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Introduction to Part 2: Objects of Religious Practice in the Jewish Communities of Germany after 1945

The Shoah marked the deepest rupture in the history of Germany's Jewish communities. After 1945, only a few German Jews returned from exile or from the National Socialist concentration camps. Thus, it was mainly the Displaced Persons who, coming from all over Europe, formed new Jewish communities in the "Land of the Perpetrators."

At first, these communities were not intended to be permanent and had not yet become institutionalized. The survivors primarily sought emigration and sat on packed suitcases, ready to leave Germany as soon as possible. However, the desire to be able to lead a self-determined life again eventually caused Jewish communities to form, despite all reservations about continuing to live in Germany. These communities were first established in temporary facilities within the DP camps or even outside the camps in assigned houses or synagogues that had not been completely destroyed in 1938.

Fig. 1: Leipheim, Jewish service in the DP camp Leipheim, undated photo (Photograph: Breslawski Schneiderman, Yad Vashem Photo Archive, ID 1486_651).

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Torah scrolls, prayer books, prayer shawls, tefillin and other ceremonial objects needed for religious practice were missing. Approximately ninety percent of all cult and ritual objects owned by Jewish communities, individuals or even Jewish museums in Germany had been looted by the National Socialists. In addition, there also existed looted ceremonial objects in Germany that had been stolen from all over Europe by National Socialist organizations for the Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question (*Institut für die Erforschung der Judenfrage*).[1]

In addition to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JOINT), the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization (JRSO) and the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (JCR) for the American occupation zone, as well as the British Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad (JCRA) and its operative arm, the Jewish Relief Unit (JRU) for the British occupation zone, organized, with the help of the Western Allies, the tracing and return of Jewish property and, in particular, Jewish ceremonial objects. If the former owners of Jewish cult and ritual objects had survived and could be found, they were returned to them. Where this was not possible, the objects defined as heirless property were distributed to Jewish institutions: To the newly forming Jewish communities in Germany, but also to Jewish institutions in Israel and other states. However, the majority of the cult and ritual objects looted by the National Socialists remained lost.[2] Since the confiscated looted property was not sufficient to enable a religious life in the newly emerging communities, prayer books and Judaica had to be procured from other countries as well and brought to Germany.

In 1949, Hannah Arendt wrote a report for the JCR in which she described the situation in the British occupation zone.[3] Although the JCR, as trustee of heirless Jewish cultural property, was at that time only responsible for the American zone of occupation, it was already able to distribute more than half a million heirless properties to Jewish communities and institutions worldwide. For the British zone, the Jewish Trust Organization (JTC) was not assigned this task until 1950. According to Arendt, apart from other reasons, the delay was due to the differing interests of the newly forming Jewish communities, which were fighting for the legal succession of the pre-1933 communities and thus for legal recognition, on the one hand, and the

1 Julie-Marthe Cohen, Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, and Ruth Jolanda Weinberger, *Handbuch zur Judaica Provenienzforschung: Zeremonialobjekte* [Looted Art and Jewish Cultural Property Initiative] (Claims Conference and WJRO, 2019).

2 See the databasis provided by Claims Conference and World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO), https://art.claimscon.org/resources/overview-of-worldwide-looted-art-and-provenance-research-databases/. Accessed November 2021.

3 Elisabeth Gallas, "Jüdische Kulturgüter in der Nachkriegszeit. Hannah Arendts Bericht zur Situation in Hamburg," in *Hamburger Schlüsseldokumente zur deutsch-jüdischen Geschichte* (January 30, 2017), https://dx.doi.org/10.23691/jgo:article-89.de.v1. Accessed November 2021. For the report, see "Hannah Arendt, Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Field Reports, 1948–1951," *Tätigkeitsbericht* 18 (February 15 – March 10, 1950). Trans. Insa Kummer. Available in *Hamburger Schlüsseldokumente zur deutsch-jüdischen Geschichte*, https://dx.doi.org/10.23691/jgo:source-126.de.v1. Accessed November 2021.

