

Leo I. Lessmann's Lost Judaica Collection: Towards a Collaborative Approach for Judaica Provenance Research

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Abstract: In 1943, in the midst of the Second World War, one of the most important German private collections of Jewish ritual objects was stolen from a dwelling in the Old Jewish Quarter of Amsterdam. The owner, Leo I. Lessmann, had sent his collection from Hamburg to Amsterdam in 1936 to safeguard it from seizure by the Nazis. Lessmann himself flew from Germany to Palestine in 1939. Lessmann's postwar efforts to find his collection remained unsuccessful. In the 1960ies, his claim for the vanished collection resulted in partial financial compensation. Three years ago, the authors of this article joined forces to reconstruct the circumstances of the looting and to locate (pieces from) the lost collection. The following report of this so-called *quovadience* research shows how rewarding an interdisciplinary approach and the use of archival and oral sources can be, albeit with limitations. Furthermore, this article increases our understanding of the often complicated looting processes, broadens our overview of migration paths of Jewish ritual objects, and of postwar claims for restitution or compensation, which always carried a sensitive load.

Keywords: Judaica; provenance research; Leo I. Lessmann; Nazi looting; Amsterdam

Introduction: Tribute to a Forgotten Collector

Three years ago, we, the authors of this article,¹ began collaborating to trace one of the largest and most valuable private Judaica collections ever assembled in Germany before World War II.² It had been built up by Leo I. Lessmann (1891-1971),³ the publisher of the widely read *Israelitisches Familien-*

blatt.⁴ In 1936, to safeguard his collection from Nazi atrocities, Lessmann sent the collection in 17 crates from Hamburg to Amsterdam. They were stored in the house of his acquaintance Louis Lamm (1871-1943), a German-Jewish antiquarian from Berlin, who had fled Nazi Germany in 1933. Lessmann eventually settled in Palestine in 1939. As soon as he was informed after the war that his collection had been stolen, he started an intensive search.

What had happened to this collection of more than 1.000 pieces? Not even a single item had resurfaced after the war. This puzzling question, which aroused both our interests, provided the impetus to our joint efforts. In our attempt to find an answer, we followed the methodology presented in the

1 The authors would like to thank several persons for kindly supporting this article: Gerard Aalders, Sharon Lieberman Mintz, Katharina Rauschenberger, Fenna and Frank Oorthuys, Michael, Ronny, Suki and Joanna Cohn, Ronny and Gidi Gerstner, Raffi Ein Dor, Anne Webber, Sophie Josephus Jitta, Max van Dam, Karen Franklin, Efrat Shimoni, Oren Kaplan, Jürgen Sielemann, Kathrin Enzel, Ilse von zur Mühlen, Clara Schmitt, and Bernhard Hensle.

2 Other important private Judaica collections in Germany at that time were for instance the collections of Max Hahn (1880-1942), Göttingen, and Max Pinkus (1857-1934), Neustadt/Oberschlesien.

3 Some publications state 1970 as the year of Lessmann's death. In fact, he died on May 19th 1971.

4 The *Israelitisches Familienblatt* was published by the Hamburg Publishing and Printing Company M. Lessmann, established by Lessmann's father Max (Marek) Rubin Lessmann in 1889. Staatsarchiv Hamburg (henceforth StAHH), Bestandsnummer 231-7, Amtsgericht Hamburg – Handels- und Genossenschaftsregister, A1, Bd. 22.

Handbook of Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects, an online publication, which appeared under the auspices of the *Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany* in 2019.⁵ Its methodology covers two different categories of research: classical provenance research, which aims at establishing prewar ownership of an object (or objects) at hand, and *quovadience* research, which presupposes that ownership is known and aims to establish the objects' present location by reconstructing its migration paths in all its details.⁶ Obviously, our case-study on Lessmann deals with the second type.

The identification of Judaica objects in the context of provenance research is often a difficult and sometimes an impossible task, not only because they regularly lack specific characteristics, but also because of scarce or incorrect object descriptions in the different sources.⁷ However, information from these sources and from prewar photographs may help to complete the picture. A central database of lost and recovered Jewish ritual objects is currently being developed. The database's creation, spearheaded by the Association of European Jewish Museums, will allow for easier identification and matching of objects. A dataset of our findings on Lessmann's collection can be transferred to this database in due time.⁸

This case-study testifies to the difficulties researchers may encounter when conducting provenance or *quovadience* research, which often concludes with unsolved issues. Our research was, for instance, hindered by missing or untraceable documents, that may have been destroyed, either deliberately by the Nazis, or with permission of

the Dutch state archivist in the postwar decades. Dispersed documents may be found in less obvious archives. However, on the basis of newly found information, we were able to reconstruct Lessmann's biography, as well as the history of his collection, to which only a handful of scholars have dedicated attention.⁹ By rescuing collector and collection from oblivion, we pay tribute to both.

Reconstructing a Lost Collection

The most important primary source to help reconstruct the lost collection is Lessmann's restitution file (Wiedergutmachungsakte, henceforth WGA-file) in the Landesarchiv Berlin, which preserves a so-called *Interims-Katalog der Sammlung altjüdischer Sakralkunst* (1935).¹⁰ This catalogue does not describe the objects in detail and appears to be rather cursory. According to a postwar statement by Lessmann, three volumes of photographs and a detailed catalogue, consisting of twelve volumes of text discussing each item in detail, were still in his possession in 1945, but these volumes have not yet been recovered.¹¹ In addition, Lessmann's restitution files contain a "Kistenverzeichnis" (list of crates) listing the contents of the 17 crates that

5 Julie-Marthe Cohen / Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek / Ruth Jolanda Weinberger: *Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects*, Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, 2018, https://art.claimscon.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Judaica-Handbook_17-Sep-2019.pdf, 8, 115, <06.09.2023>.

6 Based on publications by Patricia Grimsted, Julie-Marthe Cohen shows that particular war path patterns may help to reconstruct the fate or provenance of Jewish ritual objects. Julie-Marthe Cohen: *The Fate of Three Museum Collections that Illustrate the Impact of the Second World War and the Holocaust on Judaica Collections in Europe*, in: Cohen / Heimann-Jelinek / Weinberger 2018 (see FN 5), 174-188.

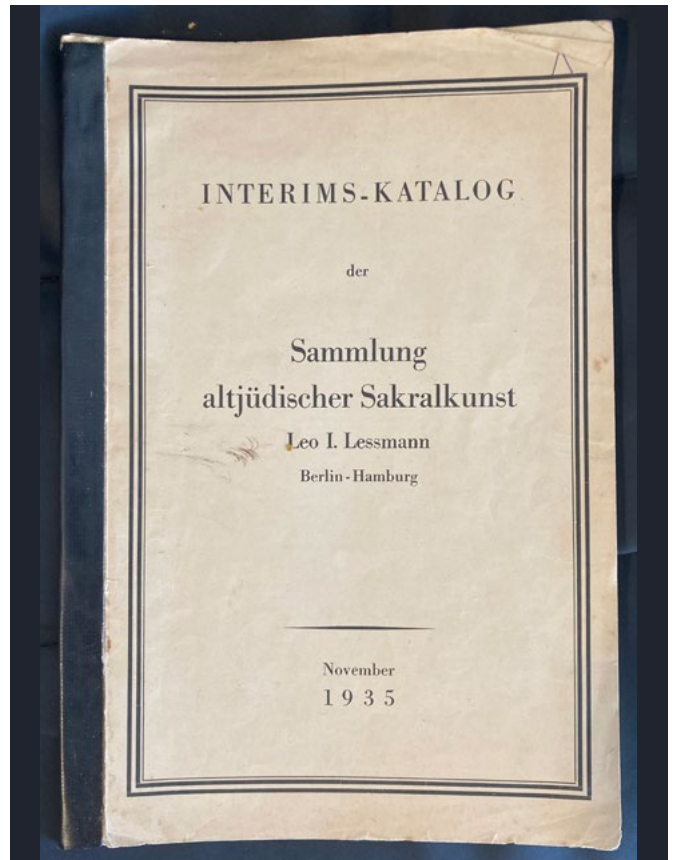
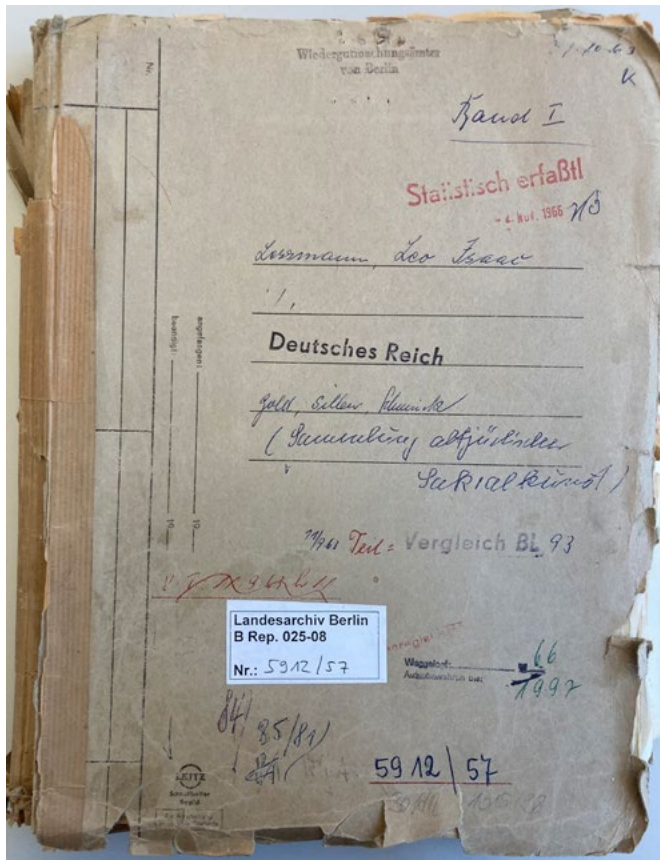
7 For the definition of Judaica, see Cohen / Heimann-Jelinek / Weinberger 2018 (see FN 5), 77.

8 Our current dataset includes about 910 collection items. As a rule of thumb, we counted sets of objects (such as Torah finials) as one item.

9 Helga Krohn: *Das Israelitische Familienblatt im Dienste der jüdisch-sakralen Kunst. Die Sammlung Leo I. Lessmann*, in: Andreas Brämer / Stefanie Schüler-Springorum / Michael Studemund-Halévy (eds.): *Aus den Quellen. Beiträge zur deutsch-jüdischen Geschichte. Festschrift für Ina Lorenz zum 65. Geburtstag*, Vol. 10, Munich 2005, 79-88; Katharina Rauschenberger: *Jüdische Tradition im Kaiserreich und in der Weimarer Republik. Zur Geschichte des jüdischen Museumswesens in Deutschland*, Hannover 2002, 122-127.

