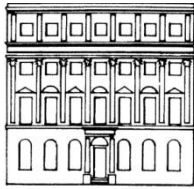


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Atina Grossmann:

Family Files: Emotions and Stories of (Non-)Restitution

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**FAMILY FILES:
EMOTIONS AND STORIES OF (NON-)RESTITUTION**

ATINA GROSSMANN

The intimate and inevitable connection between *Wiedergutmachung* and emotion has, in many ways, long been obvious. The battle within Israeli society over whether to accept a ‘blood money’ agreement with the Federal Republic of Germany was fierce and intensely bitter. The battle in living rooms and kitchens throughout the far-flung world of Jewish survivors and refugees over whether the potential gain of some unspecified material compensation was worth entering a *Papierkrieg* with a re-empowered German officialdom and the painful confrontation with memory and loss—as well as the necessary recognition of a sovereign Federal Republic—it would entail, was no less anguished.¹ And yet we are perhaps only now beginning to think, at least in an academic context, about the particular emotions aroused by claims for restitution or compensation for objects, in addition to the less literally tangible losses of freedom, health, and educational opportunity engendered by, in the language of restitution legislation, National Socialist religious, racial, and political persecution.² These meticulously constructed lists of porcelain services and silver tableware, Persian carpets, Singer sewing machines, curtains and books, velour-covered armchairs, oil paintings and lithographs, and, of course, real estate, were a key element of the complex, controversial and unwieldy process collectively and awkwardly known as *Wiedergutmachung*. Their fraught significance is only heightened, perhaps, by the fact that these ghostly reminders of a

As this article gives a historian’s personal account of her family’s and her own emotions in the context of researching the fate of her family members and their property, the editors have decided to preserve the personal quality of the spoken paper. The text is only slightly edited to produce more distanced language.

¹ On the bitter struggle in Israel see e.g. Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York, 1991), 227–52.

² See e.g. Federal Ministry of Finance, *Compensation for National Socialist Injustice: Indemnification Provisions* (Berlin, 2011), 5.

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devastated world and culture were generally specific to German Jews who could document such losses rather than the majority of East European Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

The extensive archival record of this restitution process for objects makes clear that an examination of emotional responses should consider not only the refugees and survivors themselves with all their jumbled, ambivalent feelings, but also the reactions, cloaked by references to legal paragraphs and statutes, of the various German officials, attorneys, and 'experts' of all sorts handling the claims, as well as the Aryanizers, who are often an important part of the 'conversation'. Moreover, we are also pressed to think about the emotions of the descendants retrieving the files, confronting their contents, and imagining what it meant for the claimants to engage in this process with German officials and, in some cases, also directly with the new owners of what had once been theirs.

Especially at the beginning, these exchanges in which victims had to re-define themselves as legal claimants in a society that had expelled and persecuted them and where, moreover, their interlocutors were not infrequently former persecutors, read as frustrating, painful, and bureaucratically grotesque legal and semantic battles, often suffused with anti-Semitism.³ To study them even now, decades later, provokes anger and a kind of disbelief. Inevitably, however, such investigations, at least in the case of bourgeois Berlin Jews such as my family, can also provoke fantasies about a grand and irretrievably destroyed 'lifestyle' (perhaps the word is appropriate here) that might have been.

Mixed Feelings: The Emotional Ambiguities of Fighting for Wiedergutmachungsgeld

I grew up in a family in which that strange and misleading term, *Wiedergutmachung*, was as much part of daily conversation as the weather, the international political situation, and the lack of good cafés and

³ Norbert Frei, José Brunner, and Constantin Goschler (eds.), *Die Praxis der Wiedergutmachung: Geschichte, Erfahrung und Wirkung in Deutschland und Israel* (Göttingen, 2009), 23 refers tellingly to a process by which *Verfolgte* (the victims of persecution) become *Antragssteller* (applicants).

coffee on New York's Upper West Side in the 1950s and 1960s.⁴ My father, who had practised law in Weimar Berlin, was a restitution lawyer (*Wiedergutmachungsanwalt*) and our living room was continually filled with middle-aged German-speaking friends and clients who came with their photos and their documents and their stories, on which I sometimes eavesdropped: this one had been a promising artist, that one a renowned biochemist, a doctor with a flourishing practice, a small storeowner, or a young student expelled from university. They came to plot, together with my father, the only realistic revenge, indeed, the only 'compensation' that could still be wrested from the catastrophe, namely, material restitution, money, with all the painful pangs of conscience (*Gewissensbisse*) and mixed feelings which that implied. I sensed that my father took a great measure of bitter pleasure in pulling as much money as he possibly could out of the young Bundesrepublik, and even at a very young age I was acutely aware of the sudden turn in my family's own fortunes in 1957, when the restitution money (*Wiedergutmachungsgeld*) for our own family and for my father's clients, and his commissions, started rolling in. My father embarked on his first journey back to Europe, and I still remember the smooth suede of the elegant leather handbags he brought back from Spain for my mother, and the aura of the Continent and some long-lost luxury entering our cramped New York apartment.

