HOME ON THE BALCONY

New Initiatives for the Preservation of Documents and Material Objects Relating to German-Jewish History

JOACHIM SCHLÖR

Autumn 1990. Germany celebrated its reunification, but I heard the news from afar and looked at my own country with a new feeling of distance. As a fellow of the Institute for German History at Tel Aviv University, I had developed a plan to write about the history of the city of Tel Aviv, seen through the eyes and the experiences of German-speaking Jews who had arrived here after the Nazis’ rise to power, between 1933 and 1940. My research brought me to an area of the city that some people called “Yekkesland”: Ben Yehuda, Gordon, Frishman, Mapu, and Ruppin streets, north of the city center, close to the sea, and—then, not anymore—characterized by the public use of the German language (or Hebrew with a German or Austrian accent) and the existence of some institutions such as Landsberger’s bookshop or Café Mersand where those Yekkes regularly met and exchanged views about their lives between Herkunft and Zukunft, between a European past and a Middle Eastern present. Fortunately, I also had the opportunity to visit some wonderful people, Eli and Marianne Rothschild, Viola and Mordechai Virshubsky, Ernst Laske, Eva Sänger, Nadja Taussig, and many others. All of these private apartments contained elements of a partly saved German and European cultural heritage that had found their way to Palestine and now lived together with more recent Israeli material objects: musical instruments and music sheets, paintings and drawings on the walls, bookshelves with German titles, letters, diaries, photo albums. Nadja Taussig told me about the German-speaking circle that had met in her and her husband Ernst’s flat on Mapu 3 for fifty years, from 1941 to 1991. She showed me a list of all the lectures and debates held at this place, and on that list we encounter many of the important names of deracinated German-speaking Jewish intellectuals, Shalom Ben Chorin, Max Brod, Sammy Gronemann, Margot
Klausner, Helmar Lerski, Leo Perutz, Arnold Zweig; and the important topics of the time: the land and its future, the Zionist movement and the idea of a binational state, music, film, theater, photography, and literature. I managed to make a copy of the list (and have used it in many ways), but when I asked Mrs. Taussig for a copy of the letters that must have been stored somewhere in these desks and cupboards, she hesitated and asked me to visit her again after her move to an Elternheim. She passed away just a week or so after that move; none of her friends had the chance to search for the documents and they were all thrown away. Such losses must have occurred many times, due to a lack of interest among the younger generation or maybe, in more general terms, due to the prevailing Zionist idea that the cultures of the diaspora had little value in the process of the Israeli nation-building process. One could often see German books and papers on the street, awaiting disposal.

One of the most impressive visits took place in Gordon Street. Walter Grab, who had immigrated from Vienna as a nineteen-year-old and made a living selling handbags on the street, later redefined and established himself as a historian and became the founder of the Institute for German History at Tel Aviv University. His study was crammed with books and manuscripts, copies of archival sources about the libertarian movements in German history, from the Peasants’ War through 1848 to the German anti-Nazi resistance. When I asked him where he felt at home—what Heimat meant for him—he also hesitated. It couldn’t be Vienna, he maintained, because of the antisemitism that had driven him out of his hometown and was still not defeated; it couldn’t be Jerusalem either, because of the dominance of religion which made him uncomfortable. In the end, he said, it was “this balcony,” a place from which he could look out to the sea and to his own international connections—and back into his study. I remember wondering what would happen to all these papers in the future, but I didn’t dare to ask.

