

# Seventh Junior Scholars Conference in Jewish History

## **Diaspora and Debris: Material Culture in German-Jewish History**

Conference at the German Historical Institute Washington, April 26–27, 2023. Conveners: Anna-Carolin Augustin (GHI Washington), Mark Roseman (Indiana University, Bloomington), and Miriam Rürup (Moses Mendelssohn Zentrum für europäisch-jüdische Studien, Potsdam). Additional support provided by the Wissenschaftliche Arbeitsgemeinschaft des Leo Baeck Instituts. Participants: Merle Bieber (Institut für Jüdische Geschichte Österreichs, St. Pölten), Moishi Chechik (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), Kimberly Cheng (GHI Washington), Sören Groß (Deutsches Optisches Museum, Jena), Ron Hellfritzsch (Deutsches Optisches Museum, Jena), Sol Izquierdo de la Viña (Technical University Berlin), Shir Kochavi (University of Leeds), Tammy Kohn (Latin American Rabbinical Seminary, Buenos Aires), Simone Lässig (GHI Washington), Zvi Orgad (Bar-Ilan University, Israel), Anna Rosemann (Europa-Universität Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder)), Judith Siepmann (Leibniz-Institut für jüdische Geschichte und Kultur – Simon Dubnow, Leipzig), Roni Tzoreff (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev), Hannah-Lea Wasserfuhr (Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg), Richard F. Wetzell (GHI Washington).

“Diaspora and Debris: Material Culture in German-Jewish History” assembled a transatlantic group of junior scholars to explore new research in Jewish history with a focus on the intersection between material culture and Jewish history, especially in the context of Jewish migration/transit, exile, global diasporas and Holocaust studies. Over two days the participants presented their individual research projects and themes, which opened discussions on sources, methodology,

and theory, enabling assessment of current and future trends in the writing of the modern history of Jews in Europe, the United States of America, and beyond. The analysis of material objects as testimonies to Jewish history connected several fields of research, e.g. studies on Jewish consumer cultures, German-Jewish diasporas, provenance research, and to the crucial question of the fate of European Jewish material culture after the Holocaust.

After a warm welcome and introduction by the director of the GHI and the three conveners, the first panel on “Objects of Migration and Exile” began. Chaired by Richard F. Wetzell, the theme of the panel produced several examples of how different perspectives and contexts of object-biographies can tell us life-stories of their Jewish owners and their self-identity, tradition, and not least their experiences of migration and exile. The first speaker, Kimberly Cheng, presented “All Things Considered: Shanghai’s WWII German-Speaking Jewish Refugees and Objects of Material Culture.” Cheng used everyday objects to discuss how Jewish refugees experienced life in the multiethnic metropolis of Shanghai during World War II. The experience of being in transit changed the understanding, meaning, use and value of the items Jewish refugees carried with them. What has been less researched thus far is how refugees interacted with locals, for instance to sell their shoes, clothes, handbags, and other goods. By focusing on material culture in exile, Cheng shed light on Jewish refugees’ contacts with locals and the types of local knowledge that refugees acquired on the ground. Before leaving Shanghai, many refugees left goods and private objects with neighbors, landlords, or family members, and even today some of these objects still circulate on the city’s markets. Merle Bieber’s paper “A *Steirerhut* in Edinburgh: *Tracht* in the Field of Tension of Persecution, Identity and Memory for Austrian Jewish Emigrants and their Descendants” offered additional insights. Using various biographic examples, she characterized the *Steirerhut* (a

