

Jewish Property After 1945

Cultures and Economies of Ownership,
Loss, Recovery and Transfer

Edited by
Jacob Ari Labendz



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Questions arose after 1945, and have persisted, about the ownership of properties which had belonged to Jewish communities before the Second World War, to Holocaust victims and survivors, and to Jewish expellees from the Middle East and North Africa. Studies of these properties have often focused on their symbolic values, their places in cultures of memory and identity construction, and measures of justice achieved or denied.

This collection explores contesting conceptions of ownership and property claims advanced in the post-war years. The authors focus considerably upon how conflicts over these properties both shaped and reflected shifting and competing ideas about Jewish belonging. They show their outcomes to have had considerable consequences for the lived experiences of both Jews and non-Jews around the world. This is because the properties in questions always maintained their worth as material assets, just as they could also impart financial liabilities and other responsibilities to their stewards, regardless of the morality of their title. The unique decision to include studies of European, Middle Eastern, and North African communities into one volume represents an attempt to achieve a more globally sensitive language for thinking about these histories, especially at their points of contact and mutual reference.

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Jacob Ari Labendz is the Clayman Assistant Professor of Judaic and Holocaust Studies and the Director of the Center for Judaic and Holocaust Studies at Youngstown State University, Youngstown, OH, USA. He writes about the history of Jews in and from Central Europe with a focus on post-war Czechoslovakia, communism, and antisemitism. He also participates in broader discussions on contemporary Jewish politics, Holocaust memory, and nationalism. He holds a PhD in History from Washington University in Saint Louis, St. Louis, MO, USA.



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Chapter 1

The amnesia of the Wirtschaftswunder: Essen's 'House of Industrial Design'

Michael L. Meng

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Chapter 2

Toward a material culture of Jewish loss

David Gerlach

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Chapter 3

Unsettled possession: the question of ownership of Jewish sites in Poland after the Holocaust from a local perspective

Yechiel Weizman

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Chapter 4

Synagogues for sale: Jewish-State mutuality in the communist Czech lands, 1945–1970

Jacob Ari Labendz

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Chapter 5

Property claims of Jews from Arab countries: political, monetary, or cultural?

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Grave connections: Algeria's Jewish cemeteries as sites of diaspora-homeland contact

Sara T. Jay

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Chapter 7

Reconnecting with a fugitive collection: a case study of the records of JDC's Warsaw Office, 1945–1949

Jeffrey Edelstein

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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INTRODUCTION

Jewish property after 1945: cultures and economies of ownership, loss, recovery, and transfer

Jacob Ari Labendz

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Questions arose after 1945, and have persisted since, about the ownership of properties which had belonged to Jewish communities before the Second World War, to individuals murdered in the Holocaust, and to those fortunate to have survived antisemitism. These properties have included thousands of cemeteries and synagogues in various states of repair, many of which had already come to serve new purposes before the war's end. Studies of Jewish properties have often focused on their symbolic or nostalgic values, their places in cultures of memory and identity construction, and the measure of justice achieved or denied in the postwar years for thefts entwined with genocide and expulsion.¹ These lost, stolen, and traded properties, however, always maintained worth as material assets, just as they could also impart financial liabilities and other responsibilities to their stewards, regardless of the morality of their title. These factors of value, often determined by national contexts and cultures, conditioned the types of claims that competing actors made to properties, the outcomes of their conflicts, and even how owners and would-be owners understood their relationships and responsibilities to their properties and each other. Overlapping frameworks of local, national, and transnational political economy and culture have thus influenced the articulation and reception of the moral, political, and philosophical claims to the material legacies of European, North African, and Middle Eastern Jewries.²

In March 2015, scholars from Europe, Israel, and the United States of America convened at the Center for Research on Antisemitism at the Technical University in Berlin for a workshop, 'The Stuff of Jews: Political Economies and Jewish Material Culture, 1945-Present.'³ We sought to develop a more robust language and share methodologies for thinking about Jewish properties after 1945. Our discussions identified competing and complementary conceptions of ownership. We noticed how properties could become unmoored from their histories or, alternatively, fade into the past, leaving postwar actors to produce and struggle over traces and their meanings. We explored differences across the Soviet Bloc in terms of the systems developed for managing Jewish communal properties, as well as the reception of these frameworks and the roles they played in determining the place of Jews in society. Finally, our workshop transgressed the usual boundaries of such discussions through the inclusion of papers on lost Jewish properties in the Middle East and North Africa, which forced us to think on a more global scale. So too did a presentation on the belated and fraught processes of personal property restitution in the former German East.⁴ This

contribution brought Cold-War divides more sharply into focus and led us to reconsider the implicit and normative expectations regarding how contests over property should be resolved, which have tended to influence even scholarly discussions on these themes.

Jewish Culture and History graciously offered to publish selected papers and reports from the workshop. Each has been revised, expanded, and subjected to peer review. The following seven studies, grouped into pairs with an additional stand-alone report, offer an opportunity to explore larger themes in postwar Jewish history through the lens of property relations. The collection's new title reflects the content of the specific articles chosen for publication.