10 Col. cat. Hamburg (Private): *Interims-Katalog der Sammlung alt-jüdischer Sakralkunst. Leo I. Lessmann*, edited by Anni David-Mainz, Berlin / Hamburg 1935, in: Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB), 8 WGA 5912/57, Rückerstattung Kunstsammlung Leo Lessmann, B Rep 025-08, Nr. 5912/57, 41.1-42. AG Wiedergutmachungsakten des Arbeitskreises Provenienzforschung e. V. / Anja Ebert / Heike Krokowski / Marcus Leifeld / Emily Löffler / Ilse von zur Mühlen: *Ein quellenkritischer Blick auf Wiedergutmachungsakten als zentrale Überlieferung für die Provenienzforschung. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen*, in: *Der Archivar. Mitteilungsblatt für deutsches Archivwesen* 75 (2022), No. 1, 16-18.

11 Statement by Leo Lessmann from 15th October 1945 to the Stichting Nederlands Kunstbezit, in: National Archive (NA), The Hague, 2.08.42, inv. no. 156. Lessmann also held extensive correspondence on the collection. This correspondence survived in London and was sent to Palestine after the war. It has not been found. Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie (NIOD), Archive 700, inv. no. 1378, letter of Lessmann to M. Pimentel, Tel Aviv, 19th October 1945.



Figures 1a and 1b: An important source for the collection's reconstruction: The Wiedergutmachungsakte Lessmann and the Interims-Katalog der Sammlung alt-jüdischer Sakralkunst. Leo I. Lessmann, edited by Anni David-Mainz, Berlin/Hamburg 1935, in: Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB), 8 WGA 5912/57.

were shipped to Amsterdam in 1936 – again, its rough form hardly allows for the identification of individual pieces.¹² The Berlin Compensation Office (Entschädigungsamt) also holds a file on Lessmann with supplementary information about the collection.¹³ More details on individual items can be found in the expert opinions and letters obtained from various Judaica and/or silver experts and dealers in the course of Lessmann's restitution process during the mid-1960ies. Jacob L. van Harten and Joseph Stieglitz, for instance, were requested to evaluate the collection.¹⁴

Besides studying archival documents, we also drew on visual images of the collection, which Lessmann commissioned between 1932 and 1935 in Hamburg.¹⁵ The photographs were not included in the restitution file, but Lessmann's oldest grandson in Israel, whom we found after a three-year

search for descendants, holds 59 professional photographs mounted on a set of 30 cartons, depicting approximately 730 objects shown individually or arranged in groups.¹⁶ In addition, Lessmann used his *Israelitisches Familienblatt* to present new acquisitions of which he sometimes published illustrations. In 1930 and 1931, the newspaper published articles by the Hamburg born Erich Toeplitz (1896-1933), curator of the *Museum jüdischer Altertümer* in Frankfurt, and by Ezriel Carlebach (1908-1956), respectively.¹⁷ Illustrations of a number of artifacts

¹⁶ He also holds a second copy of slightly better quality, which is glued on paper in a multimap. Some objects appear multiple times on different photographs. The Berlin Jewish Museum photo archive held some duplicate prints, which were looted by the Nazis. Stiftung Neue Synagoge – Centrum Judaicum in Berlin holds eight photographs (nos. 7819, 6616, 6615, 3855, 3731, 3728, 3727, 3726), six are kept in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, see <https://delet.jhi.pl/en/search?searchQuery=Lessmann&searchIn=library>, <06.09.2023>. See also Anna Fischer: *Abbilder einer Zeit. Ausschnitte eines Augenblicks. Die Fotografen und die Fotosammlung des Berliner Jüdischen Museums 1933-1938*, in: Stiftung Neue Synagoge Berlin – Centrum Judaicum (ed.): *Auf der Suche nach einer verlorenen Sammlung – Das Berliner Jüdische Museum (1933-1938)*, Berlin 2011, Vol. 1, 195-196; Cohen 2018 (see FN 6), 183-184.

¹⁷ Erich Toeplitz: *Die Kultgerätesammlung des Israelitischen Familienblattes*, in: *Aus alter und neuer Zeit. Illustrierte Beilage zum Israelitischen Familienblatt Hamburg*, July 17th 1930, No. 17, 132-133. For Carlebach, see FN 24.

¹² Anon.: "Kistenverzeichnis", in: LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, Kunstsammlung Lessmann, 24-39.

¹³ Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten (LABO), Entschädigungsakte Leo Lessmann, Reg. Nr. 62 532.

¹⁴ LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, Rückerstattung Kunstsammlung Leo Lessmann includes several expert opinions.

¹⁵ Note by Leo I. Lessmann, date unknown, in possession of his heirs in Israel.

are included, many of which being placed in show-cases in a room of Lessmann's spacious private house in Hamburg. Despite this treasure trove of images, it remains challenging to match the images with the scarce catalogue descriptions.



Figure 2: Leo Lessmann presented his Judaica collection in one of the rooms in his apartment in Hamburg. From: Erich Toeplitz: Die Kultgerätesammlung des Israelitische Familienblattes, in: Aus alter und neuer Zeit. Illustrierte Beilage zum Israelitischen Familienblatt Hamburg, 17th July 1930, No. 17, 132-133.

The photographs may help to identify pieces in relevant historical photograph collections, such as the photograph documentation of rediscovered Nazi-looted ritual objects in the Offenbach Archival Depot, which were later transferred to the Central Collecting Point (CCP) in Wiesbaden, as well as in present day Judaica collections and museum and auction catalogues.¹⁸ Once similar objects are found, individual important details will hopefully allow for easier matching. Lessmann had his precious metal objects professionally engraved with catalogue numbers by a Jewish silversmith in Hamburg before shipping them to Amsterdam. Textiles and wood works were equally equipped with individual catalogue numbers.¹⁹

18 The Offenbach Archival Depot and CCP Wiesbaden were two of the four central collecting points established by the US Army. National Archives, <https://www.fold3.com/image/232013603>, <06.09.2023>. On relevant Judaica collections and databases, see Cohen / Heimann-Jelinek / Weinberger 2018 (see FN 5), 156-167.

19 Statement by Leo Lessmann from 15th October 1945 to the Stichting Nederlands Kunstbezit, in: NA, The Hague, Archive 2.08.42, inv. no. 156; and letter by Leo Lessmann to the United Restitution Organization (URO), 3rd September 1963, in: LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, Kunstsammlung Lessmann, 97.



Figure 3: One of the 30 cartons, each mounted with two photographs, showing numerous items of the "Sammlung des Israelitischen Familienblattes".

The Emergence of the Collection

Lessmann began to collect Jewish ritual objects in the mid-1920ies. His collection, outstanding in scope and quality, was created at a time when Jewish collections had already been established by other private collectors, museums, or Jewish associations in several parts of Germany.²⁰ The Weimar Republic saw a general Jewish turn to tradition and culture – a 'Jewish Renaissance' – brought on by the lingering and growing anti-Semitism after World War I and a trend towards Jewish dissimulation.²¹ Moreover, the conditions for buying antique Judaica were favorable. Many collectors and Jewish congregations sold artifacts due to the bad economic situation. In addition, increasing secularization

20 Rauschenberger 2002 (see FN 9); Natalia Berger: *The Jewish Museum. History and Memory, Identity and Art from Vienna to the Bezalel National Museum, Jerusalem, Leiden / Boston, Mass., 2017.*

21 Michael Brenner: *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany*, New Haven 1998.



Figure 4a: City expedition, cyclist messengers and business car at the Max Lessmann Buchdruckerei und Verlag in Berlin. This photo was taken on the occasion of the company's 40th anniversary in 1938.



Figure 4b: Private office of Leo Isaac Lessmann in Berlin. In 1936, Lessmann moved the Max Lessmann Buchdruckerei und Verlag from Hamburg to Berlin. This photo was taken on the occasion of the company's 40th anniversary in 1938.

led to the dissolution of Jewish congregations and a general disinterest in ritual objects among many acculturated Jews.²²

At that time, Lessmann was the owner of the *Max Lessmann Buchdruckerei und Verlag* in Hamburg, which published the *Israelitisches Familienblatt*. In 1927, the flourishing business allowed the family to move into a luxurious, upper-class apartment with 14 rooms in Badestraße 47.²³ In 1930, Lessmann had assembled about 500 arti-

facts,²⁴ a number which doubled until 1935.²⁵ Most objects were made of precious metals followed in number by objects from paper works, textiles, and wood works. From the beginning, the collection reflected Jewish religious life from different countries and historical periods. A larger number of objects originated from Eastern Europe and Italy, though some highlight objects in the collection, such as the baroque “Hamburger Garnitur”, a set of ornaments made by Hamburg goldsmith Johann Friedrich Wiese (active 1743-1752),²⁶ signaled a special connection to Lessmann's hometown.²⁷

22 Rauschenberger 2002 (see FN 9), 122-127.

23 Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten (LABO), Entschädigungsakte Leo Lessmann, Reg. Nr. 62 532, D43.

24 Esriel Carlebach: Sinn und Zweck – Form und Gehalt – Die Kult-gerätesammlung des Israelitischen Familienblattes (Sammlung Leo I. Leßmann), in: *Israelitisches Familienblatt*, July 17th 1930, No. 29, [page unknown], Private Collection, Israel.

25 Col. cat. Hamburg 1935 (see FN 10).

26 Marc Rosenberg: *Der Goldschmiede Merkzeichen*, Vol. 2, Frankfurt a. M. 1923, 149; Wolfgang Scheffler: *Hamburger Goldschmiedezeichen bis 1800* (in Ergänzung der Meisterliste von Konrad Hüseler), in: *Nordelbingen. Beiträge zur Heimatforschung in Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg und Lübeck* 27 (1959), 86, Hüs. 427; Wolfgang Scheffler: *Goldschmiede Niedersachsens*, Vol. 1, 539, No. 324. Maker “Hüs. 339” and “Hüs. 981” = “3 Stücke Kultsilber aus Hamburger Synagogen” (3 pieces of cult silver of Hamburg synagogues).

27 Leo Lessmann mentions as countries of origin of his collection items: “[...] mainly: Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Carpathian Russia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Russia, Italy, North-Africa, Persia, and Palestine.” NA The Hague, 2.08.42, Beheersdossiers, inv. no. 156, Leo I. Lessmann.



Figure 5: This set of Torah ornaments, made by Johann Friedrich Wiese (active 1743-1752), is of outstanding artistic and cultural-historical value. Being rare examples of 18th-century Hamburg silversmith craft, these objects from Lessmann's collection aroused the interest of many experts. The set was shipped to Amsterdam in two different boxes in 1935. After being looted in 1943, every trace is lost. It is likely that these pieces survived due to their high value. They could probably be identified today by their engraved catalogue number 10,002.

Like many others of his generation who had fought in World War I, Lessmann was as much a proud Jew as he was a proud German. Lessmann did observe Jewish religious traditions. However, collecting Jewish ritual objects was, for him, like for other Judaica collectors at that time, less of a religious than of a cultural matter. His collection embodied an important cultural link to the Jewish past.²⁸ Furthermore, collecting guaranteed the preservation of Jewish cultural items, prevented that these were dispersed and safeguarded them for posterity. Lessmann used the *Israelitisches Familienblatt* to promote his and other Judaica collections, to report on Jewish art history and exhibitions. The newspaper even encouraged its readers to revive the tradition of commissioning Judaica through prize puzzles. The winners were rewarded with Jewish ritual objects.²⁹ How closely Lessmann's collection was linked to the newspaper is also manifest in the collection's official name: "Sammlung des Israelitischen Familienblattes" (Collection of the *Israelitisches Familienblatt*).³⁰

28 Carlebach 1930 (see FN 24).

29 Anon.: Das 'Israelitisches Familienblatt' im Dienste der jüdisch-sakralen Kunst, in: Aus alter und neuer Zeit. Illustrierte Beilage zum Israelitischen Familienblatt Hamburg, September 20th 1928, No. 27, 213; Krohn 2005 (see FN 9); Helga Krohn: Ein Preisausschreiben als Versuch zur Wiederbelebung der jüdischen Tradition, see: <https://juedische-geschichte-online.net/beitrag/krohn-preisausschreiben-familienblatt>, <06.09.2023>.

