

Restoring Knowledge and Fairness:  
Vienna University's Jewish Studies Library and Historical Responsibility at the  
Seventieth Anniversary of the End of World War Two

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**Description:** In 2015, Austrian libraries still struggle with the country's responsibility for the legacy of National Socialism. Nazi looting is the issue here; historical fairness the aim; extended provenance research the pathway to achieving it. Vienna University's Jewish Studies Library has recently been a twofold site of this struggle: both as an unexpected holder of NS-confiscated Judaica and as the workplace of its librarian, who has just begun a new research project concerned with the provenance of the university's object collections. In both these areas, Monika has needed to address questions of Jewish identity, education, and the persecution of the Jewish intelligentsia. The presentation will include an account of the practical challenges posed by the occurrence of looted/restored books and objects among library holdings (cataloging, availability), as well as examples of stamps and notes that have allowed books and objects to be identified as looted.

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**PP 1: (animated)**

[Personal introduction:] Good morning everybody. My name is Monika Schreiber and I thank you for attending my talk. I came here from Vienna, Austria. There, I represent the Jewish Studies Library, which is a branch of the total Vienna University Library.

Today, our library is a modern research and teaching collection that covers almost all fields of Jewish and Biblical Studies. However, our **speaking time is tight**, so for more general information about the library, I'd like to refer you to the Q & A slot at the end, and of course to our library homepage.

**What matters here, in the context of my lecture**, is, that, over the past five years or so, our special library has been involved in various ways in a **larger project, that is the University Library's National Socialist provenance research**.

Both things – provenance research as well as our library's involvement in it – are really complex and intricate subjects, so I try to break them down here to a few basic facts.

First of all, the research in question covers two broad categories of stock: books of course, for one thing, and the university's scholarly and scientific object collections, for another. Those collections will be the subject at the end of my talk; let us get started with the books.

Now, provenance research obviously involves **two stages of work**: the **question** whether part of the Library's holdings may have come into its possession **illegally, as a result of Nazi loot**. And the **restitution** of items that eventually turn out to be loot.

And there is one more thing to be considered: the result of our work has primarily **scholarly and symbolic value, rather than material one**, even though one can never be sure of **that**.

So we are no "Monuments Men" in the manner of George Clooney's character in the 2014 film; nor do we deal with grand art nouveau paintings like those featuring in the currently shown movie "The Woman in Gold" with Helen Mirren: There is no such publicity, or money, involved.

What we **are** doing is low-profile detail work, which enables us both to **learn and teach** and, wherever possible, to **give and care** as well.

For example, our work helps making visible the actual **scope of National Socialist plundering**. There, valuable art and furniture taken from opulent villas were only the tip of the iceberg; in fact, basically everything Jewish people possessed was **taken away, redistributed, and reused**, with nothing left behind. This sort of material exploitation was just part of the many acts of horrific mistreatment committed by the Nazis against Jews.

And all that plundering and redistributing **included books**; even, as we shall see, books in Hebrew, or anyway with "Jewish" contents.

The broadening of detailed historical knowledge about those events puts us in a position to **reconnect victims** and their descendants **with their own history, or family history**, and give them a sense of late appreciation.

**Wherever actual acts of restitution are possible (and this is rather hard to achieve, as we shall shortly see)**, they bestow of course the most important **symbolic** value to our attempts.

All of this is true for books and scholarly objects alike; but let's turn to the books first.

There is a lot of really interesting historical background to our library, yet again I can only relate a few facts here which will be useful to bear in mind. For more information, I may refer you to that short bibliography I have handed out and which reflects a heated debate on the issue of the provenance of our holdings, published in the *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* back in 2010.

## **PP 2: (animated)**

For a start, in Vienna, Jewish Studies are an offshoot of Oriental Studies.

**The "Orientalisches Institut", founded in 1887, had a long-standing Hebrew and Judaica division.**

And in the **1930s and 40s**, the Oriental Department had a **dean** who was deeply involved with the Nazi regime. This gave him privileged access to the stolen books pertaining to all the sub-disciplines of his department [including Hebrew studies], so that the Oriental Department held a real trove of looted books.

In 1966, the “Institut für Judaistik” broke away from the Oriental Department, taking over all the Hebrew and Judaic publications among its holdings. **Although** – and this is a noteworthy fact- **almost all** of them were “legal”, as the looted Hebrew and Jewish texts among the Orientalists’ holdings were restituted, meaning here: handed over to the newly forming Jewish community, as early as in 1945.

- When I say “**almost all**”, this is because among the otherwise legal offerings of our library (20,000), there is still a small number of books (approx. 15), whose provenance is attributable to Nazi looting.

This leads me on to a few more remarks on provenance research:

### PP 3: (animated)

In and about 2010, two processes converged in our library; both dealt with similar issues, but they were completely separate in practice.

