructure and instruments used to destroy the Jewish population financially. He estimated the assets belonging to the Jewish population in Germany

in 1936 as follows: real capital stock in Germany amounted to some 850 billion Reichsmark (RM) in 1936 and, the Jewish population's share in 1933 was about 0,75 percent. Thus, he calculated,  $0,0075 \times 850 = 6,375$  billion RM, would be the value of assets owned by the German Jews in 1936. For JONATHAN WIESEN (Carbondale), the theft of property was not an „incidental byproduct of the Holocaust“, but rather a key component of the Nazi ideology. The aim was to „racially sanitize the marketplace“ by eliminating the commercial activities of Jews. This effort was backed by introducing new legal measures and encouraged by propaganda. Aryanization, spoliation and other forms of expropriation of assets belonging to Jews were seen as „the right thing[s] to do“ and allowed many actors to hide behind new laws and regulations, when it was really greed, avarice and personal enrichment which incited them to steal, buy or sell property formerly owned by Jews.

In the second panel, focused on the German-Jewish commercial presence, DOROTHEA HAUSER (Berlin/Hamburg) discussed the persistence of the large Jewish private Bank, M. M. Warburg & Co. She refuted the notion that the bank continued to be profitable until its Aryanization in 1938 because of a special protection by Hjalmar Schacht. Instead, Hauser showed that in fact the bank lost more assets than any other private bank in Germany after 1933. However, as the bank became involved in enhancing Jewish emigration efforts, it managed to partially offset its losses due to a surge in Jewish clients. Exploring the family's archives, STEFANIE MAHRER (Jerusalem) drew a portrait of Salman Schocken and his strategies to prevent his commercial warehouses from being Aryanized and his personal property, especially his library, from being despoiled. Files of the Salamander shoe company and its salesmen's journals were the backbone of PAMELA SWETT's (Hamilton) case study on the influence of travelling salesmen as important local participants implicated in the exclusionary processes levelled against Jews. Swett convincingly showed that some businessmen defended Jewish colleagues, while other so-called Aryan retailers and

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sales staff were frustrated by the state's continued tolerance of Jewish participation in the commercial sector and sought ways to accelerate the processes by which Jews were dispossessed of their commercial assets.

In the next two panels, which addressed bureaucracy and dispossession, speakers turned to the perpetrators. Concentrating on the role of the Reichswirtschaftsministerium, INGO LOOSE (München/Berlin) illustrated the changes that the Nazi bureaucracy underwent; the 1930s were a period of „legitimization of injustice“ in which the Ministry introduced several decrees organizing the expropriation of Jews. After 1939, the Ministry was less involved in the robbery of the Jewish population in the conquered, occupied or collaborating European countries. Other institutions and individuals took over and violence against Jews was legitimized, including their „systematic robbery“. JOHANNES BEERMANN (Bremen) analysed the complex procedures applied by the Gestapo, tax administration and other „constructive co-organizers“ to dispossess the German Jews, focusing on the active role German freight forwarders played in it. CHRISTINE SCHOENMAKERS (Oldenburg) presented the Deutsche Golddiskontbank (Dego), a Reichsbank subsidiary that played a considerable part in dispossessing Jews. In cases of emigration and Aryanization, it served as the trade centre for cash, foreign exchange, stocks and illiquid property, arranging its registration, transfer and utilization in favour of the Nazi economy. JONATHAN ZATLIN (Boston) focused on a ruse employed by the Gestapo to steal the remaining liquid assets of elderly German Jews before murdering them by promising the aged room and board in a „retirement home“ near Prague – Theresienstadt. In fact, the so-called Heimeinkaufsverträge, or retirement home contracts, were used to obscure the regime's genocidal intentions while they allowed at the same time seizing funds that would ensure autonomy from budgetary supervision. STEFAN HÖRDLER (Washington) presented the systematic and bureaucratically controlled and supervised confiscation of personal belongings of the prisoners in the concentration camps as well as the redistribution or sales of their assets in favour of the Reich-

skasse. ALFRED MIERZEJEWSKI (Denton) discussed how the German statutory public pension system was used by the Nazi regime to deprive Jews of both pension benefits and equity.