30 Lessmann avoided his own name out of modesty. Eidesstattliche Versicherung Leo Lessmann, Tel Aviv, December 24th 1956, LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 16.

Lessmann had experts advise him on building his collection, which was common among other collectors. Julius Carlebach (1909-1964), who described and catalogued Lessmann's collection until 1932, was most likely one of them.³¹ In that same year, Carlebach became widely known for creating a Judaica collection and exhibition for the *Völkerkundemuseum* (Ethnological Museum) in Lübeck.³² According to contemporary press reviews, this collection aimed to educate Jewish and gentile visitors alike about Jewish life and culture to prevent anti-Semitism.³³ Carlebach's educational approach to counter anti-Semitism by exhibiting Judaica may have resonated with Lessmann's beliefs. Beyond that, Carlebach quickly became a major figure in the study, musealization, and trade in Judaica in Germany.³⁴ Lessmann was also in contact with other Judaica experts, such as Erich Toeplitz, who regularly wrote articles for the *Israelitisches Familienblatt*.³⁵

Additionally, Lessmann was in touch with other Judaica collectors of his time and occasionally exchanged objects with them. The relationship with

31 Statement by Julius Carlebach, New York, November 4th 1955, in: LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, Kunstsammlung Leo Lessmann, 39. Julius Carlebach was a cousin of Lessmann's editor-in-chief Esriel Carlebach. See Sandra Mühlenberend: Julius Carlebach (1909-1964). Optikhandel als Fluchthilfe, in: *transfer* – Zeitschrift für Provenienzforschung und Sammlungsgeschichte / Journal for Provenance Research and the History of Collection 1 (2022), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48640/tf.2022.1.91526>, 181-191.

32 Other museums subsequently commissioned Carlebach to build up Jewish collections. See Anon.: Die Jüdische Abteilung im Lübecker Museum, in: *Israelitisches Familienblatt*, July 7th 1932, No. 27, 11. Indeed, he designed a new concept for the synagogue room in the Altona Museum in 1930. See Karin Walter: Der jüdische Kultraum im Altonaer Museum. Eine Spurensuche, in: Gerhard Kaufmann (ed.): Schatten. Jüdische Kultur in Altona und Hamburg, Hamburg 1989, 20-29.

33 Anon.: Eröffnung eines jüdischen Museums, in: *Jüdische Rundschau* 39/40 (1932), No. 20, 190; Anon.: Eine jüdische Abteilung im Dom-museum, in: *Israelitisches Familienblatt*, May 19th 1932, No. 28, 5.

34 Julius Carlebach had a 'second career' after his emigration to the US. He became a very well-known dealer of African, Oceanic & Pre-Columbian Art in New York City. See Florence Duchemin-Pelletier: Julius Carlebach (1909-1964) and the Trade in So-Called "Primitive" Arts, in: Julia Drost et al. (eds.): *Networking Surrealism in the USA. Agents, artists and the market*, Heidelberg 2019, <https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.485>, 362-388; Sören Groß: Die Guckkastenbildersammlung des Deutschen Optischen Museums. Sammlungsgenese, Erwerbungsrekonstruktion und Objektidentifizierung, in: *Technisches Kulturgut* 1 (2022), 51-81; Timo Saalman: Erwerbungen aus Julius Carlebachs Berliner Kunsthandlung „Die Volkskunst“, in: Anne-Cathrin Schreck (ed.): *Gekauft – Geraubt – Getauscht? Erwerbungen des Germanischen Nationalmuseums zwischen 1933 und 1945*, Nuremberg 2019, 51-61.

35 According to Helga Krohn, Toeplitz advised Leo Lessmann with collecting. Krohn 2005 (see FN 9), 82.

Bavarian Judaica collector Heinrich Feuchtwanger (1898-1963) seems to have been particularly close.³⁶ With Feuchtwanger, Lessmann exchanged objects such as a circumcision knife in 1933, a Seder plate in 1935, and a circumcision bench whose date of exchange is unknown.³⁷



Figure 6: This 18th-century circumcision bench from Dermbach, Germany was in Lessmann's collection and passed to the Judaica collector Heinrich Feuchtwanger in the early 1930ies. It is today on view in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, inv. no. HF 0009.

Lessmann only bought a small part of his collection from art dealers. The majority of the items had been acquired from private persons.³⁸ In fact, through advertisements in the *Israelitisches Familienblatt*, he repeatedly reached out to private

persons to sell their Judaica to him. When it came to dealers, Lessmann was a customer of various Hamburg and Berlin jewelers and goldsmiths, including the well-known Jewish company *Lazarus Posen, Witwe*, which not only sold but also produced contemporary Judaica.³⁹ He also bought several items from Louis Lamm's antiquarian bookshop in Berlin, which specialized in Jewish and Hebrew books and old manuscripts but also sold Jewish ceremonial objects.⁴⁰

In addition, in the early 1930ies, Lessmann acquired unique Judaica with well-known provenances at auctions, such as a large porcelain jug with Hebrew inscription. This item was manufactured by the famous Hungarian *Herend*, and it was auctioned off in December 1930 at the Hugo Helbing auction house in Munich.⁴¹ This jar had formerly belonged to the Frankfurt J. Kaufmann collection. In 1932, Lessmann bought an impressive synagogue candelabra,⁴² which had formerly been part of the well-known Salli Kirschstein collection in Berlin-Nicolassee.⁴³ This cast iron candle-holder, allegedly made for a Berlin synagogue, was, according to Lessmann, exchanged for a candle-holder made of silver in the Prussian anti-Napoleonic 1813 campaign "Gold gab ich für Eisen" ("I gave gold for iron").⁴⁴ A further collection piece, acquired from Helbing auction house in 1932,⁴⁵ was a 1760-made kabalistic jar with a handle ("Henkeltopf") containing Hebrew writings.⁴⁶

36 Naomi Feuchtwanger: From Munich to Jerusalem. Dr. Heinrich Feuchtwanger's Salvation, Vision and Passion of Jewish Art, in: Annette Weber (ed.): *Jüdische Sammler und ihr Beitrag zur abendländischen Kultur der Neuzeit (Patronage and Collecting, a Tribute to Western Culture. Jewish Patronage and Modernism)*, Heidelberg 2011, 325-340.

37 Isahia Shachar: *Jewish Tradition in Art. The Feuchtwanger Collection of Judaica*, Jerusalem 1981, No. 9 (24), 16 (26), 462 (176). The circumcision bench is today displayed in the permanent exhibition of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, accession number: HF 0009 ; 197/003, see <https://museum.imj.org.il/Imagine/collections/itemCopy.asp?itemNum=247318>, <06.09.2023>.

38 Statement by Leo I. Lessmann ("Abschrift"), Tel Aviv, 15th October 1945, in: NA The Hague, 2.08.42, inv. no. 156.

39 Lessmann bought silver items from the jewelers, goldsmiths and silversmiths Hermann Schrader, Martin Meyer, Mohr, Schlee and Eggert Peters, all in Hamburg, and L. Posen Witwe in Berlin. LAB, 8 WGA 2587/51, Edelmetall.

40 Statement by Julius Carlebach, New York, November 4th 1955, in: LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, Kunstsammlung Leo Lessmann, 19. For the German translation of this statement, see LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 39.

41 Hugo Helbing: *Sammlung alter Kunstgegenstände für das jüdische Ritual*: 16. Dezember 1930, Munich 1930, Lot 61, <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.8871>. The Hungarian manufacturer "Fischer", later called "Herend", also produced traditional hand-crafted and hand-painted porcelain Seder plates, mezuzahs, kiddush cups and dreidels. Herend's Jewish Heritage was exhibited in 2020 at The Reuben & Helene Dennis Museum, Toronto.

42 Lessmann Interims-Katalog No. 3103.

43 Anon.: *Das Ende einer berühmten jüdischen Sammlung. Die Auktion der Kultgerätesammlung Kirschstein*, in: *Israelitisches Familienblatt*, 21st July 1932, No. 29, 12 [with illustration].

44 Jacob van Harten, expert opinion, 10th February 1964, in: LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, Kunstsammlung Leo Lessmann, 139.

45 Hugo Helbing (ed.): *Jüdische Kultgeräte, Silber, Gläser, Möbel, alte Gemälde, Plastik, Graphik – aus deutschem und ausländischem Adelsbesitz u. a. B.*: 14. April 1932, Munich 1932, Lot 132, <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.55085>.

46 Lessmann Interims-Katalog No. 3053.



Figure 7: In the center of this photo is an iron floor-standing chandelier that Lessmann purchased at the auction of the famous Sally Kirschstein Collection, Berlin.

Lessmann was not a designated patron. Among his few loans and donations to public museums was a 1804-made circumcision bench from Friedrichstadt in Schleswig-Holstein lent to the Altona Museum in 1932.⁴⁷ However, against the backdrop of rising anti-Jewish agitation after the National Socialist's rise to power in 1933, Lessmann withdrew the loan and donated the bench to the then newly established Jewish Museum in Berlin.⁴⁸ Apparently, it was important to him that the bench was kept in a Jewish institution. It was lost in 1938 to Nazi-looting.⁴⁹

47 Correspondence on the loan of the bench, in: Altonaer Museum AM 23.1.2. A joint exhibition of the Deutsch-Israelitische Gemeinde Hamburg and the Gesellschaft für jüdische Volkskunde in Hamburg was planned for autumn 1930, but it appears not to have been realized. Krohn 2005 (see FN 9), 82.

48 Krohn 2005 (see FN 9), 82, FN 18. The bench was returned to Lessmann in April 1933, after the closure of the Synagogenraum in the Altonaer Museum.

