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The Restitution of Jewish Cultural Treasures After the Holocaust: The Offenbach Archival Depot's Role in The Fulfillment Of U.S. International And Moral Obligations (A First Hand Account)

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Thank you, Dr. Zachary Baker, for inviting me to talk at this 7th annual Rosaline/Myer Feinstein lecture on the OAD restitution activities, involving over 3,000,000 books, archives, and other cultural properties, to fulfill U.S. International and moral obligations after World War II. Thanks also to the Council of Archives and Research Libraries in Jewish Studies (CARLJS), the National Foundation for Jewish Culture (NFJC), and the Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL). It is an honor. It forced me to study events occurring over 50 years ago relating to OAD organization, staffing, policies, and procedures; and to study OAD “regular” and “special” authorized restitution operations, 1946-1949. Also to reflect on lessons to be learned, of possible value to you.

In late February 1946 my colleague, first Lt. Leslie I. Poste, a library and archives specialist, drove me through a blinding snowstorm to Offenbach, Germany—next to Frankfurt-am-Main. (1) En route, Lt. Poste briefed me on the Offenbach collecting point’s origin in 1945. His role, along with others, in selecting a building within the I.G. Farben complex on the main river, and his concern that restitution operations be expedited, in accordance with U.S. Military regulations.

Since its establishment in July 1945, the operation had yet to reconstitute any materials. An attempt was made at the Rothschild Library in Frankfurt with a staff of some 50 German civilians to sort and catalogue the items at a rate of 300 items a day. But it was realized that at that rate it would require more than 20 years to process an estimated 2,000,000 volumes. Detailed cataloguing was discontinued, at Poste’s recommendation and it was proposed that the holdings at the Rothschild Library from Hungen, Hirzenhain, Bavaria, and other repositories be relocated to the Offenbach collecting point, and operations at Rothschild cease. Lt. Poste also reviewed the operations of the Hitler Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR) and its educational branch, the Institut Zur Erforschung Der Judenfrage (Institute to Research the Jewish Question). The ERR, backed by German military forces, had traced Jewish, Masonic, socialist, and other anti-Nazi cultural objects throughout Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe and had deposited them in many places. The ERR targets ranged from occupied Ukraine to the French-Spanish border, and from Greece to the British Isle of Man. The ERR even raided places in Italy, an Axis power. After Kristallnacht, in 1938, the ERR collected items to save and use them for Nazism and against Jews and Judaism.

Additionally, Lt. Poste described U.S. Combat and occupation operations to protect and reconstitute the looted collections. He and other personnel felt the collections should be moved to a single, large, secure facility. The I. G. Farben building at Offenbach was their choice.

My first impressions of the Offenbach collecting point in February 1946 were overwhelming and amazing at once. As I stood before a seemingly endless sea of crates and books, I thought what a horrible mess! What could I do with all these materials? How could I carry out my assignment successfully? Beyond the mess, however, was an even larger mission. Indeed, the only action possible was to return the items to their owners, as quickly as possible.

The Offenbach collecting point was housed in a well-guarded five-story concrete building suitable for use as a warehouse, following repairs. Inside, however there were only six Germans, headed by an American civilian with displaced person status, many crates, packages, stacks, and loose piles covered several floors. Clearly, the operation was running very, very slowly. My mission was to revive this somewhat dormant organization in order to accomplish the mission successfully. Hence I launched the following actions:

The Offenbach archival depot was officially established on March 2, 1946 under an order issued by the director of the office of military government for greater Hesse (OMGG). The OAD succeeded the Offenbach collecting point; 6 employees and some 1.5 million or more items assembled at the 5 story building for sorting and restitution. Later, receipts from Bavaria, Wuerttemberg-baden, Hesse, U.S. Berlin, and U.S. Bremen increased the total handled by the OAD to 3,205,041 items (as of November 20, 1948).