Something significant had definitely shifted for German Jewish refugees in New York. The fabled *Sommerfrische* (summer holiday) suddenly moved from small inns with a German-speaking clientele and hearty Central European cooking (some kosher, some not) in the rolling hill towns of the Catskills such as Tannersville and Fleischmanns to the authentic nostalgically remembered Alps and the grand hotels of Zermatt, Sils Maria, or Arosa. The final approval of restitution legislation by the Bundestag in 1956 marked the slow end of the German Jewish Catskills. And I could palpably, physically, sense the relief that washed through the Café Éclair, the Tip Toe Inn, the afternoon *Kaffeeklatsches* of the Yekke community in New York, as the money and the pensions began to arrive, bank accounts expanded,

⁴ For this see also Atina Grossmann, 'Versions of Home: German Jewish Refugee Papers Out of the Closet and Into the Archives', *New German Critique*, 90 (Fall 2003), 95–122.

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and a certain sense of security, mixed always with the pain of irretrievable loss (of which I was less clearly aware), settled into refugee life. So it was with that background that I came years later to my own family's records, as a historian of post-war Germany researching encounters between defeated Germans and surviving Jews, and, of course, as a curious but wary participant observer (*Betroffene*). My examples of restitution cases come, therefore, from that hybrid place, so often viewed with suspicion by professional historians, between History with a capital H and memoir. I draw from fragments of the family archive, a move emotionally and intellectually both perilous and rewarding, and hence perhaps entirely appropriate for a discussion of the 'emotions' of restitution.

Emotional Entanglements: The Intergenerational Legacies of Loss and Appropriation of Jewish Property

The Grossmann family files begin with the early post-war period before the promulgation of the *Bundesentschädigungsgesetz* in 1956, covering the period starting with the first Allied restitution order, Military Law No. 59 for the *Rückerstattung feststellbarer Vermögensgegenstände an Opfer nationalsozialistischer Unterdrückungsmaßnahmen* (Restitution of Identifiable Property to Victims of Nazi Oppression) in the American zone on 10 November 1947 (adopted in the British zone in May 1949). They continue through the early 1950s after the Luxemburg Agreement of 1952, when survivors, particularly German Jews, were beginning to stake their claims to restitution of property and compensation for losses that could not in fact be 'made good' again. Their claims are part of the fraught early post-war and post-Holocaust encounters between Jews and Germans. During the occupation and 'DP' years from 1945 to 1948-9 and into the early 1950s in the Bundesrepublik, many cases were presented in actual face to face encounters with German officials. But as in the case of restitution claims submitted by German Jewish refugees now scattered throughout the globe, especially in the USA, Israel, and the United Kingdom, they were often also conducted by international airmail and mediated by lawyers on both sides of the Atlantic.

In this early stage of an ongoing process of encounter and negotiation between Germans and Jews after the defeat of the Third Reich,

in which all sides had to 'learn by doing',⁵ the files mostly tell stories of non-restitution. They reveal a young West Germany for the most part determined to evade the recent past, and apparently entirely immune to expressions of loss, anger, or even embittered resignation, at least on the part of the claimants.

The crumbling files of my family's first *Wiedergutmachungs* effort from 1949 to 1953, based on the particular reparations edict imposed on Berlin by the Allied *Kommandatura* on 26 July 1949 (Article 23, REO, *Rückerstattungsordnung*, Order for Restitution of Identifiable Property to Victims of Nazi Oppression) tell a story that is entirely typical of the bitter gulf of experience and memory that separated those who had once been fellow Berliners after 1945.⁶

It is the story of a Berlin hotel which, according to a brochure published for tourists coming to Berlin in the millennium year 2000–1, was 'purchased' by the grandfather of the present owner in 1938. After having been 'partially destroyed by the vicissitudes of the second World War', the hotel is said to have 'continued its pre-war history. . . . In a house which had been constructed in 1887 according to old-fashioned artisan tradition, the charm and solidity of the past century could be preserved.'⁷ In fact, the hotel's early post-war years were marked by a bitter battle between my father, whose parents had owned the building from 1913 to August 1938, and the then owners over that pre-war history, the sordid events of Aryanization, and the forced sale of Jewish property in Nazi Berlin.

My grandmother, Gertrud Grossmann, who had taken over the property after her husband's death in 1931, managed to elude her first deportation order for almost a year and a half, but in 1943, the 39th *Osttransport* deported her to Auschwitz where she was mur-

⁵ Frei, Brunner, and Goschler (eds.), *Die Praxis der Wiedergutmachung*, 12.

⁶ For a more detailed account of the story see Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton, 2007), 112–14, 309–10, nn. 88 and 89. See *Wiedergutmachungsamt*, Berlin, 2WGA 1490/50 (Walter Grossmann) and 2WGA 3253/50 (Franz and Hans S. Grossmann). All quotations in the following paragraphs come from these sources. See also Atina Grossmann, "'The survivors were few and the dead were many': Jewish Identity and Memory in Occupied Berlin", in Marion Kaplan and Beate Meyer (eds.), *Jüdische Welten: Juden in Deutschland vom 18. Jahrhundert bis in die Gegenwart* (Göttingen, 2005), 317–35.