Turning towards other European countries, TAL BRUTTMAN (Grenoble/Paris) pointed out how the French authorities passed several laws and decrees to register the Jewish population of France and to ban them from public life and businesses. For Bruttman, these were home-grown initiatives, inspired by what was happening in Germany, a sort of „frenchisation“ of the German model of dispossessing the Jews. DAVID CROWE's (Elon) paper dealt with the dispossession in the General Government in German-occupied Poland. It also touched on the difficulty that Jewish survivors and their families face, particularly since 1989, of gaining reparations or restitution of property in Poland.

In the succeeding panel dedicated to art and visual representation, MICHAEL BERKOWITZ (London) presented photography as a diverse field that was in large measure populated by Jews in both Central and Eastern Europe – a world which has not only been destroyed, but is also largely forgotten today. CHARLES DELLHEIM (Boston) broadened the context by portraying several Jewish art dealers in Western Europe from the late 19th century on, who evolved from self-taught art dealers to pivotal figures in the art world. Underlining their importance in the field of art, Dellheim wanted „to restore the humanity of Jews in the world of art“, telling their story as actors, not only as victims of persecution and art looting. JONATHAN PETROPOULOS (Claremont) discussed the importance of art dealer networks that developed during the Third Reich and were active in the acquisition and selling of artworks looted from Jews all over Europe. After 1945, a core group of former Nazi dealers – many based in Munich – trafficked in looted art, working with non-Nazi dealers in Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and Austria, but also Western Europe and the United States. Due to the failure of denazification officers and the justice systems in several lands to devote sufficient attention to art dealers who trafficked in looted Jewish art collections, they could

continue to profit from such stolen goods in the post-war period and up until today. Understanding these networks, Petropoulos maintained, is key to tracking Nazi looted art that has never been properly restituted.

In the last panel on restitution, EVA BALZ (Bochum) discussed property politics in East and West Berlin after 1945 and showed that as early as that, mutual confrontation and provocation played an immense role. She suggested a view of restitution politics as an arena of Cold War conflict. BENNO NIETZEL (Bielefeld) put the dispossession of German Jews and the Aryanization of Jewish-owned businesses in a longer historical perspective. He explored the fate of Jewish entrepreneurs after the loss of their firms and analysed the development of Aryanized businesses during the war and in the postwar period. He read the restitution proceedings of the 1950s as a re-negotiation of property which implied struggles for memory and recognition. A case study of a restitution process for Aryanized property in Austria was given by LISA SILVERMAN (Milwaukee), using the case of the photographer Madame d'Ora, (Dora Kallmus). She underlined that a return of stolen property – like the loss that had preceded it – „was forever entwined with the fate of a family member and, can traumatically engage a complicated set of emotions. ANNA RUBIN (New York) presented the mission of the Holocaust Claims Processing Office (HCPO) of the New York State Department of Financial Services and the HCPO's method of addressing restitution claims.

By combining research on the different means used by the Nazis to dispossess the Jews with the story of the victims, the conference revealed the complexity of the process of the expropriation of the Jews, as well as the dimension of what has been destroyed forever – humanely, culturally, and financially. It offered scholars new impetus for further research on the legal, financial and cultural procedures deployed in the spheres of state authority, the bureaucracy, the economy and the local civilian population to seize the property of the Jews, and the need for more work on the various ideological motives and justifications of the robbery. The additional focus of the conference on the so-called „restitution pro-

cess“ after the war unveiled the fact that former property rights of the victims have only rarely been restored.