49 Stiftung Neue Synagoge Berlin 2011 (see FN 16), 107.

Increasing Persecution and Rescue Attempts

Having been a successful publisher during the Weimar Republic and an influential figure of Hamburg Jewish life, Lessmann became the target of Nazi-persecution from relatively early on. Several events made Lessmann realize that his life in Germany was under threat. Twice, in 1933 and again in 1935, the *Israelitisches Familienblatt* was temporarily banned by the National Socialists. In 1935, Lessmann was even wanted by the police as he was accused of “Verunglimpfung der nationalen Presse und Verdachts der Sabotage” (Dispraise of the national press and suspected of committing sabotage).⁵⁰ In the same year, probably under external pressure, Lessmann moved the *Max Lessmann Buchdruckerei und Verlag* and his family from Hamburg to Berlin. Realizing he could not stay in Germany, he later wrote:

*“Im Jahre 1936 wurde es mir klar, dass meine und meiner Familie Lage in Nazi-Deutschland mehr und mehr unhaltbar wurde und wir früher oder später würden auswandern müssen. Ich begann also, die wertvollsten Stücke meines Haushalts, darunter Gemälde, Teppiche, Porzellan, Tischsilber usw. successive an verschiedene Freunde im Ausland zu schicken, um dieses Umzugsgut dem zu erwartenden Zugriff der Nazis rechtzeitig zu entziehen.”*⁵¹

His most valuable property (“mein wertvollster Besitz”) was his sizeable collection of Jewish ritual objects. In order to save it, Lessmann approached the Ministry of Propaganda. The Ministry did not regard the objects as German cultural heritage and

50 Fahndung nach jüdischem Zeitungsverleger Leo Isaak Lessmann aus Hamburg wegen Verunglimpfung der nationalen Presse, in: Niedersächsisches Landesarchiv, Abteilung Bückeburg, L 102a, Nr. 1762; Leo Lessmann to K. J. Ball-Kaduri, Tel Aviv, 2nd December 1959, in: Documents regarding a ban on Jewish newspapers for three months in 1935, in particular the ban on the “Israelitisches Familienblatt”, 1935, O.1 – K. J. Ball-Kaduri – Collection of Testimonies and Reports of German Jewry, Yad Vashem Archives.

51 “In 1936, I realized that my situation, as well as that of my family, in Nazi-Germany was becoming more and more untenable, and that, sooner or later, we would have to emigrate. I thus started to send the most valuable objects of my household, including paintings, carpets, porcelain, silver-plate etc., successively to various friends abroad to deny these removal goods yet in time from an expectable seizure by the Nazis.” Leo Lessmann, Eidesstattliche Erklärung, 24th July 1956, in: LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, Kunstsammlung Leo Lessmann, B Rep 025-08, Nr. 5912/57, 15.

gave permission for export under the condition of financial compensation.⁵² Lessmann came up with a smart plan: he turned to attorney R. Salomon in Amsterdam, with whom he agreed to conduct a pro forma sales contract in which Salomon purchased the collection for the notional amount of 50.000 guilders. After transference of this sum from his bank account at Proehl & Co. in Amsterdam to the Reichsbank in Hamburg, Lessmann was allowed to send his collection to Amsterdam, insuring its transport for a price far under its actual value.⁵³

Lessmann must have chosen Amsterdam as a safe haven for several reasons. As Amsterdam was relatively close to Germany, it was a convenient temporary shelter for his collection “um darüber später, nachdem ich mir über mein Auswanderungsziel klar geworden sein würde, definitiv zu disponieren.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, he had a connection in Amsterdam, the German refugee and antiquarian Louis Lamm (1871-1943), who continued to run his business from his home at Amstel 3 and had a storage room available. Other Jewish collectors from Germany also moved their collections to the Netherlands at that time in the belief that these would be safe there.⁵⁵

Lessmann prepared carefully before shipping his collection overseas in 17 crates from Hamburg to Amsterdam. Not only had he taken care of the condition and documentation of each object, but

he had also included them in the “Interim-Katalog” (interim catalogue) in 1935, finished by Anni David-Mainz (1895-1984), who had taken over from Julius Carlebach.⁵⁶ Remarkably, the title page does not mention the *Israelitisches Familienblatt* as the owner, but Lessmann himself, probably because his newspaper was, for a second time, temporarily banned by the Nazis in the summer of 1935.⁵⁷

In autumn 1938, forced by the decay of his capital and his sources of income, Lessmann visited the U.S.A. in an attempt to sell his collection to an unmentioned party.⁵⁸ The expiration of his visitor’s visa forced him to abort negotiations and to continue them in writing. When arriving in the Rotterdam harbor in or around the 9th of November 1938, Lessmann heard about the open anti-Jewish terror and the (yet uncoordinated) lootings and incarcerations that were prevailing all over Germany.⁵⁹ As informed via a telephone call by his secretary, his publishing house was closed, his newspapers banned, and he himself wanted by the German police.⁶⁰ Obviously, Lessmann could not return to Germany. On December 10th 1938, Lessmann officially deregistered from Berlin to Amsterdam. He moved in with his sister Sophie and her family, who had left Germany already in 1937. Henceforth, the Nazi authorities regarded him as a “Devisenausländer”, which also meant that his bank accounts were blocked and he could no longer freely dispose of them.⁶¹

52 Leo Lessmann, Eidesstattliche Erklärung, 24th July 1956, LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, Kunstsammlung Leo Lessmann, 15. The Pinkus collection and the Danzig community collection received export permission on similar grounds. See Judith Siepmann: Silesia and discourses of Heimat. The Judaica and Arts and Crafts Collection of the Pinkus Family (unpublished paper, presented during the conference *Diaspora and Debris: Material Culture in German-Jewish History* at the German Historical Institute Washington, DC, in April 2023); Vivian Mann: Danzig 1939. Treasures of a Destroyed Community: The Jewish Museum, New York 1980.

53 Letter of Lessmann to M. Pimentel of the Consultatiebureau voor Vermogensbelangen in Nederland in Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv, 19th October 1945, in: NIOD, Archive 700, inv. no. 1378.

54 “[...] to later, when I would have decided on the destination of my emigration, definitively dispose of it.” Letter from Leo Lessmann to the Wiener Library, Tel Aviv, 24th November 1957, in: The Wiener Holocaust Library, Correspondence between Leo Lessmann and Alfred Wiener, London, Ref. No. 3000/9/10884/1/1.

55 For instance, in 1937, Frederick G. Flersheim could export his collection to Amsterdam, where it was confiscated by Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg in 1944. On other art collections from Germany brought to the Netherlands, see Gregor Langfeld: Art by Exiled Germans in the Stedelijk Museum, in: Hein Aalders / Marie-Claire van Bracht / Monique den Ouden (eds.): *The Stedelijk Museum and the Second World War*, Amsterdam 2015, 77-78, 81, 84-98.

56 Mainz took over from Julius Carlebach, who had moved from Hamburg to Berlin in 1932. Statement by Julius Carlebach, November 4th 1955, in: LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, Kunstsammlung Leo Lessmann, 39.

57 Col. cat. Hamburg 1935 (see FN 10).

58 NIOD, Archive 700, inv. no. 1378, Letter of Lessmann to M. Pimentel, Tel Aviv, 19th October 1945.

59 Akten der Vermögensverwertungsstelle, Oberfinanzpräsident (OFF), BB. Blha 36a Oberfinanzpräsident Berlin-Brandenburg, A Rep 092, No. 22033, d 248, 5.

60 Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten (LABO), Entschädigungsakte Leo Lessmann, Reg. Nr. 62 532, D7.

61 OFF, BB. Blha 36a, A Rep 092, No. 22033, d 248, 5.



Figure 8: Lessmann's wife Carry-Alice and his two daughters, Eva and Sonja (right). From Sonja Lessmann's photo album "Mein 20. Geburtstag, 5 April 1921-1941".

In preparation of his emigration to Palestine, Lessmann tried to obtain visa for his wife and his youngest daughter Eva, who were still in Berlin, as well as for his oldest daughter Sonja, who attended a boarding school in Florence. His wife Carry-Alice (1899-1964) prepared their imminent emigration taking care of their apartment in Winklerstraße 4 in Berlin-Grunewald and its furniture.⁶² In the midst of these chaotic events, Lessmann left his collection in the care of Louis Lamm until the eventual sale in the U.S.A. would have been completed.⁶³ In April 1939, Lessmann considered transferring his collection to the UK, as he was corresponding with the Amsterdam shipping company Neumann & Vettin,⁶⁴ possibly as a transit location between Amsterdam and the U.S.A.

62 Before moving to a smaller apartment in Berlin in 1935, the major part of the Hamburg interior was stored at a 'Kontorgrundstück' (office site) of Lessmann's mother on ABC Straße. Stock and Mayer handed over the smaller part to a Jewish owned shipping company in Hamburg. Included were 2.000 bottles of an exquisite wine (received from his friend Hans Rothschild) and the showcases and cabinets, which had displayed the Judaica collection. Letter from URO Berlin to Entschädigungsamt Berlin, 30th November 1956, Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten (LABO), Entschädigungsakte Leo Lessmann, Reg. Nr. 62 532, D 63. On January 21st 1937, the Dr. Walther Achenbach auction house in Berlin auctioned off 36 objects from Lessmann, ranging from furniture and paintings to tableware, but no Judaica (auction No. 1097). A few pieces were put up for auction again in May 1937. LAB, A Rep 243-04, No. 9. After the war, Lessmann learned that the stored household objects were looted. Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten (LABO), Entschädigungsakte Leo Lessmann, Reg. Nr. 62 532, D41-42.

63 NIOD, Archive 700, inv. no. 1378.

64 Letter of Lessmann to Paul Stiel of URO Tel Aviv, [Tel Aviv], 21st February 1960, in: NIOD, Archive 700, inv. no. 1378. On Neumann & Vettin also see Gregor Langfeld: Vier kunsthandelaren van moderne Duitse kunst in Nederland, in: Fritz Botermann / Marianne Vogel (eds.): Nederland en Duitsland in het interbellum. Wisselwerking en contacten: van politiek tot literatuur, 123-136, here: 132-135.

On December 1st 1938, a new law was implemented in Germany (and by then annexed Austria), which prohibited Jews to transfer any goods abroad without permission from the "Devisenamt" (foreign exchange office).⁶⁵ The original plan to ship the household objects in three lifts from Berlin to Haifa was now met with obstructions and was further complicated by Lessmann's absence. Therefore, he granted general power of attorney to two lawyers, Luise Stock and Jacques Meyer, to manage his personal and business assets.⁶⁶ However, his lawyers could act only to a limited extent, as Lessmann's private and business accounts were converted into blocked accounts ("Sperrkonten") and the Nazi authorities were reluctant to respond to his representatives. This became specifically clear after the Devisenstelle had finally given permission for export, but did not release the money for the shipping costs from Lessmann's blocked account. It took Stock and Meyer several months to get the transfer effectuated.⁶⁷ In the summer of 1939, the lifts finally arrived in Palestine.⁶⁸

The family's emigration also faced many difficulties. In March 1939, Lessmann himself travelled from Amsterdam through London and Zurich to Venice, where he planned to meet Carry-Alice, Sonja and Eva. In Zurich, he was informed that the Gestapo had arrested Carry-Alice and Eva at the Lehrtter Bahnhof in Berlin and incarcerated them after their return from a good-bye visit to Lessmann's mother. Lessmann was forced by the Nazi authorities to pay 10.000 guilders (15.000 Reichsmarks) in order to obtain their release and emigration.⁶⁹ The

65 Ralf Banken: Edelmetallmangel und Großraubbwirtschaft. Die Entwicklung des deutschen Edelmetallsektors im „Dritten Reich“ 1933-1945, Berlin 2009, 366-381.

66 OFP, BB. Blha 36a, A Rep 092, No. 22033, d 248, 11.

67 Stock/Mayer to Devisenamt Berlin, 5th April 1939, in: OFP, A Rep 092, No. 22033, d 248, 24.

68 The three lifts (two of 5 meter length and one of 3 meter length) were shipped by Silberstein's Transport Ltd. shipping company.