Fig. 2: Augsburg, Rally against the British Palestine policy in the fountain courtyard of the Augsburg Synagogue, March 24, 1947 (Jewish Museum Augsburg Swabia/Esther Fritsch, JKMB-006582).

international Jewish representatives, who saw no future for Jewish life in Germany, on the other. However, a look at the effects of legal succession shows that this was not a dispute about principles: With legal succession, claims could be made both to the property of the former Jewish communities and to property that had been declared heirless. The international aid organizations pursued their own interests just as much as the Jewish communities themselves.

The National Socialist looting of cultural objects had led to collections being torn apart and hardly remaining in their original places. Throughout Germany, Jewish ceremonial objects were found in non-Jewish municipal museums or depots. Initially, they were handed over to local Jewish community representatives, without any consideration of whether these objects had also previously been in the possession of that community. However, the Jewish welfare organizations, on the one hand, did not believe that the artefacts were safe in the possession of fragile and financially strapped new Jewish communities in Germany and, on the other hand, also understood themselves to be representing the interests of the emigrated German Jews, who also laid claim to the ceremonial objects that had been found. Largely for this reason, many of the rescued objects eventually ended up in educational institutions and communities in the United States and Israel and were therefore lost to the new Jewish communities in Germany in the long term.

It seems difficult to summarize the problematic situation regarding Jewish ceremonial objects and community development in Germany after 1945. Too many parameters need to be taken into account. On the one hand, the partly very differing situation in the various occupation zones must be mentioned, but also regional differences (large and small DP camps, connection to pre-war communities or not, etc.)[4] played a role regarding the distribution of resources to the Jewish communities as well as their self-confidence and possibilities for action. This situation did not become simpler later on, as there were then two German states that had different political views regarding their handling of the National Socialist past, regarding the continued existence of Jewish communities in Germany, as well as regarding claims to Jewish property that had been declared heirless.

Nevertheless, if we want to start defining the questions that outline the research field of "Jewish Ceremonial Objects in the Jewish Communities after 1945," we could focus on the following: A scholarly examination of Jewish ceremonial objects in postwar communities in Germany has to, in order to draw a preliminary conclusion, look at the subject matter from several perspectives: First, what ceremonial objects are involved, for what religious actions are they used, and to what extent is their possession a reflection of the communities' self-image? Secondly, we need to focus on the people involved: Who was active in the Jewish communities and who in the Jewish aid organizations? What goals did the individual players pursue? Third, the focus must be placed not only on where the ceremonial objects that were given to the Jewish communities came from, but also from which contexts they were torn. And fourth, it is necessary to ask about the subsequent whereabouts of the ceremonial objects: Were they only used in the communities for a short time and soon replaced by others, did the objects remain in the communities or were they transferred to a museum?

These ceremonial objects, their history and their significance for the present and the future of the Jewish communities, will be the focus of the following chapters. For, in contrast to the institutional development of the camp communities and early community building outside the camps, they have so far hardly been studied.

4 For an overview, see after-the-shoah.org, a project of the Nuremberg Institute for Holocaust Studies: https://www.after-the-shoah.org. There you can find an example of a small DP camp in Swabia: https://www.after-the-shoah.org/saulgau-ein-wartesaal-in-der-schwaebischen-provinz-a-waiting-room-in-the-swabian-province/. Accessed November 2021.

Fig. 3–4: Prayer book of Sche'erit Hapleta, cover, printed on behalf of the American Joint Distribution 1946 (Jewish Museum Augsburg Swabia, JKMB-007768).

The contributions

In her chapter, **Ayleen Winkler** takes a first look at what was left of Germany's Jewish communities after the Shoah. On behalf of the Jewish Scientific Institute (YIVO), Mordechai Bernstein, who had survived the Nazi era in Soviet prisons, traveled through former Jewish communities in Germany starting in 1948, searching for remnants of their history. Often religious objects were the only things he could still find. These objects were used in different ways: they were ignored, hidden, repurposed or exhibited.

Mordechai Bernstein recorded the status quo: he inventoried still existing possessions of the Jewish communities, researched their history and went in search of looted cultural property. He later summarized his findings in three volumes published in Yiddish. In 2020, the Jewish Museum Munich dedicated the exhibition "In the Labyrinth of Times. With Mordechai W. Bernstein through 1700 years of German-Jewish history." In her contribution, Winkler discusses how communities continue to deal with their history: From breaking with traditions to the musealization of history.