⁷ *Ibid.* 332.

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dered. Gertrud's three sons survived. One was liberated at Mauthausen after having made it through two years in Auschwitz; another had settled as a doctor in Hartford, Connecticut; and the third, my father, had spent the war as an enemy alien interned by His Majesty's Government in British India. Now the two physicians were counting on their brother, the former Berlin lawyer, to use the reparations edict forced on Berlin by the Allied *Kommandatura* on 26 July 1949 to rescue what he could. While the new owners claimed that they had acquired the hotel by 'a completely apolitical and economically justified contract in which no coercion or pressure of any kind had been applied', my father's memories of the 1938 transactions, transcribed in the court papers, were furiously different from the their innocuous version. According to my father, the new owner

had repeatedly boasted of his good connections to the party . . . and that if my mother did not sell him the house on his terms, he would find ways and means to acquire it in any case. Considering the general lack of basic rights for Jews in Germany . . . my mother and I decided it was only prudent to accede to his threats.⁸

After a lengthy and bitter court battle, the *Wiedergutmachungskammer* (Restitution Court) of the Landgericht Berlin on 14 September 1953 finally ordered the hotelier to pay the heirs of Gertrud Grossmann the modest sum of DM 20,000. This was at the time less than \$5000; the Grossmanns had claimed a value of DM 110,000 to DM 125,000.⁹

⁸ Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies*, 114.

⁹ For discussion of similar unsatisfactory legal struggles around 'Aryanized' property, using similar language, see Ronald Webster, 'Jüdische Rückkehrer in der BRD nach 1945: Ihre Motive, ihre Erfahrungen', *Aschkenas: Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur der Juden*, 5/1 (1995), 47-77. In fact, there were so many celebrations of fifty years of business ownership in 1988, half a century after the expropriation of Jewish property in Nazi Germany, that some localities embarrassedly asked their merchants to curtail their self-congratulatory advertising as it was a bit too obvious (*peinlich*), *ibid.* 72. As with so many issues concerning Jews in post-war occupied Germany, the situation in Berlin was unique in that a reparations edict had already been forced on Berlin by the Allied *Kommandatura* on 26 July 1949, well before the federal restitution programme was approved by the Bundestag in 1956. Article 23 REO, 'Restitution of Identifiable Property to Victims of Nazi Oppression

There is a small coda to this story which suggests how raw the emotions connected to the ownership of Aryanized property might still be. Shortly after a brief article about my research on this piece of German history appeared in one of the last issues of the German Jewish refugee weekly *Aufbau*,¹⁰ I received a letter from a grandson of the hotel's new owners. It is, I think, worth quoting from this letter (in the rather awkward English translation he helpfully appended):

I cannot comprehend the anachronistic relation between the afore mentioned acquisition and the work of a descendant of the purchaser, who is director of the hotel two generations later. I can see the point you are trying to make but it is unscientific (*unwissenschaftlich*) in my opinion. I must say, though, that the purpose of it all is totally mysterious to me (*völlig schleierhaft*). The accusation that you are making in your article is hitting someone who did not experience World War II (born in 1948) and thus cannot be held responsible for the crimes of this era. Nevertheless, like for every other human – at least in Germany – it is my duty [to] keep these events in mind, so that there will never be a repetition [and to] always be openminded and without prejudices when to comes to person's color of skin, religion, or nationality.¹¹

And then came a key point which suggested that he did indeed have his own very real material concerns about the 'purpose of it all'. 'Because of this, the whole issue of the *purchase* [*sic*] is settled in my mind', and then he added, ritualistically, 'regardless of the timeless criticism concerning the way Germans behaved toward Jewish fellow citizens (the proverbial *Mitbürger jüdischen Glaubens*)'.

from January 30, 1933 to May 8, 1945 on grounds of race, creed, nationality, or political beliefs' stated: 'Where . . . the affected property has undergone fundamental changes which have substantially enhanced its value the Restitution Chamber may order the delivery of an adequate substitute in lieu of restitution. It shall consider the value of the property at the time of the unjust deprivation and the rights and interests of the parties.'

¹⁰ *Aufbau*, 13 (July 2002), 13.

¹¹ Reference to this letter is also made in Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies*, 310, n. 89.

