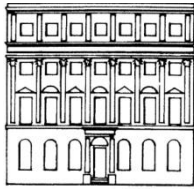


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## **OBJECTS AND EMOTIONS: LOSS AND ACQUISITION OF JEWISH PROPERTY**

ANDREAS GESTRICH AND DANIEL WILDMANN

Over the past decade the history of emotions has established itself as a rapidly developing field of research. It is one of the theoretically most challenging approaches to history, and also highly controversial.<sup>1</sup> The expanding debate on the history of emotions and their importance in history has so far focused primarily on emotions in interpersonal relations and mass psychology. It has tended to ignore a related debate which has also recently given rise to intense academic discussion, namely, the new history of objects and material culture (*Objektkultur*). This field, closely linked to museum studies and the history of memory and memorialization, explores the multi-layered relations between individuals and objects,<sup>2</sup> including the emotional qualities some objects can acquire for people.

The idea of bringing these two debates together grew out of an anecdote recounted by Saul Friedländer at a workshop held at the Leo Baeck Institute in 2007 to mark the publication of the final volume of his trilogy on Nazi Germany and the Jews.<sup>3</sup> Friedländer mentioned a family which had acquired bedding from the possessions of deported Jews. They were unable to use this bedding, however, and kept it locked away in a wardrobe. Now in the second generation,

<sup>1</sup> For introductory texts see e.g. Keith Oatley, *Emotions: A Brief History* (Oxford, 2004); Ute Frevert, 'Was haben Gefühle in der Geschichte zu suchen?', in ead. (ed.), *Geschichte der Gefühle*, special issue of *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 35 (2009), 183–208.

<sup>2</sup> Lorraine Daston (ed.), *Things that Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York, 2004), 9–24; Gudrun M. König (ed.), *Alltagsdinge: Erkundungen der materiellen Kultur* (Tübingen, 2005); Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (New York, 2000); Anke te Heesen and Petra Lutz (eds.), *Dingwelten: Das Museum als Erkenntnisort* (Cologne, 2005). See also the conference: 'Objects of Affection: Towards a Materiology of Emotions', Interdisciplinary Conference, 4–6 May 2012, Princeton University.

<sup>3</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, iii. *The Years of Extermination: A Plea for an Integrated History of the Holocaust* (New York, 2007).

they had been able neither to use it, nor give it away, nor destroy it. This bedding was at the centre of intense emotions which spanned and linked generations in the feeling of guilt, perhaps also of fear and sadness.

Conversations on this and similar narratives gave rise to the idea that a workshop<sup>4</sup> on the different emotional qualities of and relation to such objects could add a valuable new dimension to the study of the loss and appropriation of Jewish property. It might also make interesting inroads into an aspect of the evolving field of the history of emotions that has not so far been prominent, namely, the emotional quality of and relation to material objects.

The organizers of the workshop were able to draw on the fact that over the past two decades a number of excellent local studies of the expropriation and Aryanization of Jewish property have increased our understanding not only of what happened, but also how it happened, and especially the parts which individuals, neighbours, former friends, party officials, local policemen, and so on played in the expropriation and appropriation of Jewish property. We were also able to draw on more recent, wider experience with individual and collective reactions and emotions in the context of the restitution and contested restitution of Jewish property over recent decades.<sup>5</sup>

We invited historians as well as colleagues from literary, museum, and film studies, European ethnology, and law to approach these problems and perspectives. The writer Gila Lustiger, who read and discussed the story of her grandmother's paperweight which

<sup>4</sup> The workshop, entitled 'Objects and Emotions: Loss and Acquisition of Jewish Property', was co-organized by the German Historical Institute London and the Leo Baeck Institute and held at the GHIL on 26-7 July 2010. The full programme can be found on the GHIL's website <[www.ghil.ac.uk](http://www.ghil.ac.uk)> under Events and Conferences.