While Mordechai Bernstein was dealing with the history of the former Jewish communities, new communities slowly began to establish themselves in the occupied zones. In her contribution, **Lea Weik** takes a closer look at the British occupation zone. There, the majority of the Displaced Persons were housed in the former Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where terrible conditions prevailed and the survivors were still dying months after their liberation. It was up to the Jewish relief organizations to provide not only food, clothing and shelter, but also everything needed for religious practice. In the process, they faced procurement difficulties due to the large number of items needed, which had to be solved. In addition to the Jews in DP camps, the relief organizations also took care of survivors outside the camps, especially German Jews who were trying to rebuild their communities. In order to strengthen them, they were provided with ceremonial objects from the destroyed communities of Germany. Weik not only shows the work and tasks of the Jewish relief organizations in these first years after the liberation. She also shows how objects of religious practice were important for the survivors' self-confidence and their will to live.

Around 1950, the DP camps were closed. Help was now provided to the Jewish communities, which slowly built up more and more steady structures. As a result, new community centers and synagogues were built, and old communities were now formally re-established and their representatives elected. Religious differences and the resulting conflicts accompanied this process, as it became necessary to find a new self-conception as a Jewish community in a Germany in which one now wanted to remain. The consolidation of Jewish life in Germany thus went hand in hand with the expansion of the communities' infrastructure, the renovation or new construction of synagogues and other facilities – and finally also with a new attitude toward their ceremonial objects. Whereas cult and ritual objects had initially been distributed by the Jewish help organizations out of necessity and taken over by the Jewish

communities, the new communities had to come to terms with which traditions they wanted to continue and which they did not. As a result, new ceremonial objects were acquired in some cases, while old ones went into storage or, as in the case of Augsburg, into a Jewish museum.

Sarah König's contribution is also devoted to the relationship between the Jewish community and the museum. However, this time the focus is not on the immediate post-war period, but on the period between 1960 and 1985, the year in which the Jewish Museum Augsburg was founded as the oldest Jewish museum in the Federal Republic of Germany, and at the same time the period that can be described as a phase of consolidation of the Jewish communities in Germany. Unlike in other cities, it was not possible to fall back on older holdings of Judaica that had already been included into a museum, but a completely new collection had to be set up.

The founder of the museum and at the same time chairman of the Jewish community, Julius Spokojny, was able to include ceremonial objects from the Jewish community as well as his private collection in the museum. In addition, the Bavarian National Museum was persuaded to lend its Judaica collection to the Jewish Museum on a permanent basis. In addition, however, Judaica made by the Israeli artist Yehoshua Freiman were acquired for the museum. When it was founded, the museum did not see its task as presenting regional Jewish traditions in Bavarian Swabia, but in showing the "beauty of Jewish tradition." Therefore, the question must be asked whether other museums' ceremonial objects apart from the newly purchased ones had been used at all before they came to the museum.

Both the origin and the subsequent use of ceremonial objects in Jewish communities or museums thus open up a deeper view into the development of Jewish communities after 1945. They tell of new beginnings and the preservation of memory, but they also speak of forgetting and the search for a new identity. Thus, based on the stories behind the religious objects and the motives of the people involved, we can approach the topic of religious life in the DP camps and subsequent Jewish communities from different perspectives. The respective stories behind the ceremonial objects therefore also reflect the transformation of Judaism after the Shoah.

While it was initially the Jewish relief organizations that supplied the Jewish communities inside and outside the DP camps with religious objects, it later became the Jewish communities themselves that procured Judaica from various sources. Differences in religious traditions played as much a role in the selection of objects as did the means of procurement. The histories behind the objects refer both to the attempt to reconnect with the former communities and to the attempt to forget and allow new traditions. Essential in this context seems to be the need for those who returned and survived to regain a new self-consciousness through religious practice. This self-consciousness was subsequently reflected not only in the ceremonial objects used by the Jewish communities, but also in the newly established Jewish museums.