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I never responded to this anxious missive, having already decided for myself that I was not willing to invest the resources of time, money, energy, and, indeed, emotion to wage the re-opened legal battle that the grandson/owner of the Hotel Astoria obviously feared, just as for a host of reasons that I have not fully unravelled, I did not manage to pursue the 'looted art' case urged upon me by a zealous German attorney in order to discover, retrieve, or receive compensation for the impressive art collection that an uncle, the architect Leo Nachtlicht, had auctioned, sold, lost, sometime between 1932 and 1943. I preferred to take my minor but nevertheless heartfelt revenge in historical research and publication and ensuring, among other things, that representatives of Jewish organizations no longer booked accommodation at the hotel, a point that became moot in 2009 when the family finally gave up the ghost (literally I would say) and sold out to a hotel chain.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I recently discovered during casual conversation that the son of this letter-writer, that is, the great-grandson of the Aryanizer (who had been mentioned in the letter as a budding student of history) had indeed become a historian of National Socialism *and*, this is the intriguing kicker, had apparently still complained about the shamelessness and *Unwissenschaftlichkeit* of my accusations.¹² This story underscores the premise that the question of the 'emotions of restitution' should surely be extended not only to the descendants of the victims – those of us who are reading the files and reflecting on the consequences of those proceedings, which did indeed have a very real impact on the course of our lives – but also to the heirs of the spoils.

¹² This story is, admittedly, based on hearsay but it is sufficiently telling that I mention it here, albeit with the warning adjective 'apparently'. The best known articulation of this conflict between ostensibly 'objective' history of the Third Reich and 'subjective', presumably more emotional and hence unreliable study, is probably the famous exchange between the Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer. See their articles collected in Peter Baldwin (ed.), *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians' Debate* (Boston, 1990).

*Objects, Emotions, and (Failed) Lernprozesse in
Post-War Restitution Cases*

It is worthwhile, therefore, to think a bit further about the barely suppressed emotions that reveal themselves to the attentive (and personally engaged) reader of these documents. Norbert Frei, José Brunner, and Constantin Goschler point out in their detailed edited study of the processes of *Wiedergutmachung*, especially between Germany and Israel, that in a strange but powerful way, it was precisely those difficult, often agonizing, restitution cases that provided, indeed forced, the major forum for a post-war encounter between German Jewish survivors and the country from which they had been expelled.¹³ This process unfolded sometimes in the direct form of a return to Germany in order to facilitate the processing of claims, and sometimes from afar, in letters, legal documents, and interactions (almost always distinctly unpleasant) with representatives of German consulates, including the dreaded (often Jewish) *Vertrauensärzte* and psychiatrists who adjudicated disability claims. Over time, with shifting politics, this *Praxis*, Frei, Brunner, and Goschler *et al.* persuasively argue, can be understood as ‘ein[...] permanente[r] Lernprozess der daran beteiligten Gruppen und Gesellschaften’ (a permanent learning process on the part of the groups and societies involved in it).¹⁴

Indeed, the German restitution bureaucrats, the lawyers for the Aryanizers, and all those on the receiving end of the claims, could have, had they been willing, learned a great deal about the lives of their former fellow citizens. As Leora Auslander has so wonderfully shown in her sensitive readings of French restitution claims, the files open up rich and poignant portraits of lives comfortably lived and then suddenly, traumatically disrupted.¹⁵ We find detailed CVs, often laboriously reconstructed without the help of the proper documents, lost in lifts (shipping containers) gone astray, in hasty flight through multiple destinations. Claimants submitted narrative *Lebensläufe* dutifully notarized (*Eidesstattliche Versicherung*), cataloguing –

¹³ Frei, Brunner, and Goschler (eds.), *Die Praxis der Wiedergutmachung*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 23.

¹⁵ Leora Auslander, ‘Beyond Words’, *American Historical Review*, 110/4 (2005), 1015–45.

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with the proud defensiveness of those forced to prove what had once been self-evident—schooling, degrees, social position, truncated bright futures, as well as the hurdles to emigration, the difficulties of starting anew in old professions, and the fees and costs associated with new licences and degrees. They submitted lists of their curious transitional jobs (the proverbial German Jewish Fuller Brush salesman standing at our apartment back door remains a vivid figure), and painstaking comparisons of past and current (much) lower incomes. They received affidavits from friends and colleagues all over the new international refugee universe attesting to the veracity of the claims about a lost high standard of living. In my father's case, a former law partner now living in Buenos Aires attested on 15 January 1954 to the lost pleasures of Weimar bourgeois life with its taken for granted balance of work and leisure (certainly an object of envy for our hurried generation) and added, 'even though only 30 years old in 1933 he had already built up a successful practice that would surely have generated a growing income—had not 1933 intervened'.¹⁶

At the outset, however, this *Lernprozess* involved for the claimants, as I think my father's disposition suggests, a toxic mix of disappointment, frustration, fury, and confirmation of suspicions about the German refusal of responsibility. Particularly striking is the refugees' bitter sarcasm about the blatant injustice, the callous disregard of recent history, the grasping for bits of authority by newly re-empowered West German officials chagrined at having to deal with such unpleasant matters. The initial answers, certainly pre-1956, come carefully embellished with references to a multitude of legal paragraphs, concluding with a monotonous *nein, nein, nein* as claims were rejected. Current economic or professional difficulties described in these early claims were attributed to the obstacles imposed by emigration and destination nations (for example, in the case of Britain, internment as an enemy alien), rather than by Nazi persecution. The causal relation between the Nazi expulsion and the multiple losses and injuries of emigration, in contrast to those sustained while still in Germany, including the irony of incarcerating fleeing Jews as a potential fifth column of Nazi sympathizers, was simply denied, not recognized: 'nein, die Voraussetzungen sind . . . nicht gegeben (no, the conditions are . . . not met).'