- **For one thing**, there was

University-wide provenance research going on: the Vienna University Library had put a task force together as early as in 2004. It was active until 2010.

Its members conducted what may be called library archaeology: item-by-item autopsy of all the University Library’s book holdings published before 1946, which run to no less than 400,000 volumes. And that **folder** I have handed out to you together with the reference list will tell you more about the team’s activities and successes.

Among other things, the amount of loot in the Oriental Department was revealed. The finds prompted the research team to take a particularly close look at our library as well; after all, the historical context between the two departments was known at that point in time.

- **For another thing**,

roughly at the same time, Austrian and American historians embarked on separate, exterior, research of the **academic history** of the Vienna “Institute of Jewish Studies”.

Their research agenda was proving continuity between anti-semitically motivated Jewish Studies from pre-war and National Socialist times, on the one hand, and modern “Jewish Studies” in Austria and Germany, on the other.

In keeping with this line of thinking, modern departments and libraries such as ours may be viewed as “beneficiaries” of Nazi plundering of Jewish books.

Now, there were problems with the work of these historians: misunderstandings of biographical facts concerning the founder of our department, and they were blissfully unaware of the activities and results of the provenance research team.

But as far as our Jewish Studies library was concerned, the historians somehow still had a point, moving as they were in a **gray zone between misinterpretation and truth.** **Misinterpretation** because owing to the 1945 restitution of Hebrew books, there had only a very small number of volumes raising suspicion been found. But this again is enough **truth** to

enable me now to exemplify this broader agenda with 2 examples from my own library, and to show the way we work.

#### **PRACTICAL EXAMPLES – PP 4 – 10]: (6 min)**

##### **PP 4:**

Let us plunge into practice with the Jewish Studies Library's greatest success story so far: the one book from our holdings that could actually be **restituted**:

A Galician edition of the halachic work

##### **Hok le-Yisra'el**

from 1888. Here you can see title page of vol. 1, but it's a 3- volumes-work.

Now from the practical research viewpoint, on the book title, there are the following hints:

- Reference to "Orientalisches Institut", which meant that the inventory book of the Oriental Department would have to be checked for further information
- And, importantly, there is a dealer's entry: stamp of J. M. Belf's bookstore, featuring a Viennese address.

This entry made it possible to unveil the Belf story: Josef Belf, was the owner at that time; in 1938, his store underwent "Aryanization", the forcible confiscation of Jewish businesses and property by the Nazis and its redistribution to non-Jewish owners; Josef Belf, the shopkeeper, was detained at Dachau, released in 1939; he emigrated to the U.S. and died in 1944 of the long-term effects of his imprisonment.

But there are also hints missing in the book, such as

- Ex libris, name, dedication, and so on, so that there is no reference to legitimate buyers or private owners.

##### **PP 5:**

(continuation Belf)

**As I said, the inventory list of the Oriental Department was examined** and it contains the following information:

- Title according to the German Romanization standards of that period.
- Inventory date 1951; it is most plausible that the book was inventoried retroactively, because

The most important point that is missing here is any hint to a:

- Legal acquisition by the University.

So, the only reasonable presumption was that the title was still in the stock of Belf's bookshop at the time of its "Aryanization", that it was looted in the process and given to the

O.I. for scholarly use. On this basis, the researchers classified it as loot, to be put up for restitution.

Fortunately, the available information about the Belf bookstore *yielded enough of a story* to locate a legal successor in 2011: the youngest of Josef Belf's 5 children, a daughter, 90 years of age at that time and living in the U.S., was happy to accept the 3 volumes in memory of her parents.

#### PP 6:

#### Looted books awaiting restitution

Now here you get a look into my office cabinet, where I keep the handful of loot extant in my library (one shelf down, 5 or 6 to go).

From these, I selected one relatively well-preserved, sturdy volume which may serve as an example of a non-allocable item, whose ownership status has yet to be determined. Let us have a look inside the book:

#### PP 7:

It is a

#### Torah Shelemah

Printed in Szatmar, Hungary, in 1910, and it is the work of a local Rabbi.

Now as for the hints **in the book**, the title page shows the following:

- As in the case just mentioned, there is reference to the "Orientalisches Institut", which meant that also here the inventory book of the Oriental Department would have to be checked for further information
- And there is a period book stamp of the university, complete with swastika + 1943 as the inventory date. Of course, this made the book inherently suspicious.

And again there are important hints missing, such as

- Ex libris, name, dedication, and so on, so that there is no reference to a legitimate buyer or private owner.