felt hat, usually gray-green in color with a dark green hat-band) as a costume fashion of the Austrian middle class, a symbol of Jewish integration and acculturation, and a token of the search for acceptance. Public figures like Theodor Herzl, Felix Salten, or Sigmund Freud wore the *Steirerhut* as a sign of identity. After the ban of traditional costumes for Jews in 1938 the *Steirerhut* turned into a sign of identity and memory for Austrian Jewish emigrants and their descendants. In “The Dispersal of the Silesian Pinkus Collection” Judith Siepmann explained discourses of “Heimat” and Silesia. Discussing two collections of the Pinkus family – one of Silesian Judaica and the other a Silesian arts and crafts collection – she analyzed the seizure of a large portion of their contents by the National Socialists and subsequent purchases by various Silesian museums. Some objects were taken into exile by the expelled heirs; others were destroyed, dispersed, lost, or sold out of hardship and despair. After 1945, the whereabouts of most of the objects were unknown and the memory of the collections and survivor Hans Pinkus’ search for his family’s possessions became what kept the collections “alive” in some form. Siepmann found that objects of the collection were later sold at Sotheby’s, some are shown in the Jewish Museum in New York, and others remain entries in Lost Art registries.

The second panel, “Judaica and Jewish History,” was chaired by Anna-Carolin Augustin. The panel included papers dealing with research on *Torah* arks, *Shiviti* objects, and the development of the *tallit*, which gave insights into recent studies on religious Jewish objects and Jewish history. Zvi Orgad discussed “Concise Shrines: *Torah* Arks of Franconia” as nonverbal sources. Orgad argued that the study of *Torah* arks helps clarify the characteristics and life of small Franconian Jewish communities, which do not exist anymore and left few written sources. Some *Torah* arks, for example, feature the mixture of local Franconian and Jewish ornaments in their design. Some arks were used at

home and show the relation between the private and public. Interestingly, Franconian arks were influenced in their design and colors by Jewish visual culture in Poland and Lithuania, thus revealing long-distance European-Jewish networks and cultures of travel in early modern times. Roni Tzoreff's talk examined "*Shiviti* Objects, Temple Consciousness and Modern Ashkenazi Identity." A *Shiviti* (or *Menorah*) generally appears as an illustration in a prayer book, or as a plaque placed in the synagogue. It can be found in various Jewish communities, while its function and appearance vary somewhat from one geographic location to another. Tzoreff argued that the *Shiviti* turned the depiction of worship in the temple into a visual and commonly available option for contemplation. *Shiviti* can, according to Tzoreff, represent the diasporic, symbolic, religious, and gendered forms of affinity with Judaism's holy places. These objects were and are also influenced and inspired by political ideas, such as Zionism. In "The Birth of the *Tallit*," Moishi Chechik presented the history of the *tallit* as a Jewish object with a long tradition. The *tallit* developed from an article of clothing into a prayer shawl. From the twelfth century onwards, Jewish sources discuss the use of the *tallit* in the synagogue. At this point the *tallit* was no longer treated as an everyday object, but rather as a ritual garment specifically designed for the performance of a *mitzvah*. Chechik marked the change of the *tallit*'s use as an internal revolution in the shift from ancient times to the Middle Ages and from the Mediterranean basin to Europe. The *tallit* changed its form but never its uses. In recent decades the *tallit* has also turned into a popular image of modern Judaism.

A visit to the David and Fela Shapell Family Collections, Conservation and Research Center of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Bowie, Maryland, was also a feature of the conference's first day. The curators and conservators showed the highly specialized laboratories and climate-controlled environments where a wide variety

of artifacts are treated and preserved. The field trip to the Shapell Center illustrated how, through acquisitions, education, and scholarship, future generations will continue to honor the memory of Holocaust victims and learn from their history to build a better future. The following day Alexandra Drakakis and Colleen Rademaker (Rubenstein Institute) guided a tour through the collection of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and opened a discussion about presenting the Holocaust and exhibition formats.