As it turned out, they have been preserved. At that time in the early 1990s, there were only few places that would—or even could—accept such collections. The Zionist Archives in Jerusalem concentrated on the preservation of papers and documents relevant for the study of the political movement; the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, also in Jerusalem, kept the memories of (mostly destroyed) Jewish communities in Europe and elsewhere; and while the Leo Baeck Institute’s archives in New York, the London-based Wiener Library, or the archive of the Centre for German-Jewish Studies at Sussex University could have been possible repositories, not many people wanted their papers to leave Israel. In the mid-nineties, the little Museum in Honour of German Jewry, founded in 1970 by Israel Shiloni in Nahariya, was offered a new home in Stef Wertheimer’s Open Museum in Tefen, Galilee. Ruthi Ofek commenced her work as curator there, and at long last there was a place where children and grandchildren could donate the estates of their parents and
Alongside this positive development in the institutionalization and professionalization of archival work in Israel, another contribution should be discussed: More and more young researchers from all over the world, but specifically from Germany and Austria, began to write about different aspects of German-Jewish and Austrian-Jewish history and culture, and even if their specific topics concerned events, institutions, or personalities from the period before 1933, they had to use the archives in Israel and to take into account the effect of forced emigration both on the persons they interviewed and on their libraries and private archives. In addition, there has been an enormous growth in the number (and quality) of studies that research and discuss this emigration itself, the many different experiences of the *Yekkes*, and the development of both private and public memory cultures related to it. These young researchers continued to visit witnesses of the time in their private homes and asked to see personal documents they might use for their projects—and this interest in turn helped to create a new awareness among those Jews of German or Austrian origin, and their families, about the importance of the preservation of such documents. Finally, with the growing list of publications, with new research projects developed in newly funded or invigorated research centers for Jewish studies in Germany and Austria (Potsdam, Leipzig, Hamburg, Berlin, Graz, Salzburg), and with the continuity of academic collaboration between German universities and partners elsewhere, in Israel and the United States, but also in the UK (not least the Centre for German-Jewish Studies at the University of Sussex), the need to preserve such documents and to make them accessible for research has led to a stronger involvement of German cultural institutions.

As a result of all these developments, the Franz Rosenzweig Minerva Research Center in Jerusalem and the German Literary Archive in Marbach created a project, funded by the German Foreign Office, entitled “Traces and Treasures of German-Jewish History in Israel.” This initiative owns its existence to the scholarly and humane engagement of a new generation of scholars—the last generation to meet the surviving *Yekkes* in person and to visit them in their homes. Caroline Jessen, who wrote an excellent PhD dissertation on the “literary canon” of German Jews in Israel, their libraries, and on the place these collections had in their new lives in Israel, coordinated the project from 2012 to 2015. Her successor is Lina Barouch, who specializes in twentieth-century German-Jewish writing and specifically the overlaps between German and Hebrew. The project description on their website reads as follows:

Personal archives and collections were rescued from Nazi Germany by emigrants, refugees and Jewish institutions with considerable difficulty during the years 1933–1945 and in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. Many of these collections were brought to Mandate Palestine and are now preserved in public archives or private collections in Israel. Despite the efforts of Israeli archives, a significant
part of the rescued materials has not yet been made available for international research. Few Israeli archives can provide personnel with sufficient language skills to make these mostly German-language holdings accessible. The project ‘Traces of German-Jewish History’ promotes the arrangement and description of archives of scholars, writers, and artists and encourages archive-based research in the fields of Cultural Transfer, the History of Science, the Migration of Knowledge and the History of Ideas. In order to preserve significant collections and to open them up to international research, the project draws on the DLA’s development of flexible cataloging and conservation measures, while the Rosenzweig Minerva Research Center offers its scholarly expertise and a forum for discussions between established scholars, junior researchers and archivists. Personal archives, literary estates, and historical collections do not only represent a threatened “cultural heritage”, but they also provide an essential foundation for new cultural and scholarly discussions. Traces of German-Jewish History offers junior scholars and students the opportunity to participate in projects combining academic research and archival practice. In addition to this, the project aims at locating relevant German-Jewish collections, which are neither archived nor accessible to the public, in order to facilitate their transfer to a suitable public archive in Israel.4

