

**Contested German-Jewish Cultural Property after 1945 [U+2012] The Sacred and the Profane**

**Veranstalter:** Elisabeth Gallas, Simon-Dubnow-Institute for Jewish History and Culture, University of Leipzig / Caroline Jessen, Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach / Yfaat Weiss, The Franz Rosenzweig Minerva Research Center for German-Jewish Literature and Cultural History, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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The National Socialist's all-encompassing plan for the destruction of the Jews entailed both the physical annihilation of millions of Jews wherever caught in the world and the destruction of their cultural and historical heritage. Efforts to remove evidence of Jewry from history included the destruction, desecration and systematic plunder of cultural property created, collected or owned by Jews such as books, artwork, structures and religious objects. The sheer magnitude of the robbery of Jewish cultural assets committed by the National Socialists and their collaborators throughout Nazi-occupied Europe was without precedent in history, expressing the deliberate targeting of Jewish cultural identity. The victorious Allies, along with Jewish organisations set up immediately after the war, managed to recover and restitute some of the stolen assets, but a very considerable amount has changed hands and remains dispersed until today.

The 3-day Gentner-Symposium „Contested German-Jewish Cultural Property after 1945 – The Sacred and the Profane“ took place against the backdrop of these events. It was funded by the Minerva Foundation and organised jointly by the Rosenzweig Minerva Research Center of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach and the Simon-Dubnow-Institute for Jewish History and Culture in Leipzig. The topics addressed during the conference in-

cluded the history and legacy of Jewish cultural property in the postwar period: its artistic, cultural and historical aspects as well as legal, moral, political and ideological questions, the relevance of which is apparent to this day as the process of restitution is still ongoing.

Opening remarks were delivered by YFAAT WEISS, head of the Rosenzweig Minerva Research Center. In her welcoming address, Weiss emphasised the uniqueness of the German case of Jewish cultural property that developed over centuries only to come to a sudden and rapid end at the hands of the Nazis. She alluded to the complex meaning in the material remains: as symbolic reminders of a vanished culture, an aura of sacredness surrounded them. At the same time, their salvage marked a process of regained agency. In Israel, Weiss argued, German-Jewry's heritage became „negative heritage“. Simultaneously desired and neglected as it was not only a reminder of the victims but also associated with the language of the perpetrators. As a result, the status of German as a language continued to be precarious in Israeli society and academia for many decades after the Holocaust. CAROLINE JESSEN (Marbach) took up the title of the conference. She pointed to the shifting meanings of books and archival materials and illustrated the tension between the sacred and the profane. The remains of émigré book collections in Israel, sacred reminders of a vanished past and rescued often at great expense, have been discarded by libraries and sometimes even been thrown away over the years since they lost their readership and purpose. At the same time they have become notorious objects of interest in contemporary memory culture. ELISABETH GALLAS (Leipzig) seized the opportunity to remind the audience of the significance of the conference's location. Almost to the day 70 years ago the Diaspora Treasures Committee, together with Jewish historian Salo W. Baron, convened at the Hebrew University and outlined a plan for the salvage and restitution of Jewish cultural property, a revolutionary undertaking that shaped the future fate of hundreds of thousands of Jewish assets recovered in Europe.

The first session was devoted to differ-

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ent dimensions of material culture. CAROLINE JESSEN (Marbach) challenged the notion of a „Noah’s Ark“ for salvaged German-language literature in Israel. After 1945 plenty of valuable books from émigré collections have been shipped back from Israel and were integrated into German research collections. Jessen offered insights on the impact of those remigrated writings on the German research landscape: they not only reinforced German scholarship but also fabricated a historical and cultural continuity of literary tradition, as their provenance and history was never fully acknowledged. ADA WARDI (Jerusalem) recounted how Kleist’s novella Michael Kohlhaas migrated alongside the graphic designer Moshe Spitzer from Germany to the Hebrew bookshelves in Israel/Palestine. After settling in Jerusalem in 1939, Spitzer founded his own publishing house by the name ‘Tarshish’ – a clear reference to the biblical vessels used to carry valuable goods to the Holy Land – and reprinted a redesigned and translated version of the book for the Hebrew speaking audience. Wardi used this example to demonstrate in what way the art of book design is altered when transferred to a new cultural space but how it also enriches the new surrounding it arrives to.