The OAD directive essentially provided that the director —

1. Establish and maintain liaison with allied and other officially designated restitution officers. Assigned or attached to u.s. Forces European theater (USFET). During 1946-49, over 50 restitution officers came to OAD.
2. Assist them in the restitution of books, archives, and other cultural properties clearly identifiable as to country of origin.
3. Make recommendations regarding unidentifiable materials as to country of origin
4. Procure personnel and direct their activities.
5. Provide logistical support for the OAD; security, supply, transportation, maintenance, storage, warehousing, boxing, sorting, and shipping
6. Prepare military correspondence for the director, (OMGGH). [\(2\)](#)

In March 1946 German personnel was obtained from the local arbeitsamt (personnel office), increasing the staff to 12 by March 1st; 51 by March 7th; 97 by March 14th; 167 by March 28th. A slight increase took place in April 1946 to 176. Decreases occurred in June 1946 to 143; august, 121; October 65; December 46; January 1947-march 1948, 43-40; April 1948, 33; and December 1948, 19. [\(3\)](#)

The rise and fall of the size of the staff reflected the workload; also, the desire of the military and

German authorities to reduce personnel expenditures.

In March 1946, OAD was organized into 3 branches—reflecting OAD functional activities:

1. Administrative branch—personnel, security, supply, transportation, maintenance sections.
2. Operational branch—storage, warehousing, care, preservation, sorting, boxing, crating, and shipping sections.
3. Liaison and ranch—country sections. [\(4\)](#)

U.S. Personnel assigned to direct the OAD during 1946-1949 were:

Captain s. J. Pomrenze, March – May 1946

Captain Isaac Bencowitz, May-November 1946

Mr. Theodore Heinrich, November 1946 – January 1947

Mr. Joseph Horne, 1947-1948, and

Mr. James Kimball, February – April 1949. [\(5\)](#)

During May-August 1946 Corporal Reuben Sami was assigned to the director to handle supply procurement and other administrative matters. Additionally, volunteers were valuable individuals—Jewish chaplains, like Rabbi Isaiah Rackowsky of Usfet, Rabbi Maurice Liber of France, Dr. Gershom Schulem of Jerusalem, Lucy Dawidowicz of YIVO, and others—who supported the OAD with their expertise in identifying Hebrew and Yiddish materials, in sorting the files and, generally, making it possible to reconstitute the items. [\(6\)](#) Also, many of the over 250 visitors aided the depot staff.

Good working conditions were essential. Heat, light, clean floors, repaired windows, and heavy-duty shelves were provided. [\(7\)](#) U.S. sources were requisitioned and supplied enough coal and gasoline until the winter of 1947. Then coal shortages occurred during the winters of 1947 and 1948. They were partly solved by the naphthol-chemie management of the building. About 30 German employees were initially assigned to building maintenance. They did an excellent job of ensuring a pleasant environment in the depot.

The I.G. Complex, taken over by the naphthol-chemie, had security staff on site, as did the OAD. Security checks were made frequently, and, later identification cards were issued to all entering the OAD. Internal telephones were activated on each floor of the building through an OAD switchboard. The identification of crates, stacks, packages, and piles bearing some indication of country of origin were checked beginning in March 1946.

Instructions for sorting the materials were divided into 4 phases: [\(8\)](#)

I. Test closed crates packages. Do the items belong to a named country/institution?

II. Divide the materials in to identifiable/unidentifiable groups

III. Sort by country, if possible.

IV. Sort semi-identifiable by stamp, marking, and language.

Captain Bencowitz improved subsequently the march 1946 sorting plan by photographing the stamps, markings, etc, indexing them by country, assigning each sorters specific stamps/markings; having each sorter become familiar with assigned stamps; markings; numbering them; etc, thus personnel unfamiliar with Hebrew, Slavic, or of over 30 languages were able to identify huge portions of the unidentifiable piles, this Bencowitz system was remarkably suitable for our operations.

The Netherlands restitution officer, Major Jonkherr Dirk Petrus Marcus Graswinckel, an unusual personality had begun his work in 1945 at Offenbach. By March 8, 1946 he had 371 crates ready for restitution to the Netherlands by barge, up the Rhine River. The barge, Mary Rotterdam left OAD on March 12, 1946 Graswinckel left for Holland on march 10, 1946, to ensure proper unloading and returned to the OAD on March 22, 1946. This was the first restitution shipment from the OAD. [\(9\)](#)

A second barge for the Netherlands, the Buiten Verwachting, was ready for restitution by June 11, 1946 with 533 crates. A third barge, Allemania—with 520 crates, left OAD for the Netherlands on July 4, 1946.