¹⁶ Hans S. Grossmann file, 2WGA 3253/50.

In my father's case, an entirely logical if perhaps predictably quixotic effort to argue that had his passport not been marked by the clearly National Socialist addition of a 'J' and the added middle name of 'Israel', his plan to emigrate from a first refuge in Tehran to the USA via the Soviet Union and Japan would not have been derailed by the denial of a transit visa by a Japanese regime allied with Germany. Without that Nazi imposed 'racial' marking, he would not have been coerced into a risky journey through British India to catch a boat from Bombay to San Francisco, culminating in five years of entrapment in India, during which he lost, as the text with which I close this essay reflects, the remnants of his 'respectable' identity: his remaining savings; his affidavit and visa for the USA; his professional outfits and credentials; whatever possessions he had managed to transport from Berlin to Tehran during his first hasty flight after 1933; and his chance to start over in the USA half a decade earlier, as a younger, healthier, and less traumatized man.

Such reasoning, intelligible as it may seem to us, proved, of course, utterly unconvincing to German officials disinclined to take any responsibility for the wartime actions of their post-war occupiers. The Berlin *Wiedergutmachungsamt* in 1956 explicitly denied any connection between the 'aus rassischen Gründen erfolgten Auswanderung des Antragsstellers im Jahre 1936 und dem Freiheitsschaden im Jahre 1941' (the applicant's emigration for racial reasons in 1936 and the loss of freedom in 1941).¹⁷ And these stories, it is useful to keep in mind, are those of former German citizens who, according to the text of the *Bundesentschädigungsgesetz* (BEG) belonged to the 'deutschen Sprach- und Kulturkreis' (German language and cultural sphere) and were, from the outset, privileged in their entitlement to compensation by comparison, for example, with stateless Eastern European Displaced Persons in Germany who could only press claims based on harm to health and 'loss of freedom'.¹⁸

It is important to recall, therefore, that for all the success story of *Wiedergutmachung* – and in many ways it is a story of a kind of justice finally rendered and of a carefully orchestrated encounter between perpetrators and victims – the early years reflect precisely the sheer 'deep-rooted, stubborn, and at times vicious refusal to face and come

¹⁷ WGA files, Hans S. Grossmann.

¹⁸ Frei, Brunner, and Goschler (eds.), *Die Praxis der Wiedergutmachung*, 26.

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to terms with what really happened', as Hannah Arendt put it so brilliantly in her essay 'Visit to Germany' in 1950.¹⁹ They are a key part of what Jewish observers in the post-war years termed the 'enigma of irresponsibility'.²⁰

The responses by claimants came, as in my father's submissions, with fury wrapped in Prussian formality and seared by a knowing sarcasm. My maternal grandfather, who had survived in hiding in Berlin, was laconic in his retort to the Senator für Finanzen in West Berlin on 25 July 1953 which, using the very documents he had submitted in his initial claim, had established that the Oberfinanzpräsidium (OFP) files documenting my grandmother's deportation from the Große Hamburger Strasse ten years earlier clearly showed that, after all, he had no more possessions at that time. Accordingly, any additional claims would have to be buttressed by a precise accounting of each individual *entzogenen* (misappropriated) item. He was enjoined to describe and to prove 'wann, wo, auf welche Weise und durch welche Dienststelle des vormaligen Deutschen Reiches eine ungerechtfertigte Entziehung zugunsten eines der von mir zu vertretenden Rechtsträger erfolgt ist' (when, where, and how a misappropriation was made by which office of the former German Reich in favour of a legal entity which I am to represent). In the absence of such evidence, no compensation could be provided. So my grandfather tried again, consciously deploying the language of his tormentors: he had lived in a 'sogennannten herrschaftlichen Haushalt' (so-called grand household, the adjective 'so-called' adding a level of irony), buttressed by his wife's substantial dowry, with expensive décor, over 1,000 books (which a Friedenau bookseller had relieved him of for DM 30 when he moved to a *Judenhaus*), even a *Sportboot* (racing boat) that the impassioned *Turner* (gymnast) had anchored at the Spree Ruderklub Grünau rowing club, and a *Diplom* (certificate) as a fencer. The former 'illegal' (*U-Boot*), who unlike most German Jewish claimants had directly experienced the wartime Third Reich,

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Aftermath of Nazi Rule: Report from Germany* (1941). The German translation was published as *Besuch in Deutschland* (Berlin, 1993).