The panel was followed by the keynote address delivered by ULRICH RAULFF (Marbach) on art historian Aby Warburg and his Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek. Raulff illuminated new facets of the migration of Warburg’s 60,000 books from Hamburg to London in 1933. Besides the urge to save the library from the clutches of the Nazis, Raulff showed that fierce economical problems had precluded the transfer. In 1944 it came under the care of the University of London, where the foundations for the prestigious Warburg Institute were laid. Raulff discussed the implications of the university’s recent attempt to challenge its duty to keep the library as an „independent unit“. 80 years after it was saved from the Nazis the library’s integrity was again in danger – this time for bureaucratic reasons.

The first session of the conference’s second day was devoted to the early post-war discussions among Jewish intellectuals and or-

ganisations regarding the future of recovered Jewish assets. Session chair DAN DINER (Jerusalem) characterised that period as „the heart of the matter“ as in those years the foundations of Jewish cultural restitution were laid and heirless individual Jewish property was recognised as collective property of the Jewish people. YFAAT WEISS (Jerusalem) revealed the often overlooked role British Jewish historian Cecil Roth played in the endeavour of salvaging Jewish cultural property. As the chairman of the Jewish Historical Society of England, Roth had already raised the question of ownerless Jewish property in 1943, prompting the Hebrew University to take action. For several reasons Salo Baron’s initiative, the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (JCR) took hold of the reins of this undertaking in 1945. However, the fact that Roth’s effort fell into oblivion is partly owed to Baron who deliberately downplayed Roth’s role in his personal accounts of the events. Weiss argued convincingly that one of the reasons for Baron’s disregard of Roth’s efforts stems from his own failure to assess the implications of Nazi policy at the beginning of the 1940s correctly whereas Roth did. GIL RUBIN (New York) described Baron’s postwar political commitment from another angle. Based on unpublished writings, Rubin illustrated the shift in the Jewish historian’s thinking as he turned into an advocate of Jewish emancipation after WWII as a solution for the postwar Jewish question after being a staunch critic of emancipation before the war.

The last session dealt with contested Jewish cultural property in Poland. YECHIEL WEIZMANN (Haifa) addressed the question of how the local Polish population treated abandoned Jewish sites, regarded both as desired property and disturbing reminders of the past. By focusing on the fate of the Jewish sites in the town Olkusz, Weizmann presented an example of an attempt to erase Jewish traces from the local Polish landscape. ALON SIMHAYOFF (Jerusalem) addressed the question of the rightful ownership of Polish-Jewish cultural property. He discussed the Polish and Jewish-Israeli perspectives on universal and particular approaches to that question, highlighting the tensions which arise from these different interpreta-

tions. He concluded that the controversial issue of ownership lacks a definite answer due to the uniqueness of the Jewish case as a people without territory before 1948.

In conclusion of the day curator MIRA LAPIDOT from the Israel Museum in Jerusalem discussed together with journalist JULIA VOSS, and the curators INKA BERTZ of the Jewish Museum Berlin and EMILY BILSKY from Jerusalem questions of provenance, authenticity and ownership of Nazi-looted art works. Voss underlined the role art objects have as carriers of memory and argued that in order to understand the artwork and its history one must know about the (former) owners. She pointed to the absence of research on provenance in the academic field that is at odds with its importance to the public debate on ownership. Emily Bilsky emphasised the responsibility museums and curators share in regards to the object and its history. She stressed the need to make provenance and the process of acquisition transparent and visible to the public. In the same vein, Inka Bertz pointed out that Jewish Museums too are not exempt from the duty of provenance research. She drew attention to the dilemma posed to museums and art collectors by the fact that not all provenance can be discovered due to absolute genocide. The discussion revealed complex and sometimes conflicting demands requiring attention: moral and legal justice towards the rightful heirs, museums' obligation to research the history of their collections and make it visible to the audience, as well as an interest to keep prominent artworks accessible to the public.