The 3 shipments to the Netherlands in 1946 included collections of: [\(10\)](#)

1. Jewish Portuguese Seminarium Amsterdam—109 crates
2. Bibliotheca Rosenthalirna Amsterdam U—194 crates
3. Societas Spinozana—18 crates
4. Free masons—25 crates
5. Jewish historical museum Amsterdam—10 crates
6. Other Netherlands organizations—26 crates

The French restitution team, headed by Lt. Colonel Jean Prinnet of the Paris Bibliotheque Nationale, also began identifying and preparing their materials for restitution of five freight cars—730 crates were loaded in March 1946; with four additional freight cars in April 1946. Included in these nine freight cars were: [\(11\)](#)

1. Paris Bank Rothschild Freres—596 crates
2. Alliance Israelites
3. Ecole Biblioteheque
4. Bibliotheque de Chinon
5. French Free Masons
6. French synagogues
7. Lifschits Libraire Paris—80 crates
8. Other French organizations—57 crates

Russian restitution officers came to the OAD in June 1946. Ltc N.R. Novik identified and receipted for 760 crates; arranged for transportation to Russia in July 1946; and four freight cars left shortly thereafter. [\(12\)](#) Italian restitution officers required seven freight cars in November 1946 to reconstitute collections of the Kunst Historisches Institut in Florence, the Collegio Rabbinico de Firenze, the Deutsche Historisches Institut in Rome, and other Italian organizations. [\(13\)](#)

A somewhat irregular restitution effort took place in April 1946, involving the Preussische Staats Bibliothek of Berlin. [\(14\)](#) This huge collection had been moved west to Frankfurt an-main during World War II and was in OAD by March 1946. On orders by General Lucius clay, the U.S. Military Governor, it was restituted to East Berlin in 23 freight cars on April 25, 1946. A military government officer was in charge of this 700,000 shipment.

To summarize the above largest restitution operations, as of October 1946:

Country crates items

1. Netherlands 1,452 319,000
2. France 1,454 319,840
3. Germany 23 freight cars 700,0000
4. Russia 1,055 232,000
5. Italy 1,021 234,520

Lesser restitution operations took place in 1946 and as of October 1946 included: [\(15\)](#)

1. Belgium 14 2,420

2. Great Britain 17 3,740

(Channel Islands)

3. Czechoslovakia 56 6,522

Also during 1946 and 1947 restitution took place adding to the above shipments; and involving countries/crates:

Yugoslavia, 171; Greece, 41; Poland, 60; Austria, 115; Norway, 2; Romania, 1; Switzerland, 2; and Turkey, 1 (as of august 1947). Unfortunately, these restitutions did not require the countries to return the materials to their owners.

“Special” restitution operations involved actions by governments and individuals not included as official restitution agencies and/or officials. These involved U.S. Intelligence elements, the library of congress mission, the American Jewish joint distribution committee, Yivo-strashun, German institutions, and the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Commission (JCR).

U.s. Intelligence agents, G-2, CIC and others were, of course, free to come and choose books, archives, and other cultural properties.

The Library of Congress became involved in reestablishing its presence in Europe in the summer of 1945. Through its Library of Congress Mission (LCM) it resumed its main purpose there, namely, the purchase of books and newspapers for its collections and for distribution to other American libraries.

As for looted materials, Dr. Luther H. Evans, the librarian of congress, issued instructions for LCM participation in its handling but was determined to stay outside the restitution operations. In this regard, Dr. Evans wrote—as paraphrased by Dr. Robert Waitee, senior historian of the U.S. Justice department—the problem of loot was materially one of the most difficult problems we are called upon to face. The issue has been widely discussed by librarians in private conversations throughout the United States and it has been the subject of related discussions with members of the mission and with representatives of the war department.

The OAD transferred to the LCM 4,712 items on March 21, 1946, largely nazi-produced items; and over the next few years lcm received about 17,000 volumes. LCM did not take items eligible for restitution; it took only materials cleared by high omgus levels. [\(16\)](#)

The JDC initially, through its senior representative in Europe, Professor Koppel Pinson of Queens College, was interested in getting books from the OAD for the Jewish refugees in the displaced persons camps. JDC obtained an agreement from Omgus Berlin for a loan of 25,000 items. Some 1,400 were given on March 3, 1946, and additional quantities added. By the end of April 1946 the total reached 19, 127 items. Also, Professor Pinson was given two trucks to distribute the books to the camps in May 1946. Pinson worked tirelessly to carry out this

mission. [\(17\)](#)

Another important “special” restitution operation involved the valuable YIVO-Strashun-and associated Vilno collections at the OAD. Restitution of these materials presented a number of problems. Lithuania was the country of origin, but it was no longer an independent state—but a part of the USSR; also it was almost Juden-rein. Additionally, its top professional, Dr. Max Weinreich—with prophetic vision—had arranged for the transfer of the Vilno YIVO headquarters to NYC YIVO in 1939. So—who gets YIVO-Strashun. Dr. Weinreich worked continuously with us authorities on this matter. Also, he feared the collections would be thrown into the mass of unidentifiable—unrestitutable materials.