### **Conference Overview:**

#### *Keynote*

Christoph Kreutzmüller (House of the Wannsee Conference, Berlin), *Kristallnacht and the Destruction of Jewish Commercial Activity in Germany*

#### *Economic Background*

Albrecht Ritschl (London School of Economics), *Financial Destruction. Confiscatory Taxation of Jewish Property and Income in Nazi Germany*

Jonathan Wiesen (Southern Illinois University, Carbondale), *A Jew-Free Marketplace: The Ideologies and Economics of Thievery*

Jonathan Zatzlin (Boston University), *Chair*

#### *The German-Jewish Commercial Presence*

Dorothea Hauser (Warburg Archiv, Hamburg), *Too Involved and Too Engaged: The Warburg Bank's Late Surrender*

Stefanie Mahrer (Franz Rosenzweig Minerva Research Center, Hebrew University of Jerusalem), *Fighting the Thieves. Salman Schocken's Strategies to Save His Possessions*

Pamela Swett (McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario), *Salesmen, Salesmanship, and Dispossession in the Retail Context*

Eugene Sheppard (Brandeis University), *Chair*

#### *Bureaucracy and Dispossession I*

Ingo Loose (Institut für Zeitgeschichte, München-Berlin), *The Reich Ministry of Economy and Its Role in the Institutional Competition of Plundering European Jews*

Johannes Beermann (University of Bremen), *Taking Advantage: German Freight Forwarders and the Theft of Jewish Property, 1938-1945*

Christine Schoenmakers (Carl von Ossietzky University, Oldenburg), *The „Legal“ Theft of Jewish Assets: A Closer Look at the Key Actors and Mechanisms of Expropriation be-*

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Hartmut Berghoff (German Historical Institute, Washington, DC), Chair

*Bureaucracy and Dispossession II*

Jonathan Zatlin (Boston University), „Retiring“ to Theresienstadt: The Heimeinkaufsverträge and the Dispossession of the Elderly

Stefan Hördler (German Historical Institute, Washington, DC), Administered Plundering: Gefangenen-Eigentums-Verwaltungen in the Nazi Camp System

Alfred C. Mierzejewski (University of North Texas, Denton), Taking from the Weak, Giving to the Strong

Christoph Kreutzmueller (House of the Wannsee Conference, Berlin), Chair

*The German „Model“ in European Context*

Tal Bruttman (City of Grenoble/Memorial de la Shoah, Paris), Identifying „Jewish Assets“ in Vichy France

David Crowe (Elon University, Elon, North Carolina), Plunder and Theft of Jewish Property in the General Government

Jeffrey Diefendorf (University of New Hampshire, Durham), Chair

*Art and Visual Representation*

Michael Berkowitz (University of London), Coming to Terms with a Lost Cohort: Recalling and Restoring the Legacy of Jews and Photography

Charles Dellheim (Boston University), Traffic in Significant Symbols: The Meaning of Looted Art

Jonathan Petropoulos (Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, California), Art Dealers in Nazi Germany: Trafficking in Looted Art Before and After 1945

Susannah Heschel (Dartmouth, Hanover, New Hampshire), Chair

*Restitution*

Eva Balz (Ruhr-Universität Bochum), The Politics of Property in the Cold War. The Restitu-

tion of Jewish Assets in Berlin

Benno Nietzel (University of Bielefeld), Restitution, Memory, and Denial: Assessing the Legacy of ‘Aryanization’ in Postwar Germany

Lisa Silverman (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), Repossession and Return: Madame d’Ora and the Restitution of Jewish Property in Austria after the Holocaust

Anna Rubin (Department of Financial Services, New York State), The Nazi Regime and Legal Spoliation

Abigail Gilman (Boston University), Chair

*Conclusions*

Laura Meier-Ewert (La Commission d’indemnisation des victimes de spoliations intervenues du fait des législations antisémites en vigueur pendant l’Occupation, French Embassy, Berlin)

Christoph Kreutzmüller (House of the Wannsee Conference, Berlin)

Jonathan Wiesen (Southern Illinois University, Carbondale)

Jonathan Zatlin (Boston University)

Tagungsbericht *Dispossession: The Plundering of German Jewry, 1933-1945 and Beyond*. 09.11.2014–11.11.2014, Boston, in: H-Soz-Kult 10.02.2015.