²⁰ Term used by American Jewish occupation official Moses Moskowitz, 'The Germans and the Jews. Postwar Report: The Enigma of German Irresponsibility', *Commentary*, 2 (July-Dec, 1946), 7-14. See also Hannah Arendt's similar reflections in her classic text, 'The Aftermath of Nazi Rule: Report from Germany', *Commentary*, 10 (Oct. 1950), 342-53.

wrote: 'Die Schuld des Nazireiches brauche ich wohl nicht erst nachzuweisen . . . Ich darf wohl annehmen, dass diese Angaben genügen' (I presume that I do not have to furnish proof of the Nazi Reich's guilt. . . I presume that I may take it that these details are sufficient). But of course they were not, the *Antrag* (application) was rejected again, and his request that the precious remaining photos of his *herrschaftlichen* quarters that he had submitted as 'proof' be returned to him was not fulfilled, as I discovered decades later when I retrieved (and I might add, against all regulations, absconded with) them from his *Wiedergutmachungsakte* in 2002.²¹

Interestingly, in the particular family files that I have examined, the most loving and pained detail, it seems, is provided for the more mundane, the more everyday objects, the 'modern' (an insistent emphasis) as well as 'luxurious' domestic objects, a double bed, an armchair upholstered in velour, a *Rauchtisch* (smoking table), rather than for the items that solicit bewildered gasps from me today: oil paintings by Otto Dix and Kokoschka, several ('original' it says in parentheses) drawings by Degas and Liebermann, as well as 'weitere Oelgemälde . . . kann ich mich nicht besinnen' (further oil paintings . . . I cannot recall) that had graced the elegant apartment of the architect Nachtlicht at Trautenaustraße 10, Berlin Wilmersdorf. One of the Nachtlicht daughters made this clear in her claim on behalf of her parents. With her well-known father dead (perhaps by suicide) shortly before his planned deportation and her mother killed at Auschwitz, she clearly mourned her sheet music and violin as much as the Bluethner grand piano and the valuable artwork. For her, a skilled musician now living the peculiar life of the European exile—privileged as white, but alien and disoriented as Jewish and a refugee—in southern Africa, those were for her the 'unersetzlichen Gegenstände' (irreplaceable objects).²²

²¹ Heinrich Busse file, 62WGA 2671/51.

²² WGA file 2671/51, Nachtlicht. The file includes an affidavit from an 'Aryan' neighbour who continued to visit the couple until the end in 1942, attesting to her own memories of the luxurious home, the last-minute move to a *Judenhaus* in the same street, the gradual forced sale or confiscation of the possessions, and the couple's progressive impoverishment. A relatively 'satisfactory' restitution settlement was finally reached on 10 Feb. 1959. Interestingly, in an indication of the long reach of 'emotions of restitution',

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It is the private items that loom most vividly, quite in contrast to the values we set today – a circumstance that contributes in part to my confused discomfort with current efforts to research and claim ‘looted art’ so many decades later, so removed from the experiences of its owners or even their children. I understand the politics of holding the Aryanizers, and the German galleries and museums that still will not fully account for the provenance of their holdings responsible, but I am uncomfortable with distant relatives profiting potentially massively so long after the fact, and uncomfortable also with my own fantasies – ‘oh if only I had just one of those Degas or that Lovis Corinth’ – about how my own life or that of my children, even further removed, could be, or could have been, transformed by sudden riches acquired and lost in such a different world.

Wiedergutmachung claims reveal or at least suggest the emotions of the now adult children who had escaped, buttressed by the eyewitness testimony of those who had been there and remembered. The daughter-in-law of another uncle attested that her husband was still so depressed by his inability to save his mother and brother that she had taken over the restitution process. She remembered helping her mother-in-law turn in valuable jewellery, diamond brooches, the very finest silver, and, in fact, added sketches of these objects, reconjured from memory in 1961. The two women had, she added, taken a taxi to the *Sammelstelle* (collection point) in the Jägerstrasse, the silver carried in two *Waschkörbe* (laundry baskets). The family maid, who still lived in Berlin and had submitted an earlier unsuccessful affidavit in October 1959, was most impressed by the family silver, really *edel* (high quality), she insisted, not mere *Hotelsilber* (hotel silver), some two *Zentner* (hundredweight) of butter and cheese knives, soup spoons, and a full fish service as well as jewellery. The *Sammelstelle*, she noted, still provided receipts, although those documents of confiscation and loss were also long since lost. In her recollection, however, the most valuable item, a glittering pearl necklace she valued at RM 16,000 had, in a desperate and defiant act of trying to maintain some resource that might buy some food or maybe a visa, not been

the current occupants of the apartment in the Trautenaustraße have initiated a *Stolperstein* commemoration for the Nachtlichts and some ninety other Jewish neighbours in the same street; the memorial ceremony with the laying of the stumbling stones, welcomed by some and determinedly ignored by other current residents of the street, is scheduled for 29 Apr. 2012.