69 The Nazi authorities discovered that Lessmann had an outstanding debt from his brother-in-law, Hans Gottschalt. To impede that Lessmann would pay off Gottschalt in the Netherlands, and thereby missing out on Lessmann's fortune, they extorted even more from him through blackmail. Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten (LABO), Entschädigungsakte Leo Lessmann, Reg. Nr. 62 532, D7, D56. On the following broader phenomenon, see Bettina Zeugin / Thomas Sandkühler (eds.): Die Schweiz und die deutschen Lösegelderpressungen in den besetzten Niederlanden. Vermögensentziehung, Freikauf, Austausch 1940-1945, Zurich 2001.

family was finally reunited in Venice,⁷⁰ where they boarded the ship *Marco-Polo* to Haifa, eventually arriving on March 16th 1939.⁷¹

The 1939 Silver Plunder

On February 21st 1939, the Reich Economics Ministry issued the “Third Order of the Ordinance on the Registration of the Property of Jews”,⁷² which forced Jews to deliver all privately-owned jewelry, gold, silver, and platinum objects to one of the 66 pawnbroking institutions run by the municipalities all over the German Reich.⁷³ Regardless of the object’s artistic or emotional value, Jewish owners were paid only a fraction of the material price in return, from which a further 10 percent administrative fee was deducted; it was essentially robbery.⁷⁴

This euphemistically so-called “Silberabgabe” (silver levy) or “Leihhausaktion” (pawnshop action) robbed Lessmann of precious metal objects. According to a postwar statement by Lessmann, the Nazi authorities ordered him to store his precious metal items at the “Hauptstahlkammer” (main steel chamber) of the Deutsche Bank Berlin on March 23rd 1939.⁷⁵ By then, the entire Lessmann family had already left Berlin. Thus, it were probably Stock and Mayer who handed over 79 silver objects, mostly utensils, such as cutlery, but also jewelry and a couple of Jewish ceremonial objects, such as a “Büchse” (probably a spice-box), a Seder plate, a ritual jug with bowl (“Waschschüssel

mit Krug”), and two small Shabbat lamps, the latter part of Lessmann’s original collection.⁷⁶ After the war, in 1951, Lessmann estimated the value of these items to have been 4.998 Reichsmarks.⁷⁷



Figure 9: Leo Lessmann purchased this Seder plate in 1927 from the Hamburg Jeweler Eggert Peters. He described it as richly chased handwork and as based on an antique model. It was among the silver objects deposited at the Deutsche Bank in 1939 and got lost. Landesarchiv Berlin, 8 WGA 2587/51, Edelmetall.

It is surprising that Lessmann had to deliver these objects to the Deutsche Bank, and not, as was more common, to a local pawnbroking institution. However, there are a few other examples of Jewish collectors being ordered to deposit their precious metal holdings in bank depositories for special safekeeping (Sonderverwahrung).⁷⁸ A decree of March 20th 1939 allowed Jewish emigrants to take abroad precious metal holdings, after they had first applied to the Foreign Exchange Office and paid a requested sum for the objects in foreign currency (valuta). Often, however, emigrants could not afford to bail out their belongings in bank depositories, as was, for instance, the case with Judaica collector Max Hahn (1880-1942), who had been forced to store objects at bank depositories in

70 Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten (LABO), Entschädigungsakte Leo Lessmann, Reg. Nr. 62 532, M15.

71 Application for Palestinian Citizenship by Leo Isaak Lessmann, Tel Aviv, 15th May 1941, in: Government of Palestine. Department of Immigration, Israeli State Archives, 6830/2-M.

72 On the so-called “Dritte Anordnung auf Grund der Verordnung über die Anmeldung des Vermögens von Juden”, see <https://www.lexikon-provenienzforschung.org/ss-14-zwangsablieferungen-von-edelmetall-juwelen-und-perlen>, <07.09.2023>.

73 Exceptions were only made for specific object groups, such as wedding bands, pocket watches or dental gold.

74 Banken 2009 (see FN 65), 314-324; Marlies Coburger: Der Silberschatz im Märkischen Museum, in: Jahrbuch Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin 4 (1998), 223-272; Anna-Carolin Augustin: The Object’s Afterlife: Nazi-Looted Precious Metal Objects, Art History, and Jewish History in Postwar Germany, in: Bulletin of the German Historical Institute 66 (Spring 2020), 31-52, https://perspectivia.net/receive/pnet_mods_00003784, <20.09.2023>; Mathias Weniger: Neues zu den Objekten aus der NS-Silberabgabe im Bayerischen Nationalmuseum, unpublished draft.

75 The Deutsche Bank Archive holds no sources on this matter. Email from Reinhard Frost, Deutsche Bank archivist, 11th October 2022.

76 Eidesstattliche Erklärung by Leo Lessmann, 27th October 1956, in: LAB, 8 WGA 2587/51, Edelmetall, 46.

77 For today’s value, see <https://www.bundesbank.de/resource/blob/615162/5a2ab631c106f9a6438899323321ec31/mL/kaufkraft-aequivalente-historischer-betraege-in-deutschen-waehrungen-data.pdf>, <07.09.2023>.

78 Banken 2009 (see FN 65), 373.

Hamburg and Göttingen.⁷⁹ Objects not bailed out were usually sent to the central pawnbroking institution in Berlin, which was under the control of the Reich Ministry of Economics. There they were often melted down or, if of art historical value, sold to private persons or museum collections.

Two months after the forced delivery of the silver objects, Stock and Meyer transferred 32 kilos of these objects to the Berlin pawnbroking institution, receiving a “Purchase Certificate for Jewish Assets” and 720 Reichsmarks.⁸⁰ Separately confirmed on the same day was the delivery of jewelry, namely a pair of earrings, a pearl necklace, and two rings with diamonds, pearls and colored stones, for which the pawnbroking institution paid an additional 216 Reichsmarks.⁸¹ On August 15th 1939, a total of 936 Reichsmarks was transferred to Lessmann’s blocked bank account.⁸²

Simultaneously, in May 1939, Lessmann transferred money from Palestine to redeem some silver objects and jewelry which had remained at the Deutsche Bank.⁸³ In June, Mayer and Stock complained that they had still not received the objects.⁸⁴ Although evidence that these objects were actually handed over to Mayer and Stock is lacking, the objects may have reached Palestine in the same lifts of the household goods in the summer of 1939.⁸⁵ On the other hand, after the war, evidence showed that “ein Paket Silber- und Schmucksachen” (a package of silver and jewelry) had been deposited by Lessmann at the Amsterdam Neumann & Vettin

shipping company, which was looted by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg in connection with the “Möbel Aktion” on 27th July 1944.⁸⁶

After the war, Lessmann made a claim for compensation for his lost silver and jewelry. At first, the (West) German restitution officials did not consider the transfer from the bank to the pawnshop proven and asked for more evidence. Lessmann could no longer ask his agents to clarify, since Luise Stock had been murdered, and Jacques Mayer had emigrated to an unknown destination in South America.⁸⁷ Later that year, however, Lessmann managed to submit further evidence and received a compensation of 11.602,10 Deutsche Mark (ca. 29.933 Euro in 2022).⁸⁸

The Looting of the Judaica Collection

Lessmann’s restitution file includes important information on the circumstances under which his collection was looted in Amsterdam. According to his witness report of 24th December 1956,⁸⁹ he was told that, during the German occupation of the Netherlands, SS officers had arrived with several trucks at Lamm’s home at Amstel 3, where the collection was temporarily stored, and confiscated the respective crates. They arrested Louis Lamm and his youngest daughter and deported them to Auschwitz, where they were murdered. After the war, Lessmann travelled to Amsterdam to find out what had happened to his collection. He corresponded with the editors of professional journals, antique shops, museums all over the world, and other organizations, but all his efforts remained without concrete results.⁹⁰

79 Lisette Ferera / Cordula Tollmien: *Das Vermächtnis des Max Raphael Hahn – Göttinger Bürger und Sammler. Eine Geschichte über Leben und Tod, mutige Beharrlichkeit und die fortwirkende Kraft der Familientradition*, Göttingen 2015, 93.

80 Ankaufbestätigung für jüdische Vermögenswerte by the Städtische Pfandleihanstalt, Berlin W 8, May 17th 1939, in: OFP, BB. Blha 36a, A Rep 092, No. 22033, d 248, 55.

81 OFP, BB. Blha 36a, A Rep 092, No. 22033, d 248, 57.

82 OFP, BB. Blha 36a, A Rep 092, No. 22033, d 248, 55.

83 Leo Lessmann to Feuchtwanger Bank Ltd. Tel Aviv, August 21st 1951, in: Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten (LABO), Entschädigungsakte Leo Lessmann, Reg. Nr. 62 532, D47, D44.

84 Stock/Meyer to Oberfinanzpräsident Berlin-Brandenburg, 7th June 1939, in: LAB, 8 WGA 2587/51, Edelmetall, 73.

85 The identity of the individual pieces cannot be determined. Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten (LABO), Entschädigungsakte Leo Lessmann, Reg. Nr. 62 532, D47. The objects are just described as “einzelne Schmuck- und Silberwaren” (individual jewelry and silver plate).

86 NIOD, Archive 700, inv. no. 1378. Letter from Van der Leeuw to URO, Berlin, 9th August 1961. On the “Möbelaktion”, see Gitta Ho: Mobilisation of moveable assets: Objects designated for the art trade from the National Socialist plundering of the “M-Aktion”, in: *Journal for Art Market Studies* 2 (2018), 1-18, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23690/jams.v2i2.36>.

87 LAB, 8 WGA 2587/51, Edelmetall, 62.

88 LAB, 8 WGA 2587/51, Edelmetall, 78. Based on <https://www.bundesbank.de/resource/blob/615162/5a2ab631c-106f9a6438899323321ec31/mL/kaufkraftaequivalente-historischer-betraege-in-deutschen-waehrungen-data.pdf>, <07.09.2023>.

89 LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 15-17.

90 A survey was conducted among numerous institutions in an attempt to locate correspondence, however, none of the institutions that reacted could give us a positive reply.