Michael Meng delivered a thought-provoking keynote address to inaugurate our workshop and so it is appropriate that his article appear first in this collection as well. Meng recalls the concept of 'reification,' mainly through Theodore Adorno, to explain how some postwar Jewish properties could become abstracted from their histories and reduced to commodities of exchange, particularly in the context of West Germany's 'economic miracle.' With a focus on a single synagogue in the city of Essen, the author shows that such processes of forgetting and abstraction are historically contingent and therefore also potentially vulnerable to resistance and change.

Personal objects and their meaning in the context of the Holocaust and restitution claims are the focus of the next article by David Gerlach. Noting that most of the property lost by Jews through the Second World War was never recovered, he explores what stolen property meant to Jews and how it shaped their memories about the past. Gerlach focuses on survivors' restitution claims and the lists of lost properties they composed. He calls attention to the boundedness of such claims to specific legal and bureaucratic frameworks, competing cultures of ownership and attitudes towards history, and the claimants' socio-economic status. Not only did new owners and non-Jewish majorities view objects differently than survivors in some cases, but the way that survivors considered, described, and sought their own properties could shift over time, depending upon context and other factors.

The tension between objects and their histories, embedded in these questions of reification and representation, fall away in the next two articles. Yechiel Weizman and Jacob Ari Labendz present complementary studies of how the newly communist states of Central Europe disposed of properties, such as synagogues and cemeteries, which had belonged to Jewish communities before the Second World War. Weizman shows that the decision of the Polish state not to return such properties to Jewish hands often clashed with cultures and expectations at the local level. In many cases, the (ambivalent) perception that Jews and their communities had 'moral' claims to specific types of property yielded a unique set of practices unanticipated by the law and rejected by the central state. Careful not to portray this as philosemitism, Weizman shows that different parties invoked or responded to such attributions of moral ownership with varying combinations of altruism, pragmatism, and opportunism.

In contrast to Weizman's work on the periphery, Labendz focuses on policies and procedures developed by the central state and how they structured Jewish-state relations more broadly. Postwar Czechoslovakia recognized the rights of its Jewish communities to receive in restitution properties that had been lost by their interwar predecessors. Labendz reveals that specific cohorts of party-state administrators and Jewish leaders in Prague collaborated to defend Jewish property rights and dispose of surplus synagogues in the service of their own interests. He argues, however, that this collaboration was often understood as reflecting

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certain shared moral commitments and that it subsequently contributed to the emergence of a culture of limited Jewish-state mutuality which, in turn, helped make possible an efflorescence of Jewish life in the 1960s.

The final two articles in this collection, by Shayna Zamkanei and Sara Jay, press beyond the territorial boundaries of Europe and broaden our discussion of postwar Jewish property by including cases rooted in the Middle East and North Africa. Both pieces situate material loss in transnational and diasporic contexts, in which the absence of a community at the site of loss is the rule rather than the exception. This necessarily draws attention away from local Jewish-state relations and thus distinguishes these studies from those which precede them. For this very reason, however, as Zamkanei and Jay make clear, the politics and cultures of recovery in these cases have become internationalized and subject to the cultures of the United States, Europe, and Israel. The inclusion of these papers reflects one of our workshop's goals of developing – or testing the possibility to develop – a more globally sensitive language for thinking about these histories, especially at their points of contact and mutual-reference.

With a focus on two major organizations, Zamkanei explores the multidimensionality of the claims made by Jews from Middle Eastern countries to the properties which they lost through their mid-century migrations to Israel, a result of state and popular antisemitism. She argues that the popular tendency to view their claims through the prism of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (in which they have become politicized) has occluded the claimants' more nuanced perspectives on their own histories, places in the contemporary world, and lost properties. Zamkanei further shows that such elisions of politics and culture are also rooted in the popular hegemonic practice of molding Middle-Eastern Jewish histories and identities to accommodate the predominating frameworks which place the Holocaust at the center of Israeli and Jewish history.

Jay relates the unusual story of three Algerian-Jewish brothers who have taken it upon themselves to care for and catalogue their country's Jewish cemeteries, despite the emigration of most Jews by 1962. She argues, in fact, that the lack of a visible Jewish presence in Algeria has made it possible for the brothers to establish informal relationships with cemetery-keepers which do not involve the state. This is also because they have made only 'moral' claims to the properties – to borrow a term from Weizman – rather than legal ones. For Jay, the importance of the brothers' project is not limited to their newfound connections to their own Algerian-Jewish heritage. They have also cultivated ties to the Algerian-Jewish diaspora and, through their project, are attempting to return Algeria to its lived geography.

This volume concludes with a report by Jeffrey Edelstein on the digitization of the archival records of the Polish office of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) after the Second World War. The originals are housed at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Digitization has facilitated the integration of this 'fugitive collection' of over 500,000 pages into the JDC Archives, which are available online. Edelstein's report, which also offers a brief history of the JDC in Poland, introduces for consideration a special category of property which can be transferred or shared without much loss. Unlike the lists of properties discussed by Gerlach, the catalogue of the JDC Archives links to digital copies that can stand-in for their material originals. The lists analyzed by Gerlach functioned as mere traces, whereas these digital copies also function as the objects to which they refer. The implications of digitization (and other technologies) for thinking about Jewish property after 1945 will continue to unfold, as the meaning of ownership shifts in the information age.