The second session of the second day focused on the transfer of knowledge and the relocation of Jewish cultural property from Europe to safer places in the United States and Israel. ELISABETH GALLAS (Leipzig) impressively discussed the different layers of meaning attached to salvaged cultural property of European Jewry in the early postwar years. She argued that, as capsules of history, memory, knowledge, religious thought and tradition, books and manuscripts constitute an integral part of Jewish culture and identity. Their looting was perceived as fundamental assault on the Jewish collective self. As the last physical remains of a van-

ished past, their salvage, recognition as Jewish collective property and relocation to safer places outside of Europe, were perceived as a possibility to secure continuity and survival. ANNA KAWALKO (Jerusalem) discussed the case of Prof. Ernst Grumach, who, as a forced labourer in the Central Jewish Library of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt in Berlin, was forced to play an active role in the large-scale robbery of his people by sorting and cataloguing Jewish books and archival material looted by the Nazis. After the war Grumach assisted the American administration and Jewish organisations in their effort to reconstitute library collections to their rightful owners. With Grumach's case as a focus point, Kawalko illustrated perfectly the tragic character of these historical events and the impact the plunder and salvage of Jewish heritage had on German-Jewish scholars and intellectuals. In a similar manner, ENRICO LUCCA (Jerusalem) highlighted the crucial role Hugo Bergmann, the first director of the Jewish National and University Library as well as the first rector of the Hebrew University, played in the relocation of Jewish cultural property from Czechoslovakia to Jerusalem. He tied the philosopher's efforts in Prague during November 1946 to his activities as cultural educator on behalf of Stockholm's Jewish community later on. By doing so, Lucca demonstrated Bergmann's devotion to the creation of a Jewish cultural centre in Palestine while at the same time directing his energy to strengthen Jewish life in post-war Europe.

The final session of the conference dealt with narrative reflections on materiality and cultural property. JOACHIM SCHLÖR (Southampton) identified an important source for the personal and private dimension of Nazi robbery of Jewish property by examining family letters and testimonies, arguing that „the loss of property stands equally to the loss of human dignity“. LINA BAROUCH (Jerusalem/Marbach) discussed Gershom Scholem's accounts of his post-war quest to locate Jewish books and libraries in Europe in his unpublished diaries and its partly narration in Barbara Honigmann's short story „Doppeltes Grab“. Barouch argued that what remains is not only cultural property but more

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crucially a legacy of a transformed Jewish cultural practice of dispersion and reconvening in the face of catastrophe that found its textual expressions i.a. in Scholems and Honigmann's writings.

The three-day interdisciplinary conference brought together young researchers and senior scholars from Israel, Germany, Great Britain and the US. The variety of harmoniously composed panels and lectures echoed the manifold layers and aspects of cultural property and its restitution, and will certainly inform further research in the field.

### Conference Overview:

#### Greetings

Yfaat Weiss (Franz Rosenzweig Minerva Research Center) / Caroline Jessen (Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach) / Elisabeth Gallas (Simon Dubnow Institute)

#### *PANEL 1: Dimensions of Material Culture – Objects, Emotions, Memory*

Chair: Arndt Engelhardt (The Hebrew University/Simon Dubnow Institute)

Caroline Jessen (Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach): Affirming Ownership, Obscuring Provenance? Émigré Collections in Israel and Germany after 1945

Stefanie Mahrer (University of Basel): Lace Doilies and Cyclamens: Emotional Aspects of Material Culture

Ada Wardi (Tel Aviv): How did Michael Kohlhass Immigrate to Jerusalem? Reading the Design Work of Dr. Spitzer: Reflections on Books as „Objects of Cultural Message“