Among the witness statements in the restitution file are those of Julius Carlebach and J. Eisemann, the latter worked at the office of the United Restitution Organization (URO) in Tel Aviv at the time.⁹¹ Both men declared that they had received information that, on the order of Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, the collection was confiscated in Amsterdam, sent to Berlin, and publicly shown in a derogatory manner in a propaganda exhibition of Jewish art and cultural objects.⁹² Obviously, Lessmann took this information seriously.⁹³ In 1957, Lessmann turned to Alfred Wiener (1885-1964), a friend of his father in London, to help him find proof.⁹⁴ A thorough search by the Wiener Holocaust Library of Nazi newspapers and art-antiquity magazines for announcements of such an exhibition did not yield any results.⁹⁵

Although Göring's involvement remains doubtful, one has to wonder if there is at least some truth to the story.⁹⁶ Would Göring have given orders for his own good? This seems unlikely, as he never showed interest in collecting Judaica and hardly any such objects were found in his collection after

the war.⁹⁷ Did the monetary value trigger his greed? Was the collection perhaps temporarily stored in the Reichsbank Berlin, waiting to be sold to an interested buyer?⁹⁸

In this framework, however, an interesting discovery allows for some speculation. The story is as follows: from November 1938 until his emigration to Palestine in March 1939, Lessmann stayed with his younger sister Sophie (1895-1992) who, together with her husband Hans Eugen Gottschalt (1888-1943) and their only child, Ralph (1924-1942), lived in Amsterdam since 1937. She had become acquainted with the non-Jewish German businessman and art collector Hans Tietje (1885-1971).⁹⁹ Tietje was not just somebody; he is a well-known figure in the history of Nazi art looting.¹⁰⁰ He was a supplier of Göring and functioned as a middleman in furnishing old masters paintings to the planned "Führermuseum" (Führer's art museum) in Linz, Austria. At the same time, he was also in close contact with Alois Miedl,¹⁰¹ a German art trader who worked with Göring and supplied both him and Hitler with art works. Tietje had relations with Willy Lages (1901-1971), head of the Reichssicherheitsdienst (Reich Security Service) in Amsterdam, and Ferdinand Aus der Fünten (1909-1989), head of the "Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung" (Central Office for Jewish Emigration) in Amsterdam, who were both responsible for the

91 URO was established in 1948 as a legal aid service to assist victims of Nazi persecution living outside Germany in making restitution and indemnification claims against Germany and Austria.

92 For Carlebach's statement of 4th November 1955, see LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 19. Carlebach did not remember who had been his informant. Eisemann's statement is not part of the WGA, but is paraphrased by Lessmann, see *ibid.*, 16. Public propaganda exhibitions built around Jewish ritual objects were not a common phenomenon. At the Braunschweigisches Landesmuseum, the complete interior of an 18th-century synagogue from Hornburg was used for propaganda purposes. See Dirk Rupnow: *Vernichten und Erinnern. Spuren nationalsozialistischer Gedächtnispolitik*, Göttingen 2005, 114-119.

93 Lessmann had told his eldest grandson that he and Göring would have been neighbors in Berlin and that Göring knew about his collection and had stolen it (communicated by telephone, January 2023). According to the Berlin address books, this information is not correct. For 1937, see https://digital.zlb.de/viewer/image/34115495_1937/1, <07.09.2023>; for 1938, see https://digital.zlb.de/viewer/image/34115495_1938/1, <07.09.2023>.

94 According to § 5 of the new Law (Neufassung des Gesetzes), a claim for compensation was only assigned on the basis of proof that the collection was looted and sent to Germany.

95 Letter from Wiener to Lessmann, London, 9th March 1958, in: *The Wiener Holocaust Library, Correspondence between Leo Lessmann and Alfred Wiener*, Ref. Nos. 3000/9/1/884/9/1; and 3000/9/1/884/9/2.

96 That the collection was transferred to Germany on Göring's order is also mentioned in a note of 7th January 1959 of the United Restitution Organization about the Lessmann restitution cases, see LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 7.

97 For a rare case of a Judaica object looted for Hitler's collection, see https://www.dhm.de/datenbank/ccp/dhm_ccp.php?seite=6&fld_1=1525%2F12&fld_3=&fld_4=&fld_5=&fld_6=&fld_6a=&fld_7=&fld_8=&fld_9=&fld_10=&fld_11=&fld_12_a=&fld_12_b=&fld_12a=&fld_13=&suchen=Search, <07.09.2023>.

98 If so, could this ever be confirmed? Silver objects were not individually described in the Reichsbank administration, what counted was weight and value. US documents sometimes include types of objects, for instance, Passover cups and candlestick holders found among the SS loot in the Merkers mine and transferred to the Reichsbank in Frankfurt a. M., see <https://www.fold3.com/image/114/303510612>, <07.09.2023>. See also <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1999/spring/nazi-gold-merkers-mine-treasure.html>, <05.09.2023>.

99 Tietje had settled in Amsterdam in 1921 and was director of the N.V. Nederlandsche Export en Import Maatschappij "Nedeximpo". With his Jewish wife Helene Vorenberg he had four children, see <https://www.openarch.nl/saa:eb90c6d7-7340-4f07-8275-b34d08110d71/en>, <07.09.2023>.

100 Tietje is briefly mentioned in a number of publications, for instance, Myriam Daru: *Sommer's List. Between Opportunism and Righteousness in WW II Amsterdam* (unpublished article). There is no monograph yet.

101 On Miedl, also see Nils Fiebig: *Alois Miedl. Der Bankier und die Raubkunst*, Würzburg 2020.

deportation of the Jews in and around Amsterdam.¹⁰² As an influential person, Tietje also had his own list with protégés, and Sophie was one of them.¹⁰³ When Sophie's son Ralph was arrested by the Nazis, Tietje tried to get him released, but it was in vain.¹⁰⁴ He was deported from Westerbork camp with the first train to Auschwitz on 15th July 1942, where he was murdered at the age of 18 on the 30th of September 1942.



Figure 10: A Lessmann family reunion in Nice (France), 1965 (f.l.t.r.): Leo I. Lessmann, Lotti Cohn-Bachmann, Gertrud Bachmann-Lessmann, Hans Tietje, Sophie Gottschalt-Lessmann. Photographer: Francis Bay, Nice.

After the war, Tietje was arrested, brought to trial and acquitted. However, he was not allowed to remain in the Netherlands. He settled in Caracas, Venezuela. His Jewish wife, Helene Tietje-Vorenberg, stayed behind in Amsterdam, where she died in 1948. Soon after, Sophie, widowed since 1943, emigrated to Caracas as well, in all likelihood because she and Tietje already had a close relationship. At some point in time Tietje became Sophie's

102 NIOD, Archive 197f, Bureau Bestrijding Vermogensvlucht, inv. no. 2.

103 NIOD, Archive 197f, Bureau Bestrijding Vermogensvlucht, inv. no. 2, Na-oorlogse rapporten en verhoren met betrekking tot contacten H.S.C. Tietje met Alois Miedl ... lijst met namen van Joden die door Tietje geholpen zijn (list of names of Jews who received help from Tietje) [Annex A to a report of 25th July 1945]. Tietje declared: "Ik heb zeer velen Joden geholpen. Mijn kennissenkring bestond voor 5/6 uit Joden en 1/6 uit Christenen" (I helped a lot of Jews. My circle of acquaintances was comprised by five sixths of Jews and one sixths of Christians). List of names, see *ibid.* 197f (Rapport verhoor Dr. Tietjen [sic!], 27th July 1945).

104 Letter from Tietje to the "Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung" in Amsterdam, [Amsterdam], 24th July 1942. Tietje argued that Ralph was partly "arisch" (Aryan) and was an employee of a factory that worked for the German Wehrmacht. This letter is part of the collection of Ronny Cohn, grandson of Gertrud Bachmann-Lessmann, Lessmann's eldest sister, England.



Figure 11: The house and antiquarian bookshop (souterrain and first floor) of Louis Lamm on Amstel 3, on the corner on the very left. Lessmann's collection was stored there from 1936 until it was looted in 1943. The photo was taken in November 1954. Collection Stadsarchief Amsterdam, <https://archieff.amsterdam/beeldbank/detail/38840267-553a-22cf-35ac-7527d3c5b5a3>, <31.10.2023>.

"life comrade", as she called him in his death announcement in 1971.¹⁰⁵ Tietje's involvement in the looting of Lessmann's collection remains purely speculative. There is no proof or indication that he knew about Lessmann's collection and played a role, but it cannot be excluded.¹⁰⁶ In 1957, Sophie released a short affidavit in Caracas.¹⁰⁷ In 1943, after she had heard about the looting, she visited Amstel 3. A neighbor told her that the collection had been looted by "Nazis in uniform" and that they had come with several trucks.¹⁰⁸

While Sophie was not a first-hand eye-witness, other eye-witness reports reveal the precise circum-

105 NRC Handelsblad, 27th July 1971 and 28th July 1971 (rectification).

106 According to Van der Leeuw "Für einen Befehl Goerings in der Angelegenheit fehlt hier jeder Hinweis" (There is absolutely no evidence for Göring having given the order in this matter). Letter to Wiedergutmachungsämter von Berlin, Amsterdam, 9th August 1961, in: LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 58.

107 LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 20-21.

108 Sophie did not wear the yellow star because she was admitted as 'half Aryan'. Her mother was born as a gentile. Letter from Inspectie der Belastingen te Amsterdam to NBI, 14th November 1947, in: NA, The Hague, Archive 2.09.16 NBI, 1945-1967, inv. no. 81838.



Figure 12: A. Puls was a moving company that emptied the houses of deported Jews in Amsterdam. The photo was taken in Amsterdam's Kerkstraat by an amateur photographer, date unknown. NIOD Amsterdam, <https://beeldbankwo2.nl/nl/beelden/detail/4dd0edc2-025a-11e7-904b-d89d6717b464/media/6fdcc3bf-1ce7-fech-b814-b035aac71122>, <31.10.2024>.

stances of the looting in 1943. A detailed account comes from Johanna Maria Jonkers-van de Kragt (1914-1991). She lived in a house in Zwanenburgerstraat No. 4 which is built against the house Amstel 3 and thus a huge room in Lamm's house was adjacent to her living room on the second floor.

On 27th April 1961, she gave the following account: she knew about 12 to 14 [!] crates with the valuable collection of Jewish ritual objects of "ein reicher Kaufmann aus Hamburg" (a rich salesman from Hamburg) that were stored in this locked room – she later also declared that she knew that Lamm had kept a couple of silver chandeliers of this collection in one of his rooms. In 1935 or 1936, she had witnessed how in the courtyard the crates were lifted with cables and a pulley attached to the roof. Lamm and his daughter Ruth had repeatedly spoken about the valuable objects and, while waiting for their imminent deportation, had asked her to keep the room and its content secret to the Germans. On the 19th of November 1943, she had given birth to a son and was still in her childbed. She remembered that a day or some days later, around nine in the morning, four men had knocked on her door and smashed it when she did not open it. Two

men in German uniforms of the "Grüne Polizei" (green police; probably meaning the German military police) with German helmets and guns and two Dutch SS men in civilian cloth entered her room and shouted at her – why had she not opened the door?! They had come to take away the "jüdische eingelagerte Sachen" (Jewish stored goods) and dragged her out of her bed to show them Lamm's dwelling. Three of the men went to Amstel 3 while one stayed with Jonkers. They discovered the room with the crates, returned to her and declared that the crates needed to be hoisted down to street level from the first floor of her apartment. She had witnessed how this was done and how the crates were loaded into a furniture truck ("Möbelwagen") of the Puls firm.¹⁰⁹ She also noticed that Lamm's library and books were carried away from the front of Amstel 3.