The third panel, "Nazi Looting, Restitution, and Provenance Research," chaired by Mark Roseman, dealt with material objects as testimonies of Jewish lives and persecution during World War II, placing the role of cultural responsibility for restitution and the importance of provenance research at the center of discussion. Sören Groß and Ron Hellfritzsch started the panel with "Escaping from the Nazi Regime: The Persecution and Emigration of Two Jewish Businessmen." The two provenance researchers reconstructed how Julius Carlebach and Otto Bettmann escaped Germany, using sales records and correspondence with the Optisches Museum in Jena during the 1930s. This research is a product of the provenance research project at the Deutsches Optisches Museum in Jena and shows how objects in museums and collections can be important testimonies of the persecution and emigration of Jewish people. The field of provenance research is an important key to reconstruct the past and keep the culture of remembrance alive. Tammy Kohn presented "German Judaica: Material Culture of German Jews in Argentina." Kohn showed how the books and objects immigrants brought led to the migration of ideas and material traditions from their place of origin to their new homes and communities. Synagogues and archives in Argentina are now a reservoir for Jewish ritual objects mixed with Holocaust-related items. The study of the continuity and disruption of Jewish German material traditions in Argentina is expected to raise new questions for further debate about the meaning of these

objects as primary historical sources of Jewish and general history. Shir Kochavi's talk "Rethinking the Narratives of the Jewish Past: Exhibiting Provenance Research" discussed three exhibitions – "Recollecting: Looted Art and Restitution" (2008–2009), "Memory Objects: Judaica Collections, Global Migrations" (2018) and "Afterlives: Recovering the Lost Stories of Looted Art" (2021) – as examples of different approaches museums are adopting to examine the translocation of Jewish objects with respect to World War II and the Holocaust. While "Recollection" used contemporary artistic methods to display archival materials, museums used original objects in "Memory Objects" and "Afterlives." All three clearly connected the Jewish owners of the cultural objects with the tragedy of the Holocaust, but also offered critical stances on restitution, current migration/refugee controversies, and the afterlives of objects with complicated provenance and migration histories.

The fourth panel, "Blind Spots: Hidden (Parts of) Object Biographies," was chaired by Miriam Rürup. Three junior scholars presented their research to uncover hidden objects, based on private photo collections, press photographs, and magazines. Sol Izquierdo de la Viña discussed "Two Albums Divided by the Atlantic: Objects' Biographies from the Legacy of an Exiled Jewish Woman Artist," focusing on the photographs of and belonging to the Jewish-Austrian artist and collector Lene Schneider-Kainer. The artist's first album, including scenes of family portraits, excursions, and visits to European cities, recovers the memory of Jewish life during the Weimar Republic. The second album, dating from 1929 to 1951, depicts Schneider-Kainer's life as she left Europe and immigrated to the United States. The trajectories of the two albums – the first was likely looted in Germany, and only reemerged there in the 1980s, while Schneider-Kainer kept the second album and later donated it to the Leo Baeck Archives in New York – reveal processes of transfer entangled in the looting and migration of twentieth-century history. Anna Rosemann

presented the topic “Modern Press Photography – A Forgotten Heritage of German Jewish Material Culture.” Roseman examined photographic testimonies as a forgotten heritage of German Jewish material culture, with people of Jewish origin becoming increasingly active in the emerging field of press photography from the end of the nineteenth century onward. Using three case studies, Roseman explored the major role of Jewish owners of press photo agencies in the development of press photography in Germany. “Tracing Jewish Visibility on German Main Street” by Hannah-Leah Wasserfuhr closed the last panel of the conference. Tracing entries in various magazines and advertisements, the paper sought to reconstruct the manufacturers and the market networks for producing and selling Judaica in Germany between 1871 and the 1930s. She showed different methods to trace Jewish visibility and the history of material objects before they were transformed by use into German Judaica. Reconnecting the objects to their manufacturers’ backgrounds might help to situate them into the general consumer culture. The paper exemplified how using economic and cultural history methods offers new explanations which complement insights from the art history approach.

Overall, it became clear in the conference contributions and discussions that by taking into account the overarching issues of Jewish history and relating them to material Jewish culture, new perspectives can be provided, be it with regard to migration and exile studies, museum and memory studies, works on consumer culture and gender studies, or in the growing field of provenance research, to name just a few.

**Sören Groß**

(Deutsches Optisches Museum, Jena)