#### *Evening Lecture*

Chair: Lina Barouch (The Hebrew University / Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach)

Ulrich Raulff (Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach): The Wanderer and his Shadow. Aby Warburg and his Library

#### *PANEL 2: Shifting Centers: Cultural Reconstruction – Semantics and Politics*

Chair: Dan Diner (The Hebrew University)

Yfaat Weiss (The Hebrew University): The Tricks of Memory: Salo Baron, Cecil Roth, and

the Salvaging of Jewish Property in Europe

Gil Rubin (Columbia University): The Victory of Emancipation: Salo Baron and the Postwar Jewish Question

Yehuda Dvorkin (The Hebrew University): A Jewish-English Debate of Restitution: Patriotism, Zionism and Continentalism

#### *PANEL 3: Transitory Spaces: Negotiating the Future of Cultural Property*

Chair: Aya Elyada (The Hebrew University)

Iris Lauterbach (Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte München): The Munich Central Collecting Point and the first Restitutions 1945-1949

Bilha Shilo (The Hebrew University): A Struggle over Property and Status: The Fate of YIVO's Newspaper Collection

Yael Levi (The Hebrew University): Personal Inheritances for the Hebrew University, 1935-1948

#### *PANEL 4: The Heart of Darkness: Contested Property in Poland*

Chair: Marcos Silber (University of Haifa)

Yifat Gutman (The Hebrew University): Reviving and Contesting Jewish Culture in Contemporary Poland

Yechiel Weizman (University of Haifa): Eliminating the Traces: The Postwar Fate of the Jewish Sites in Olkusz, Poland

Alon Simhayoff (The Hebrew University): Who Owns Polish-Jewish Cultural Property?

#### *Roundtable: Negotiating Provenance and Authenticity*

Chair: Mira Lapidot (The Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

Participants: Inka Bertz (Jewish Museum Berlin) / Emily Bilski (Jerusalem) / Julia Voss (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung)

#### *Presentation of Archival Holdings of the National Library of Israel*

Chair: Irene Aue-Ben-David (Leo Baeck Institute Jerusalem)

Hanan Harif (The Hebrew University): Shelomo Dov Goitein's Archive as a Source for 20th Century Cultural History

Yonatan Shiloh-Dayan (The Hebrew University): What does a Displaced Historian Keep? Walter Grab's Archive

Amit Levy (The Hebrew University): Cataloguing the Martin Plessner Collection(s): A Researcher's Point of View

*PANEL 5: Transfer of Knowledge – Migrating Property*

Chair: Stefan Litt (The National Library of Israel)

Elisabeth Gallas (Simon Dubnow Institute): Capsules of Time, Tradition and Memory: Salvaging Jewish Books after 1945

Anna Kawałko (The Hebrew University): Jewish Intellectuals and Restitution of Cultural Property: Ernst Grumach in Berlin, 1941-1949

Enrico Lucca (The Hebrew University): Finding a New Home for German Jewry: The Years 1946–1948 in the Life of Hugo Bergmann

Adi Livny (The Hebrew University): The Archive of the Hebrew University: Technical and Intellectual Challenges

*PANEL 6: Narrative Reflection on Materiality and Cultural Property*

Chair: Doerte Bischoff (Universität Hamburg)

Joachim Schlör (University of Southampton): Reflections on the Loss of material Objects in Emigration Correspondence

Lina Barouch (The Hebrew University/Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach): What Remains? Barbara Honigmann and Gershom Scholem Recount the Reconvening of Books and Libraries in Short Story, Diary and Report

Ynon Wygoda (The Hebrew University): Die Schrift in the Holy Land: The Curious Case of Nehama Leibowitz and the Early Reception of the Buber-Rosenzweig Translation in Israel

Tagungsbericht *Contested German-Jewish Cultural Property after 1945 [U+2012] The Sacred and the Profane*. 27.09.2016–29.09.2016, Jerusalem, in: H-Soz-Kult 04.01.2017.