Lydia Oorthuys (1919-2010), second floor neighbor of Amstel 3, also remembered how Lamm's books were carried away, on a rather wide gangway with standing edges over the garden and street, to a huge ship. "Everything was 'gepulst' [carried away

¹⁰⁹ Firma A.[braham] Puls, a transport company working for the Nazis, clearing out the houses of deported Jews in Amsterdam.

by Puls] and destroyed in no time”, she wrote. “Everything went so rudely, insensitive, it made us cry, and we picked up some of the books that had fallen to the side and had fallen apart. A shofer [sic!] in the garden, the sewing machine, some books.”¹¹⁰

Jonker’s statement would prove to be of crucial significance in the context of Lessmann’s claim for compensation, which was taken up in 1960 by Anthonie Johannes (Hans) van der Leeuw (1919-2003), employee at the RIOD (Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, today’s NIOD). Van der Leeuw had been appointed to collect proof needed for the so-called “Verbringungsnachweis” (a proof of shipment to Germany) to qualify for compensation in the framework of the “Bundesrückerstattungsgesetz” (Federal Compensation Act). In general, it was difficult for an applicant (formerly deported or in hiding) to prove that his/her property had been looted and if it had ended up in the so-called “Gelungsbereich”, the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany or in the city of Berlin.

Lessmann’s Search for his Collection

Lessmann’s application on the basis of the Bundesrückerstattungsgesetz was only submitted after a long active search for his collection. After hearing about the seizure, he approached the “Consultatiebureau voor Vermogensbelangen in Nederland” (Consultancy Office for Assets Management in the Netherlands) in Tel Aviv, which would report the loss to the Dutch institutions.¹¹¹ On 22nd February 1946, attorney Willem Ezechiels (1909-1949), who represented Lessmann in the Netherlands, submitted Lessmann’s declaration form to the Stichting Nederlands Kunstbezit (SNK, Netherlands Art Property Foundation, responsible for the recuperation of looted property), including the catalogue and the photographs. He also informed other tracing

services.¹¹² SNK reported back that the collection had not been found yet, but that an abundance of Jewish ritual objects was stored in the Offenbach Archival Depot.¹¹³ In the summer of 1947, SNK informed Ezechiels that the collection had still not been found in Germany.¹¹⁴ Demoralized due to the many unsuccessful attempts to locate his collection – conducted by himself as well as Dutch institutions – Lessmann’s efforts entered a second phase: his battle for compensation. On 6th January 1952, an attempt to obtain compensation from the Dutch government, after he was informed that the value of his collection was under protection of the Dutch state, remained unsuccessful:

“I was informed that all which was lost in the Netherlands during the war was under protection of the Dutch government, which will and shall claim the damage from Germany.”¹¹⁵

The situation slowly improved. In 1952, negotiations between Israel, the Jewish Claims Conference and Germany about “Wiedergutmachung” (compensation) bore fruit, resulting in the Treaty of Luxemburg, signed by the Federal Republic of Germany.¹¹⁶ It arranged for payments, export goods and services to Israel in order to support the integration of Jewish refugees. In the following years, under Allied pressure, the West German government installed the Bundesrückgabegesetz, which became effective from 1957 onwards. Thus, after

110 She remembered the event in a letter from 2001. Although her name is not mentioned, she and her husband Cas Oorthuys (1908-1975) most likely gave a statement to the Amsterdam police just after the war. The Oorthuys family did not know about the storage of Lessmann’s collection. Account in typewriting by Lydia Oorthuys to Flip Bool, 26th June 2001, in the possession of Fenna Oorthuys.

111 For the Consultatiebureau voor Vermogensbelangen in Palestina, see NA, The Hague, accession number 2.09.06 (Inventaris van het archief van het Ministerie van Justitie te London [1936] 1940-1945 [1953]), inv. no. 1759.

112 Letter from Lessmann to the Commissariaat voor Oorlogsschade, 6th January 1952, in: The Wiener Holocaust Library, Correspondence between Leo Lessmann and Alfred Wiener, Ref. No. 3000/9/1/884/8/2. Lessmann mentions the Amsterdam Centrale Inlichtingen Dienst (CID), yet he probably meant the Centrale Vermogensopsporingsdienst (Central Assets Tracing Service), because the CID had already been dissolved in 1946. This archive was integrated into the Nederlands Beheers Instituut (NBI) files. NBI does not keep a file on the name of Leo Isaac Lessmann.

113 NA, The Hague, 2.08.42, inv. no. 156, letter from N.R.A. Vroom, director of SNK, to Ezechiels, 19th July 1946.

114 NA, The Hague, 2.08.42, inv. no. 156, letter from Ezechiels to SNK, Amsterdam, 10th July 1947; and letter from R.F.P. de Beaufort, director of SNK, to Ezechiels, 11th July 1947.

115 Letter from Lessmann to the Commissariaat voor Oorlogsschade (Commission for War Damage), Tel Aviv, 6th January 1952, in: The Wiener Holocaust Library, Correspondence between Leo Lessmann and Alfred Wiener, Ref. No. 3000/9/1/884/8/2. The archive of the Commissariaat voor Oorlogsschade was dissolved in 1960 by permission of the Algemene Rijksarchivaris (General State Archivist). See http://www.oorlogsgetroffenen.nl/archiefvormer/Commissariaat_Oorlogsschade, <07.09.2023>.

116 On the Treaty of Luxemburg also see Dan Diner: *Rituelle Distanz*. Israels deutsche Frage, Munich 2015.

a long period of uncertainties, Lessmann finally could officially claim compensation for his lost collection. It was the start of a third phase which ended in 1966.¹¹⁷

Lessmann's case was handled by the United Restitution Organization (URO) in Tel Aviv in close collaboration with URO Berlin. On 24th December 1956, Lessmann delivered an affidavit for URO in Tel Aviv.¹¹⁸ Witness reports, other statements and expert reports with the appraisal of his collection would constitute his file for compensation and substantiate his case. Julius Carlebach and J. Eisemann, both mentioned above, gave their statements in November and December 1955.¹¹⁹

Lessmann's sister Sophie gave her statement in 1957. More affidavits were to follow. On the 10th of March 1957, Karl Schwarz (1885-1962), director of the Jewish Museum in Berlin until his emigration to Palestine, where he became director of the Tel Aviv Museum until 1947, described Lessmann's collection as "die reichhaltigste und umfassendste Privatsammlung dieser Art in Deutschland" (the richest and most comprehensive private collection of its kind in Germany) and appraised the collection at presently being worth 70.000 US dollars.¹²⁰ The former employee of the *Israelitisches Familienblatt* (1934-1936) and curator of the Jewish Museum New York, Stephen Kayser (1900-1988), knew the lost collection intimately. Its comprehensiveness, the great number of objects dating from the 15th to the 17th century, its excellent state of preservation and the expertly made catalogue made him appraise the collection at 100.000 US dollars.¹²¹ Annie David-Mainz, author of the "Interims-Katalog", declared that "die Sammlung in ihrer Gesamtheit ein besonders eindrucksvolles, reiches und einmaliges Bild ergab und daher in ideeller wie materieller Hinsicht einen beträchtlichen Wert darstellte" (the collection in its entirety presents a remarkably impressive, instructive and unique ensemble of hence considerable intrinsic as well as material value).¹²²

117 LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 200.

118 LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 15-17.

119 For Carlebach's statement, see LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 39.

120 LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 22.

121 LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 24, 25.

122 Eidesstattliche Erklärung (statement under oath) by Annie David-Mainz, Tel Aviv, 18th March 1957, in: LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 23.

In September 1957, the responsible employee of URO Tel Aviv questioned whether Lessmann's case would meet the requirements to qualify for compensation. He doubted that the given statements would be convincing enough to provide the proof demanded in § 5 of the Bundesrückgabegesetz,¹²³ i.e. that Lessmann's looted collection had ended up in Western Germany or in Berlin (the so called "Geltungsbereich"). He felt that, given the lack of precedents, it was not clear whether one had to submit strong evidence that the collection was indeed transferred to Germany.

The following year, apparently very pessimistic about receiving compensation, Lessmann declared: "Ich muss mich wohl doch mit dem Gedanken vertraut machen, dass meine schöne Sammlung endgültig verloren ist und ich keinerlei Restitution dafür erhalten werde. Schade!" (It seems that I will have to get used to the fact that my beautiful collection is ultimately lost and that I will not receive any compensation for it. What a pity!).¹²⁴

Finally, in January 1960, URO Berlin presented Lessmann's claim on the basis of §§ 5 and 13 of the Bundesrückgabegesetz to the Wiedergutmachungsamt Berlin – it was filed as WGA 5912/57 – stating that the collection had been looted on the order of Hermann Göring and sent to Berlin.¹²⁵

The "Senator für Finanzen" (senator of finances) evaluated the claim and gave his opinion to the Wiedergutmachungsamt. He found that § 13, which applied to looted "Umzugsgut" (relocation goods), would not be relevant, because the collection had already been sent to Amsterdam in 1936 and Lessmann could freely dispose of it. As to § 5, the documents produced did neither prove the theft nor the transfer to Germany. Lessmann was required to submit authentic affidavits from eye-witnesses, which should include the time and

123 NIOD, Archive 700, inv. no. 1378, letter from URO Tel Aviv to URO Berlin, Tel Aviv, 11th September 1957.

124 Letter from Lessmann to Wiener, Tel Aviv, 23rd April 1958, in: The Wiener Holocaust Library, Correspondence between Leo Lessmann and Alfred Wiener, Ref. No. 3000/9/1/884/10.

125 NIOD, Archive 700, inv. no. 1378, Letter of 7th January 1960; LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 7. URO Berlin to the Wiedergutmachungsämter von Berlin, Berlin, 7th January 1960. For the Bundesrückgabegesetz (BRüG), see https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/br_g/BRüG.pdf, <07.09.2023>. The affidavits of Lessmann (24th December 1956), Carlebach, Eisemann, Gottschalt-Lessmann, Schwarz, David-Mainz, and Kayser were enclosed. Letter from URO Berlin to Wiedergutmachungsämter Berlin, Berlin, 14th July 1960, in: LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 7, 12.

place of the looting. In addition, he should provide a list of objects stamped by the custom authorities and prove that the objects were still at the mentioned location when the seizure took place.¹²⁶ The Wiedergutmachungsamt asked the Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie (RIOD) if anything was known about the event, i.e. the looting of the collection on the order of Göring.¹²⁷

Clearly, the circumstances were by no means unequivocal. URO therefore approached the RIOD in Amsterdam, hoping it could provide documents to substantiate this assumption.¹²⁸ On 14th January 1961, Van der Leeuw replied that he was already familiar with the case. Previous research had shown that the collection had not been anymore present in Lamm's antiquarian store when it was emptied by Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg and that an eye-witness had declared soon after that it was stolen by unknown people: this was simply an ordinary theft.¹²⁹

Several months later, Lessmann objected to Van der Leeuw's conclusions on several grounds. Various statements had convincingly shown that the seizure was executed by uniformed personnel. Furthermore, ordinary thieves could technically never have carried away the heavy overseas crates over the steep stairs.¹³⁰ According to Van der Leeuw, it was impossible to prove that the collection had been sent to Germany.¹³¹

On 9th August 1961, Van der Leeuw replied to the Wiedergutmachungsamt Berlin with a reconstruction of the events based on documents from different institutions:¹³²

126 Letter of 30th November 1960. NIOD, Archive 700, inv. no. 1378.

127 Letter of 8th December 1960. NIOD, Archive 700, inv. no. 1378.

128 NIOD, Archive 700, inv. no. 1878, letter from URO Berlin to URO Tel Aviv, Berlin, 5th January 1960.

129 Quoted in a letter from URO Berlin to URO Tel Aviv, Berlin, 1st February 1960, in: NIOD, Archive 700, inv. no. 1378.

130 Letter from Lessmann to URO Tel Aviv, [Tel Aviv], 10th April 1960, in: NIOD, Archive 700, inv. no. 1378.

131 Letter of Van der Leeuw to Lessmann, 27th March 1961, in: NIOD, Archive 700, inv. no. 1375.

132 The institutions which had provided him with useful documents were the Schade-Enquêtecommissie voor Noord-Holland and Mr. Ezechiels from the SNK. On 2nd August 1961, Van der Leeuw asked Mr. E. J. Van Deemter of the Ministry of Finance, Directie Bewindvoering, to receive Lessmann's SNK file. NA, SNK 2.08.42, Beheersdossiers, inv. no. 156, Leo I. Lessmann.