#### PP 8:

(continuation Torah Shelemah)

**As in the previous book, the inventory list of the Oriental Department was examined and produced the following information:**

- Title according to the **German Romanization standards** of that period. (Tōrah šělēmāh)
- And a telling note of accession: "Geschenk der Geheimen Staatspolizei in Wien" (gift of Vienna GESTAPO/secret police). So this is by all standards proof of illegal accession.

But unfortunately, there isn't :

- Any reference to legitimate owner or seller.

So all of this, while quite telling, *doesn't reveal enough of a story* to connect the book to any specific person, family, or firm. It was stolen from one of the many homes, synagogues, or stores that had been raided during the years of Nazi tyranny. But there is no one to give it back to. Restitution is impossible at this stage.

And this is not unusual. To this day, there are many such items of art, craft, or print, in Austria, in all sorts of state-owned collections: museums, libraries....

#### PP 9:

For this category of cases, the Republic of Austria is pooling the resources of those institutions in a concerted effort to **trace the heirs** of such items by means of its **Art Database**, which is a division of **the National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism, an institution established in 1995.**

The function of this database is to help legal successors of Holocaust victims locate and claim artwork and related objects that were looted from their families.

And the Vienna University Library is one of the institutions that cooperate with the National Fund in its search for heirs.

#### PP 10:

As an example, I show the upload of the Hungarian **Torah Shelemah** in the Art Database.

Various search options may lead victims of National Socialism and their families to objects that might have been in their legal possession. Then they can get in touch with the National Fund; ownership claims are checked; positive results → objects returned.

### THE UNIVERSITY'S COLLECTIONS – PP 12 – 14: (6 min)

#### PP 11:

To round off what I have said so far, I should like to provide a brief insight into a new branch of the University Library's provenance research. It is one I am actively involved in as a researcher still trying to find my way around what is a new line of work for me.

**It's about the university's pre-war research and teaching collections.**

What's the background here? For one thing, the university's historical object collections came under the administrative responsibility of the University Library a couple of years ago.

For another thing, in the course of the provenance research on books in a number of libraries, first clues were found concerning the existence of connections between books of looted provenance and those collections. So in 2014, I was commissioned with a pilot study concerning such objects' **possible** history as Nazi-loot.

Here again, I'd like to present an example of the broader agenda of provenance research, if now in a non-book field.

#### PP 14: (animated)

**The first collection I was allowed to lay my hands on is the teaching collection of Vienna University's Department of Egyptology.**

I'd like to give a **little** background here as well: Department established in 1923; early involvement of founders with National Socialism, not unsimilar to the Orientalists; department was located in an aryanized apartment. So everything looked highly suspicious to the book researchers from the outset.

Even more than with the books, which often bear names, ex-libris or owners' stamps, **archival material** is of **special** importance for the processing of objects and artifacts. One example would be the **inventory list** of the Department of Egyptology, a section of which is shown here.

This list was searched for hints on the provenance of library books as early as in 2008; in the process, a list of 12 plaster replicas of Egyptian art was found, and I am dealing with them at the moment.

Now, which hints do we have in the inventory list?

- First, there is again that note: "**handed over by GESTAPO in July 1938**", which makes the objects automatically suspect in terms of their accession (just like the Torah shelemah I mentioned before).
- Second, there is of course a description of items. Example: "Baboon's head".

And here it is:

- **You see here the bottom side of the baboon's head with corresponding inventory number.** Reference to a legitimate owner is missing on the object.
- But there is also a faint, barely visible, **engraving of a 3-digit number.**

And that 3-digit-number leads us to the **manufacturer** of the plaster casts: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, famous replica workshop (still active). And the engraving turned out to be the **Berlin workshop mold number**, by which a copy of the same baboon can still be ordered today.

The museum hasn't kept pre-war sales lists, or they were lost, so no information is available concerning the original purchaser(s).

#### PP 14:

So all we can say at the moment is that someone with a liking for Egyptian art had the collection manufactured in Berlin; when their home was raided, the collection was stored at

some GESTAPO department and reallocated to the Department of Egyptology. Therefore, like the book presented above this is a case for the National Fund's Art Database.

And here you see the objects, which have in the meantime been uploaded to the database, and we hope that further traces might be found that way. [Most of the objects belong to the special Amarna period; perhaps the owner had particular knowledge of it - that might be some sort of lead.]

**PP 15:**

As you can see, in our arduous detail work, with its many dead ends and primarily symbolic and scholarly reward, we are dealing with a massive, complex issue. Historical reconstruction of the past is never easy, but with so many lacunae in the documentary evidence to start with, and with so much of the once existing evidence destroyed – or simply lost in the fog of war –we are facing a daunting task. But let me assure you: we stay committed, we won't give up!

Thank you for your attention!

## Reference list:

- The discussion in RRJ in chronological order:

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- The results of provenance research at the Jewish Studies Library:

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