Among the collections, we find files of the Hebrew theater Habimah and of the Leo Baeck Institute in Jerusalem, as well as private collections of Ruth Enis, Gideon Kaminka, Samuel (Shmuel) Hugo Bergmann, Shlomo Dov (Fritz) Goitein, C. Z. Kloetzel, Heinrich Loewe, Nadia Stein, Curt Wormann, and Walter Grab. At a conference in Jerusalem in September 2016, “Contested German-Jewish Cultural Property after 1945: The Sacred and the Profane,” Yonatan Shiloh-Dayan summarized his research on the Walter Grab collection in a lecture with the beautiful title: “What Does a Displaced Historian Keep?” Not only were the documents saved, ordered, systematized, but the preservation enables us to discuss new questions around Grab’s work and to enter his world of thought through the documents he kept. This would have pleased Walter Grab immensely. Similarly, the papers of Heinrich Loewe have been preserved. Loewe was a—maybe, the—central figure of the Zionist movement in Berlin from the late 1890s to 1933. His name appears in the context of nearly every single initiative dedicated to a Jewish future in Palestine. Frank Schlöffel, in his study Heinrich Loewe. Zionistische Netzwerke und Räume, made an enormous effort to reconstruct all these initiatives and to tell the story of Loewe’s life, from a childhood in Magdeburg and a professional career as a librarian at Berlin’s Friedrich-Wilhelm-Universität to the position of director of Tel Aviv’s municipal library.3 And there, in Beit Ariela, an important part of Loewe’s papers (which had not gone to the Central Zionist Archives) were kept in bad condition without a secure future. Now they have been preserved and can be
made accessible. These papers contain life stories, “traces,” that led from Germany to Palestine and Israel, and they reflect individual experiences of emigration and immigration, feelings of a Heimat lost and a new life gained.

They are indeed “treasures.” To have this knowledge is important both for the self-understanding of the Israeli society and its relationship to the diaspora and for our understanding of a German and German-Jewish culture that has partly been destroyed and lives on—in fragments. These documents show, as Caroline Jessen put it in an interview, “how deeply Israeli history is connected to German-Jewish history” and that “the work of German Jews has become a part of Israeli identity.”

In the second part of this contribution, I would like to open our perspective and look at other forms of dialogue between German-Jewish émigrés and their former home, with a specific focus on the city of Berlin on the one hand, but on a worldwide connectivity at the same time. Questions relating to the fate of German-Jewish cultural property after 1933—from the initial “loss” to eventual restitution—are generally addressed within the framework of the state or other official institutions. Yet there is a further dimension to both the historical events and current debates about them, namely that of the individual and personal experience. “Aryanization,” theft, confiscation—these impacted individuals and families first of all. Those who were able to flee from Nazi persecution and emigrate to places all over the world were forced to leave property behind, to sell art collections or furniture for the lowest prices, or to hand over their firms and stores to whoever profited from their loss. During my current research on family letters and testimonies written during the process of emigration (and over ensuing decades), I have come across numerous sources that have rarely been used in this context: Family members and relatives exchange information about the loss of material objects in documents that are, perforce, of a transnational character, while at the same time they refer to the former Heimat, their home—the place of departure. These documents afford us a valuable insight into the meaning of things for families and individuals.

A first source that demonstrates this importance of property to the emigrants and survivors is a letter written by Walter M. Danziger, 2907 Fallstaff Road, Apartment T5, in Baltimore, Maryland, on April 29, 1991. The letter is addressed to Dr. Klaus Sühl, Freie Universität Berlin, who had been commissioned by the Senate of Berlin to prepare the publication of the Gedenkbuch der ermordeten Juden Berlins (Memorial Book for the Murdered Jews of Berlin). Walter Danziger writes as follows:

Dear Dr. Suehl,

With regard to your appeal in Aktuell-Berlin, I wish to inform you of what we went through in Berlin before we were finally permitted to emigrate to America. We also sadly lost many relatives in concentration camps, even entire families. My
parents owned a department store in the Schlossstraße in Berlin-Koepenick, called Lichtenstein Nachf. D. Cohn. The building in which the store was based and where we lived belonged to my grandmother Emilie Cohn. Behind the building there was also a very beautiful garden, with a view over the Dahme, which also belonged to my grandmother Emilie Cohn.