<sup>5</sup> See also the two exhibition catalogues on this topic, reviewed below by Chloe Paver in this issue of the *GHIL Bulletin*: Inka Bertz and Michael Dorrmann (eds.), *Raub und Restitution: Kulturgut aus jüdischem Besitz von 1933 bis heute* (Göttingen, 2008); and Alexandra Reininghaus (ed.), *Recollecting: Raub und Restitution* (Vienna, 2009). The famous legal case of Michel Levi-Leleu, whose father, Pierre Levi, was murdered at Auschwitz and who detected his father's suitcase in an exhibition of the Paris Memorial de la Shoah, also provides many insights into the emotional importance of objects in this context.

## Objects and Emotions

forms part of her family novel *So sind wir*, was also invited.<sup>6</sup> The workshop was very much exploratory in character. It was not intended as the basis for a volume of collected essays. There were some papers, however, which we thought could inspire further discussion. These are published in the organizers' respective journals, the *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* and the *German Historical Institute London Bulletin*. The first of the three papers assembled here deals with issues of emotions in legal restitution processes of Jewish possessions; the second looks at the life of such objects in museums; and the third is a personal account by a professional historian whose family was a victim of Nazi persecution and Aryanization policy.

In his article 'Emblems and Heirlooms. Restitution, Reparation, and the Subjective Value of Chattels: A Legal Perspective' Norman Palmer analyses the importance the law accords 'the unique subjective value of individual objects to specific claimants'. He approaches this topic first from a general perspective by looking at litigation surrounding personal chattels and then turns to Holocaust-related objects. In particular, Palmer draws on cases dealt with by the British Government's Spoliation Advisory Panel, which has a certain bias towards more valuable objects, especially looted art. Taking these cases and recommendations as a starting point, he is able to demonstrate the courts' increasing recognition of the emotional importance of objects to their former owners and their descendants.

In the second article, 'Diasporic Home or Homelessness: The Museum and the Circle of Lost and Found', Hanno Loewy reflects on the 'context of material memory, the trajectory of meanings, emotions, and affections attached to objects of everyday life'. He elaborates on a specific set of ambiguities which objects attain when they enter the space of the museum, namely, that between the sacred and the profane (museums take objects originally created for the purpose of religious cult and practice and make them profane); that between past and present (in objects we can perceive the physical presence of the past); and that between biography and history, when objects are taken out of the personal contexts in which they were created and used, and serve as examples for wider historical interpretations. Loewy exemplifies these ambiguities by tracing the history of various objects in the context of this analytical framework.

<sup>6</sup> Gila Lustiger, *So sind wir: Ein Familienroman* (Berlin, 2005).

The third article, by Atina Grossmann, presents a historian's reflections on her and her family's personal experiences with persecution, terror, and loss of life, chances, careers, and property, as well as their struggle for compensation and restitution. The article is an emotional one. This portrayal of the experience of bourgeois Berlin Jews highlights how hurt and frustrated those who narrowly escaped the Nazi extermination camps were by Germany's post-war bureaucracy defending the Aryanizers and their 'possessions', often by employing hair-splitting legalistic procedures with overtly anti-Semitic tendencies. It is therefore not only the immediate emotional value of the object itself, but also encounters in law suits, personal conversations, and correspondences that entangle victims, perpetrators, and their descendants in a shared, albeit antagonistic, relationship with such contested objects.

All three articles show, each in its specific way, how multi-layered is the topic of objects and emotions. This is especially obvious when one analyses, as Atina Grossmann does, how the emotional quality of such objects metamorphoses across generations. In any case, all three articles amply demonstrate that analysing the emotional relationship of victims and perpetrators with certain objects which bind them together is central to a better understanding of the complex fabric of German-Jewish relations before, during, and after the years of Nazi terror and legalized theft. The theoretical tools for a systematic analysis of these emotions are not yet well developed. The three articles presented here in many ways explore territory that has been ignored by the evolving field of history and theory of emotions. The sources they present and reflect on, however, leave no doubt that this is a field worthy of intensive interdisciplinary research.