handed over but hidden away; it was discovered later during a Gestapo raid. For that item there was no receipt. But all those receipts, even had they been preserved, would have proved useless, at least for the West Berlin authorities in the 1950s. These carefully reconstructed inventories of once secure and comfortable affluent lives, 'Tafelsilber für 24 Personen (komplett doppelt), Fischbestecke, Kuchengabeln, Teesiebe, Tortenheber, etc.' (silver cutlery for 24 people, full settings doubled, fish knives and forks, cake forks, tea strainers, cake servers, etc.) that had been duly confiscated and recorded could not be considered for compensation because the *Sammelstelle* collecting Jewish-owned goods in 1939 had been located in the Jägerstrasse which was now assigned to East Berlin, and the relevant regulations (*Rechtssprechung des Kammergerichts*) conveniently only applied to 'den örtlichen Bereich der heutigen Westsektoren Berlins' (the jurisdiction of Berlin's present-day Western sectors). The West Berlin authorities did not consider themselves responsible for compensating any objects that had been delivered to a site now behind the iron curtain.²³

Many claims which had been summarily and repeatedly rejected in the early years of the Federal Republic were finally resolved, more or less, in 1959. The *Lernprozess* began excruciatingly haltingly with encounters grounded in polarized memory and mutual suspicion. The history of this process remains unworked through, especially perhaps for the heirs of those who enriched themselves, or simply made their lives and homes more pleasant, more decorative, more 'modern', with Jewish goods and property, but also for those of us reading history – of everyday life, of material culture, of the post-war encounter between Jews and Germans – through the files of the *Wiedergutmachungsämter*.

The Wishlist: Fantasies Aroused by Lost Objects

And then there is another level of emotion that connects to that which cannot be restituted, which resists the – not to be cavalierly dismissed – monetary compensation offered by even belated *Wiedergutmachung*. These are the immaterial losses, the identities forever disrupted that could never be put back together again, even if some

²³ WGA Freudenthal file.

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refugees, especially the younger ones, especially those, like many German Jews, who managed to arrive at their final destinations before the war and were able to acquire precious medical or legal licences, establish businesses, and identify with the Allies during the war, built new and often satisfying lives for themselves. Interestingly, however, these profound, intangible losses are often linked to the re-imagining, and then listing, of particular objects.

Indeed, digging further in the musty family archives, still unsorted and stored in my basement, I discovered another layer that speaks precisely to memories and fantasies aroused by lost objects or the lost lives such objects could represent. One particular find stopped me in my tracks, precisely because its poignant mix of the personal/idiosyncratic and the generalizable/‘historical’ speaks, it seems to me, directly to the emotional and intellectual difficulties of recruiting one’s own family stories into the writing of what we think of as history.

In the cellar of my house in Long Island, still crowded with boxes of embarrassingly unpacked family memorabilia, still ‘un-worked through after decades’, in which I periodically try to make a dent, I happened upon a text, somewhere between a list and a poem, typed on blue airmail paper. The underlined heading read *Wunschtraum: Wish dream after 10 years Inner Asia, 5 years India, and 6 months Bombay*, and it had been composed by my father in Bombay after five years of internment by the British in the Himalayas, following five years as a refugee in Tehran, and then six months of living in limbo in Bombay. He had been freed from the camps, but, visa-and-asset-less, was still not free to leave India. His list of ‘wish dreams’ reflects the very specific desires of a quintessential Berlin Jew, a lawyer with a taste for the good life of what used to be called a ‘salon Communist’, nostalgic for the accoutrements of a bourgeois, European life long since left behind, living in a tropical world that was, as he always used to remember, with irony, no place for a Berlin lawyer. At the same time, it piercingly articulates the classic yearnings of a stateless refugee (and former prisoner) without a passport, without papers, living out of suitcases, speaking the patois of the uprooted, who has lost access to his own language or any elegant language, without money or property, condemned to idleness (except the busyness of trying to free oneself and find a place in the world), reduced, as he says, to writing applications pleading for a return to individual agency and political identity/citizenship.

The text tells us, it seems to me, so much about what it means to be free and not free, what we take for granted, and what becomes important when one has, as the refugees had, survived a war and a Holocaust, avoided the very worst, but lost so much of what constituted one's identity and those one had loved, while still maintaining, as so many refugees did, a sense of humour and a zest for life and new adventures. There is nostalgia here, but it is NOT the oft-cited homesickness for a world—for the vanished German Jewish life—that had clearly disappeared irrevocably and to which one could never ever go home again. Interestingly, there is also a kind of nostalgia for the early years of flight, for the exotic life in Iran, and, of course, for the romance with my mother, whom he is trying to convince, after five long years of separation (and all male existence), to relinquish her own free and adventurous life in Persia and join him in what he hopes will be a new beginning in the USA or, surprising for me to read, perhaps in Palestine.