Dr. Weinreich found out that I was stationed at the OAD. He turned to my brother, Dr. Israel Chaim Pomerantz, a key member of YIVO-NY, and a Vice-President of the Manischewitz Matzo Co. for help. I was recruited by Dr. Weinreich to get approval from four U.S. Agencies to restitute the YIVO archives to YIVO NY. During January to June 1947 I coordinated a plan which enabled me to go to the OAD; mid-June 1947, restitute 420 crates/79,204 items; load them on a ship at Bremen, bound for NYC by July 1, 1947. [\(18\)](#)

German institutions began to send representatives to OAD. [\(19\)](#) in September 1946 a move to turn over some 7,482 volumes was initiated at OAD. Additional actions were taken with Abbot Bush of St. George’s seminary in Frankfurt-am-Main to restitute all catholic properties. The seminary under took the distribution in July 1947. Similar actions were taken in the same period with respect to German Masonic materials. They were turned over to the great national mother lode—some 49,853 items—for distribution to free Masonic organizations. With regard to very small German collections, [\(20\)](#) it was difficult to find organizations and or individuals who would sign for them and see that they were returned over to proper owners.

An especially difficult task was presented to OAD by hundreds of thousand of items with no country and/or institutional ownership. The Jewish cultural restitution organization and other organizations and individuals became concerned with this problem during and after World War II. The main worry was how to handle the items in the interest of perpetuating Jewish culture. For cultural purposes the material was divided in these major categories:

Jewish books, archives, and other documents in various languages

I. Torah scrolls and other synagogue/church vestments, altar covers, prayer shawls, etc.

II. Jewish ritual objects of precious metals; and including precious stones

III. Jewish paintings and furnishings

IV. Such other Jewish cultural properties as the JCR and the military government agree to transfer to the custody of various institutions.

In an excellent paper, to be published in libraries and culture, summer 2002, [\(21\)](#) Dr. Waite,

summarizes a number of plans proposed for the disposition of the OAD unidentifiable items:

I. Dr. Theodore Gaster of the Library of Congress—designate the library of congress as the trustee, with JCR working closely in the distribution of the items

II. Paul Vanderbilt of OMGUS, MFAA—, JCR should play a central role and it should be the link with the library

III. Luther Evans— the disposition should be in the hands of the U.S. Military authorities in Germany

IV. Professor Jerome Michael of Columbia University law school and the JCR— the state department should determine disposition; avoid giving items to former nazi occupied countries— remove unidentified items from Europe to use and Israel. Set up board of advisors, designate a trustee. Library of Congress should classify/catalogue books.

V. Copenhagen, Denmark—give items to the Jewish library in Copenhagen

On February 15, 1949, an agreement was reached to designate the JCR as the trustee, with some conditions. The JCR was to distribute to public and quasi-public religious, cultural, and educational institutions, as JCR sees fit—to perpetuate Jewish art and culture. The transfers began in the fall of 1949. By early 1950, about 2/3rd of the books at the Wiesbaden collecting point (the successor to the OAD in April 1949) were shipped or ready for shipment. The procedure, laid out by Hannah Arendt, the JCR secretary was:

1. To make every effort to locate the owner
2. To type a list of the persons, reproduce it and distribute it to major Jewish organizations/institutions. Lists of persons and subjects were parts of monthly reports of the depot.
3. To give the list wide publicity
4. If items are not claimed, to give them to libraries/institutions with stipulation that, if item is claimed within two years, it is given to claimant, with proper identification

The JCR distributed over 79,000 books between 7/1/49 and 11/30/50. By January 31, 1952, the JCR had turned over 150,000 items to 17 priority libraries and 31 other libraries. The attached charts list the receiving libraries/institutions, 1949-1952. (22) Dr. Waite concludes that this was a fair and thoughtful resolution—and I hope you all will agree that the OAD restitution activities involving over 3,000,000 books, archives, and other cultural properties fulfilled U.S. International obligations fairly and thoughtfully.