In 1938, my father was forced by a Nazi called Ahrendt to sell the store. This Nazi also bought all the other Jewish stores in Koepenick and took over our apartment. The City of Koepenick bought the building at a very low price. Life in Koepenick became very uncomfortable in 1939. Jewish families were taken out of their houses at night and led through the entire city accompanied by ugly taunts. Thus my parents decided to move to West Berlin, where we managed to get an apartment in Schaperstraße 8, near the Kaiserallee. Our friends were called Loewe. Our host owned a publishing house. His wife was descended from one Professor Abraham Geiger, who had founded Reform Judaism.6

This source forms part of a large body of correspondence that has not been accessible so far and which I was permitted to view in the archives of the Stiftung Neue Synagoge—Centrum Judaicum in Berlin’s Oranienburger Straße. The task assigned to Klaus Sühl and his colleagues, Ulrich Schulze-Marmeling and Rita Meyhöfer, was—as the correspondents frequently note—immense. They attempted to list all the Jews who had been deported from Berlin and murdered in the Holocaust, along with the dates of their deportation and the dates of their death, and any further information that could possibly be found.7 What the researchers had not foreseen was that those who responded to the appeal titled “Aufruf an alle ehemaligen Berliner Juden” (call to all former Berliner Jews), advertised in Aufbau, Mitteilungsblatt, Semanario Israelita, AJR Information, and many other newspapers and journals of German-Jewish émigrés worldwide, wished to tell—indeed had to tell—their own stories: stories of survival in concentration camps or living “illegally” on the streets of Berlin; tales of migration, of the many different ways in which their life in Berlin came to an end and how they began to build a new life elsewhere; and accounts of the material objects they were able to take along or were forced to leave behind.

This collection, originating in the idea to document the circumstances of death, has evolved into a reservoir of stories of survival. Berlin-Aktuell is the name of the journal—which appeared in print for many years, and today is mainly accessible online—founded by the so-called Emigrantenreferat of the Berlin Senate, whose main task has been, since 1969, to maintain the numerous forms of contact between the city and its former inhabitants, most importantly the regular visits of groups of “former Berliners.”8 Letters addressed to and sent by Berlin-Aktuell and the Emigrantenreferat form a further body of sources, stored in the upper floor of Berlin’s Rotes Rathaus. Together these two
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sets of sources, which comprise thousands of letters, provide insight into the multiple forms of relationships among the Berliners who now reside (or, as many have since passed away, resided at the time) in Baltimore, Maryland and in so many other places around the globe. They provide an idea of the relationship between owners and their property as well as their sense of loss and hope for restoration.

What became of the house and the garden in Köpenick? Which parts of the family property were those who emigrated able to take along with them when they left? (Walter came to England with the Kindertransport.) What role did the former property play in the subsequent lives of those who managed to escape? Did the emigrants try to retrieve it? Did they talk about it during family meetings? When we think of all the human lives destroyed by the Nazis, writing about material objects, from houses to children’s toys, may seem trivial. Yet the letters show that this is not the case. Another former Berliner, Walter Lachman, wrote as follows from Longmeadow, Massachusetts in the 1990s:

I am still suffering today from a terrible fear that I will again lose the tangible properties I have been able to amass in this world, and even more, that I will again lose my decent human instincts and cultural values.9

The loss of property is an ever-present event in the lives of those who remained, and for those who emigrated. These events mark the steps of persecution and marginalization. The experiences noted in the letters directed to the city of Berlin illustrate Walter Danziger’s assertion that the loss of property was no less significant than his memory of the loss of human dignity. This was equally true for those who managed to emigrate. Leo Eisenfeld writes as follows in his Erinnerungen, a report that he submitted to the Gedenkbuch team:

From January to July 1939, after I had to leave my mother alone in Berlin, she began wandering around Berlin in ever-greater desperation, bullied terribly at the police precinct, to try nevertheless to obtain something in return for her apartment furnishings, to try nevertheless to obtain certificates for Palestine or quotas for America. The little that she managed to get for her things she of course had to spend on her upkeep, to meet the emigration expenses, etc.10

The emigrants take stock of their belongings and their meanings, as Vivian Jeanette Kaplan observed: “Sitting cross-legged on the ground beside the empty overseas bag, I wonder what, among the inventory of my previous life should go into this container and what should go onto the large pile of things that I have to leave behind.”11 The objects become travel companions whose presence is described in memoirs: “I also
recorded in the text descriptions of mementos among my items, of objects to which I was attached, because they remained with me on the entire journey described here.”