The shock of recognition when I pulled out and read the typed blue aerogramme-style paper was profound: his voice vivid, suffused with the self-irony that seemed to sustain so many German Jews through their multiple emigration journeys. He expresses (in clearly gender and class inflected terms) the longing to escape the tropics back into 'culture' (never mind that that culture had turned incomprehensively barbaric). But he also, it seemed to me, channelled all the descriptions and analyses of refugee status that I had encountered in historical and theoretical texts (especially the classics by Hannah Arendt on statelessness and being a refugee); so many thoughts and fantasies tumbling out and mixed up in this one private text, the personal and the political inextricably intertwined. There are only hints of all that is unspoken, such as grief at not only the separation from but also the murder of loved ones (although acknowledged in other documents, including an extraordinary *Kaddish* he recited and recorded for the already defined six million victims at a service he led for fellow internees shortly after VE Day), as well as sexual longings and memories, alluded to but not directly articulated. He already knows a good deal, but certainly not everything, about the enormity of what has happened and what he has lost. He can, it appears, still imagine a reunion with lost family and friends; in 1946 in Bombay, such a possibility is not yet completely ruled out. I include some samples in the order in which they were typed, col-

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lected under the heading, *Ich möchte wieder einmal* (I would like to once again).

Sleep at night under a woollen blanket
Go to the theatre
See only people dressed in European garb
See shows and go skiing
Live in a room furnished accorded to my own taste
See a green forest and a meadow
One day not have to talk about internment and release
Sit at the wheel of a car
Chat about the latest and not so latest events (*letzten und vorletzten Dinge*)
Read a good French book
Not only spend money, but also earn some
See once again all those with whom I now only exchange letters
Eat a good roast goose
Write a book about the last five years
Be able to unpack all my suitcases
Lie in a tiled bathtub
Have a 'Heimat' [with the scare quotation marks, and I felt somehow that here the term 'scare' applied]
Be able to master a foreign language perfectly
Express myself in a perfect German
Possess a bank account
Travel on a big ship
Be liberated from my chronic cough
Go hiking in the mountains
Not have every day be a Sunday (*nicht alle Tage Sonntag haben*)
Wear a woollen suit and a winter coat
Weigh 10 kg. less
Live without mosquitoes, cockroaches, and moths
Have someone sew on a button for me
Live in another city
Listen to a good symphony concert
Ride on an Arabian steed (memories of Iran)
Have a profession (*Beruf*)
Ride the subway / *U-Bahn*
Experience the difference between summer and winter
Be liberated from the attribute 'refugee'
See only people who are not in uniform
Own a gramophone with good records
Have guests
Be able to enjoy the anticipation of a vacation

Know where I will find myself in 6 months
Not give reason to be pitied
Eat gooseberry tart with whipped cream
Not have to talk to anyone for 24 hours
Fly on an aeroplane and ride a motorcycle
Appear as a defence attorney
Put on a dinner jacket (*Smoking*)
Really celebrate my birthday (*feiern*)
Read Heinsche (and other) poetry aloud
Have a night lamp [the power to turn the light on and off at will]
Feel fresh and rested when I wake up in the morning, just once
Own a library
Not hear anything about Indian politics
Be able to correspond without airmail stamps
See happy people in my immediate environs
Take a walk (*Spaziergang*)
Be liberated from the diseases of playing cards (*Patience-Legen*)
Go out without sunglasses
Be required to leave for somewhere every morning at a particular time
Have all my cavities filled
Be 20 years younger
Take my meals at times agreeable to me
Spend a night alone in the moonlight
Not to have to live only from 'photos'
See a Raphael, Rembrandt, Renoir, Rodin in a museum
Tinker with a radio
Live without applications
Own a suit that fits
Travel to Switzerland
See the rest [meaning what???] of my family reunited
Much more, which will remain here and now unarticulated (*unausgesprochen*)

What do I make of such a text, suffused with yearning for objects as well as emotions, about an identity linked to those objects of bourgeois existence? It captures, I think, the sensibility of the refugee, the adventure of the Orient, the experience of the internee, the uncertainty of statelessness, the pain of longing. The historian's question, of course, is: does it tell a specific story that is also generalizable? And perhaps most confusingly, at the 'personal' level, how does this text match up with my memories of a man who did make it again to a museum, to a symphony, to custom-made suits, to light switches,

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telephones, and a passport, even to practise as an attorney, but never managed to regain those twenty years, his health, his lost family, or his intact sense of bourgeois identity. And yet, the family archives also contain artefacts of the new life that did begin, the transformation of refugees and survivors into citizens of new homes. Particularly striking to me: a dinner menu, with pompous names for what seemed like dreadful British food, from one of my parents' final refugee crossings, representing that liminal state between being a stateless displaced person and a once-again regular passenger on an (albeit converted troopship) ocean liner, the *SS Aquitania*, which finally arrived in New York harbour on 5 February 1947.

These are topics that belong not only to the psychoanalysts, therapists, and fiction writers to whom they have been consigned. They need to be integrated into a new and evolving history of emotions which considers especially questions of intergenerational transmission and the fraught, mostly invisible, ways in which objects, tangible and remembered, still link the heirs of the looted and the looters.

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