FOOTNOTES

1. Leslie J. Poste, “Books Go Home from the Wars”, *Library Journal*, 73: 1699-1704, December

1, 1948.

2. Offenbach Archival Depot, *Monthly Report*, March 1946, P.3 and Enclosure 1, P.8-9. The Monthly Reports, 1946-49, form the basis of this paper and are located at the U.S. National Archives, Boxes 259-262, Location 390-45-22-06. Hereinafter cited as UAD, Monthly Report (March 1946). See Greg Bradsher, *Holocaust-Era Assets*, National Archives and Records Administration, 1994, p.519, "Records of the Offenbach Archival Depot."

3. OAD, *Monthly Report*, March 1946, p.1. Also, *Ibid*, April 1946, p.1; and Subsequent *Monthly Report*, June 1946-August 1947, p.1 of each report. Staff figures for November 1947 and months in 1948 form a part of the Wiesbaden monthly consolidated field reports.

4. OAD, *Monthly Report*, March 1946, p.10, Enclosure, Organization chart.

5. *Ibid*, March 1946, p.1 (Capt. Pomrenze); May 1946, p.1 (Captain Bencowitz); November 1946, p.1 (theinnich); January 1947, p.1 (Joseph Horne) of the OAD, in Leslie Poste, The development of U.S. Protection of Libraries and Archives in Europe during World War II, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1958, and Chapter 10, Restitution: The Offenbach Archival Depot, typescript, p.296, U.S. Army, Civil Affairs School, Ft. Gordon, GA.

6. OAD, *Monthly Report*, March 1946, p.3 (Rachowky); June 1946, p.2 (Liber); July 1946, p.3 (Scholem); February 1947, p.2 (Schidkret-Pawidowicz). "Visitors" are listed in the OAD *Monthly Report*, March 1946-August 1947.

7. The Monthly Reports contain paragraphs relating to building security, repairs, maintenance, heating, etc. As winter approached, requirements for heating supplies were emphasized in the Monthly reports. See September 1946, p.1; February 1947, p.4-5, low coal subsistence.

8. OAD *Monthly Report*, March 1946, p.4. Also see *Ibid*. Enclosure 8, p.27, for a "Work Plan for Sorting." For Bencowitz sorting plan, see OAD *Monthly Report*, May 1946, p.5. Also Enclosure 3 to May 1946 report, p.13, "Work Plan for Sorting."

9. OAD *Monthly Report*, March 1946, p.4 (Mary Rotterdam); April 1946, p.36, (Ruiten Verwachting); July 1946, p.4 (Allemania). See also S.J. Pomrenze, "Offenbach Reminiscences and the Restitutions to the Netherlands", *The Return of Looted Collections (1946-1996): An Unfinished Chapter*, Amsterdam, 1997, p.10-18. For a summary of Graswinckel and contributions to the OAD, see Pomrenze, *op. cit.*, p.15-16.

10. OAD *Monthly Report*, March 1946, p.6-7.

11. *Ibid.*, p.7; April 1946, p.3.

12. *Ibid.*, June 1946, p.5.

13. *Ibid.*, November 1946, p.4-5.
14. *Ibid.*, April 1946, p.3.
15. *Ibid.*, October 1946, p.8.
16. Rubert G. Waite, Post-war fate of books lusted by the Nazis, Memorandum, U.S. Department of Justice, to Eli M. Rosenbaum, May 2, 1997, p.6-15.
17. OAD *Monthly Report*, March 1946, p.1, 7; April 1946, p.6.
18. S.J. Pomrenze, YIVO-Strashun and the Offenbach Archival Depot, Lecture at YIVO Institute of Research, Typescript, April 16, 2002, p.1-7.
19. OAD *Monthly Report*, September 1946, p.4; March 1947,p.4; June 1947, p.4.
20. *Ibid.*, July 1947, p.6.
21. Rubert G. Waite, "The Returning of Jewish Cultural Property: Handling of Books Looted by the Nazis in the American Zone of Occupation", *Libraries and Culture*, July 2002, 37:3, p.213-228.
22. "Distribution of Books in the U.S. from July 1, 1949 to January 31, 1952," Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, [1952, p.3].