The many practical steps needed to prepare for emigration often led families to reassess their material possessions and to discuss their use and value.

Exile research has recently begun to focus increasingly on the place of things, of material objects, in emigration. Objects are manufactured from particular materials; they are used during the course of everyday cultural practices in the context of work or home life; they are repaired (as part of a “makeshift economy”), inherited, rededicated, dug out again, forgotten, and then remembered once again. However, cultural anthropology has tended to focus on the objects that remained in place rather than on those that went “on a journey.” But what happens when the “domestic environment,” the home, is threatened, confiscated, destroyed? What happens to belongings and to their significance? Jewish families that decided to emigrate in the face of Nazi persecution were obliged to reexamine their belongings, assess whether they could be used in a different location, itemize them for the purpose of taxation, pack them, and ship them. British legal theorist Jeremy Bentham highlighted the importance of the relationship between an object and its owner as early as the end of the eighteenth century, observing that ownership is the basis of hope. Only the law can ensure that the relationship can endure into the future for the next generation, to provide “an assurance of future ownership.” Should this security be attacked or threatened, more than the object itself is at stake: “Every attack upon this sentiment produces a distinct and special evil, which may be called a pain of disappointment.”

Objects make the world comfortable and homely by creating relationships between people who pass them on to one another and who leave personal traces on them, which later owners can come to know and love. Exile—the (violent) expulsion from one’s familiar life environment—destroys this familiarity with objects and the communicative and mediatory function they perform within the close-knit world of owners of the same house—in both a literal and in a figurative sense. As soon as the surviving family members and friends were able to get in touch with one another again, the topic of “things,” of property once owned and then lost, resurfaces in the letters they write to one another. The correspondents do not simply bemoan the loss of some material object or another—they use the objects as symbols of what they went through. The restitution they would claim was no doubt financially important but beyond this restitution possesses a far broader dimension. Talking and writing about a lost house or stolen furniture becomes a means of reassertion, enabling exiles to grapple with questions such as “Who are we now?” or “Who is still here to share the memories of things once owned and then lost?” When the city of Berlin (like many other cities in Germany), with the best intentions, began to contact those who emigrated, the lost houses and the lost possessions became topics of discussion and means of negotiation:
about money, about status, but also—to return to Walter Danziger’s phrasing—about “cultural value” and human dignity.

The Berlin archives I consulted comprise 31 folders—*Ordner*—that contain thousands of letters. And even this constitutes only a tiny part of the immense project of retrieval of personal memories undertaken by these German-Jewish families that represent the fragmented world of German Jewry on a worldwide scale. Interestingly, social media has created new forms of networking between descendants of such families—their exchanges about trips to Germany, the laying of *Stolpersteine*, questions of genealogy and about material objects such as paintings, books, or manuscripts form a new set of sources for the study of the continuity of German-Jewish history and culture outside Germany. Most of this virtual collection has been lost. What remains should be considered a telling and significant element of German-Jewish cultural property. I find it so important because these sources possess a narrative dimension that is sometimes lacking in better-known cases of looted art or book collections. As Rom Harré argued, “What turns a piece of stuff into a social object is its embedment in a narrative construction. The attribution of an active or a passive role to things in relation to persons is thus essentially story-relative: nothing happens or exists in the social world unless it is framed by human performative activity.”

This view corresponds with the concept of culture as process and practice that has evolved in the fields of European ethnology and cultural anthropology. Harré’s insistence on the importance of the narrative helps us appreciate the significance of the letters stored in Centrum Judaicum and in Berlin’s Rotes Rathaus and treats them with the same respect and scholarly interest as the papers collected in the “Traces and Treasures” project: there are still so many stories waiting to be told.

**NOTES**


3. Unfortunately the museum closed in August 2020 after the Wertheimer family withdrew their financial support. Ruthi Ofek, with the support of the Irgun Jozei Merkaz Europa, is looking for a new location.
9. CJA, 5C2, Correspondence Lachmann.
für ihren Lebensunterhalt, für die Ausreisespesen u.s.w. ausgeben.” CJA, 5C2, Correspondence Eisenfeld.