“Durch Befragung der Nachbarn¹³³ stellte die Amsterdamer Polizei nach dem Kriege fest, dass die Sammlung-Lessmann schon fortgeschafft war, bevor der Einsatzstab das Geschäft entleerte. Die Nachbarn hatten beobachtet, dass die Sammlung von einigen Personen in Zivil unter Erbrechung der Siegel abgeführt wurde. Dabei blieben einige kleine Gegenstände am Boden liegen und wurden von einem Nachbarn aufgelesen.”¹³⁴

Later he would add “dass nach Mitteilung der Nachbarn am Amstel die Sakralgegenstände von den Leuten in Zivil per Dreirad abgeführt wurden” (that, corresponding to reports from the neighbors at the Amstel, the sacred objects would have been taken away via tricycle by those individuals in civilian dress).¹³⁵ Van der Leeuw concluded that the collection was stolen from the SD (Reich Security Service), who at the time was in control of the collection, and that there was no reason to believe that Göring had given the order.¹³⁶

In light of the requirements of the Bundesrückgabegesetz, it is obvious why Lessmann's and Sophie's statements did not include parts of the first looting:¹³⁷ it did not provide presumptive evidence in the framework of Lessmann's WGA-application and could possibly even harm his case. But they knew that, already on 14th September 1945, Sophie had written to her brother in Tel Aviv:

133 The neighbor was probably photographer Cas Oorthuys (1908-1975), who lived above Louis Lamm. When SNK turned to Mr. W. Ezechiels for details about the persons on the loading tricycle, he refers to Cas Oorthuys. NA, 2.08.42, inv. no. 156, letter of Ezechiels to SNK, Amsterdam, 28th February 1946.

134 “Through interrogation of the neighbors, the Amsterdam police after the war was able to reveal that the Lessmann collection had already been transferred even before the Einsatzstab had emptied the store. The neighbors had observed that the collection had been removed by several individuals in civilian dress who broke open the seal. In the process, several smaller objects were left behind lying at the floor where they were then picked up by a neighbor”. Letter from Van der Leeuw to Wiedergutmachungsämter von Berlin, Amsterdam, 9th August 1961, in: LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 57. Sophie's letter to Lessmann from 14th September 1945 recounts that according to the neighbor the crates were cracked open already weeks before the looting.

135 Letter from Van der Leeuw to Wiedergutmachungsämter von Berlin, 13th February 1963, in: LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 68.

136 LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 57.

137 Ezechiel mentions that several persons had carried away the crates with a transport vehicle. Letter from Mr. W. Ezechiel to the Stichting Nederlands Kunstbezit, Amsterdam, 28th February 1946, in: NA, SNK 2.08.42, beheersdossier, inv. no. 156. Sophie was instructed to declare that it was not a private looting but a looting executed by Nazis in uniform. Undated note in NIOD, Archive 271d K.F. Mannheimer, inv. no. 542.

“[...] Nun zu deiner Sammlung. Ich kann Dir wenig Hoffnung machen. Ich ging sofort zur Amstel 3, fand Herrn Lamm’s Wohnung verschlossen und natürlich leer geholt. Wie mir eine Nachbarin sagte – übrigens waren alle im Bilde! – seien die Kisten eines Tages abgeholt worden, nachdem sie vorher aufgebrochen schon Wochen so gestanden hätten. Der eine Nachbar gab gleich zu, einen Leuchter sich angeeignet zu haben, da er bei Lamm im Zimmer umherlag und sonst ja doch nur von den Deutschen gestohlen worden wäre.”¹³⁸

In October 1961, Van der Leeuw received a letter from URO Berlin, with a copy of an affidavit from eye-witness Jonkers, who had been found after Lessmann had instigated to do more research. Van der Leeuw, who first took another interview to evaluate whether her statement would provide enough proof, concluded: after the war the Amsterdam police had only interviewed the neighbors on the Amstel side (who probably knew nothing about the events in the Zwanenburgerstraat in November 1943), that the earlier looting concerned only part of the collection, and that the 12 to 14 crates in the room next to Jonker’s apartment were carried away around 21st November 1943 by Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg personnel in the presence of two Germans in civilian clothes,¹³⁹ along with two officers of the “Grüne Polizei”, who, as was common, were acting on the Einsatzstab’s behalf.¹⁴⁰

It is puzzling that the looting of the collection of Jewish ritual objects was not mentioned in the Einsatzstab’s reports. In fact, the looting of books and Jewish ritual objects, which were discovered in the nearby Ashkenazi synagogue, was indeed

mentioned in the reports.¹⁴¹ But Van der Leeuw did not look for explanations why these reports kept silent. He had collected proof that the collection – or at least the majority of the objects – had ended up in German hands.

The quantity of 12 to 14 crates reported by Jonkers – against the 17 crates mentioned by Lessmann – is not explained in Van der Leeuw’s statement nor anywhere else in the WGA-file. The difference is explained by Sophie in a letter to her brother from 3rd February 1962 after speaking to Jonkers:

“Diese Differenz in der Zahl der Kisten erklärt sich so, dass der Lagerraum auf dem Boden des Lammschen Hauses nicht gross genug war, um alle 17 Kisten in ihm unterzubringen, weswegen er die überzähligen Kisten in seiner eigentlichen Wohnung, im gleichen Gebäude, unterbrachte. Dort wurden sie bei seiner Festnahme gleich gefunden, erbrochen und per Dreirad fortgeführt. Der eigentliche, ganz oben im Haus gelegene, schwer zugängliche Lagerraum wurde erst später, als das Lammsche, nur von ihm und seiner Familie allein bewohnte Haus definitiv von den Nazis ausgeräumt wurde, entdeckt und die dort befindliche Mehrzahl der Sammlungskisten per Lastwagen abtransportiert.”¹⁴²

Who were the thieves in civilian clothes? The police reports from 1943 keep silent.¹⁴³ However, they do show that ordinary local civilians were looting Jewish property on a large scale. Herbert Wieth, for instance, was a German antiquarian silver expert, who in his warehouse stored silver objects looted by Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg. In 1944, he

138 “[...] Now regarding your collection. I fear that I won’t be able to much raise your hopes. I immediately went to Amstel 3, where I found Lamm’s flat locked and, of course, emptied. A neighbor told me – by the way, they were all in the know! – that the crates were picked up one day, after they had stood there, already cracked open, for several weeks. One of the neighbors instantly confessed to have taken one of the candleholders, as it would have been lying around in Lamm’s room and otherwise the Germans would have stolen it anyway”. Quoted in a letter from Lessmann to M. Pimentel, Tel Aviv, 19th October 1945, in: NIOD, Archive 700, inv. no. 1378.

139 Letter from Van der Leeuw to Wiedergutmachungsämter von Berlin, Amsterdam, 13th February 1963, in: LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 68.

140 Letter from Van der Leeuw to Wiedergutmachungsämter von Berlin, Amsterdam, 13th February 1963, in: LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 68.

141 Julie-Marthe Cohen: Theft and Restitution of Judaica in the Netherlands, in: Julie-Marthe Cohen / Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek (eds.): Neglected Witnesses. The Fate of Jewish Ceremonial Objects During the Second World War and After, Amsterdam 2018, 199-252, here: 231.

142 “The difference in the number of crates is explained by the fact that the storage room in the loft of Lamm’s house was not large enough to contain all of the 17 crates. Because of this, he placed the spare crates in his actual flat, in the same building. When he was arrested, they were instantly found, cracked open and taken away by tricycle. The storage room proper, situated upmost within the building and hardly accessible, was detected only later, when Lamm’s house, inhabited only by himself and his family, definitively got emptied by the Nazis and the majority of the collection crates stored there were removed by truck.” A copy of the text can be found in a letter from URO Berlin to Van der Leeuw, Berlin, 12th March 1962, in: NIOD, Archive 700, inv. no. 1558.

143 Stadsarchief Amsterdam (henceforth SAA), archive no. 5225.

reported the theft of three crates with silver plate valued at 20.000 guilders, which were carried away by three men in a cargo bike.¹⁴⁴ Without further details or written evidence, the thieves cannot be identified.

Why did not even one of Lessmann's precious objects reappear after the war? Were they taken to Germany and destroyed, or carried away by the Red Army to the Soviet Union as war trophy? Very little is known about the fate of European Judaica carried off to the East. Were individual objects auctioned off, or do they remain invisible in private collections?

In March 1966, Lessmann received an offer for an agreement as compensation for his vanished collection. The West German officials took the lower evaluation by van Harten as the basis for their offer of 350.000 Deutsche Mark, repudiating Stieglitz higher evaluation of about 365.000 Deutsche Mark out of doubt and suspicion. But they also questioned other proofs. Not knowing about the actual number of objects that had been stolen, and probably assuming that the objects were not transferred to Germany, the officials interpreted this as an argument against full compensation. In addition, they assumed that the thieves had selected the most valuable objects of Lessmann's collection, without substantiating their conclusion. Furthermore, the fact that the first looting was not mentioned in Jonkers eye-witness report decreased the credibility of her statement. That she might not have witnessed the event at all was perhaps not even considered. The final compensation was therefore based on a 50% reduction of Van Harten's assessment, and a further subtraction of 50.000 Deutsche Mark already received by Lessmann as a "Vorabvergleich" (preliminary settlement).¹⁴⁵ In the end, Lessmann was offered only 125.000 Deutsche Mark.

In the 1960ies, compensation was still based on the burden of proof by the claimant – which under current moral standards is considered unfair and unjust. Lessmann's case proves to be a bitter illustration of this difficult, labor-intensive and painful process. It took him 21 years to receive partial

compensation. But Lessmann had lost more than his fortune: the Nazis had forced him to leave his native country, they had liquidated his flourishing business, stolen his goods, and destroyed his social image as a man of high standing and prestige. Under these circumstances, to build up a new life in Palestine, then still a developing country, was not an easy task. But, like so many other persecuted Jews who had suffered great losses and showed admirable resilience, Lessmann managed to do so. Yet he never collected Judaica again.

Conclusion

Our research has focused on reconstructing the circumstances of the looting with the aim of tracing (pieces from) Lessmann's missing collection. This process went hand in hand with collecting the utmost information on the individual items of his collection. Crucial to the latter were the different descriptions and evaluations of the objects in the WGA-files and additional information from other sources mentioned in this article. These findings have enabled us to establish a dataset for the future lost and found central database, an indispensable tool for locating missing or displaced objects. Such a database also remains a desideratum for catalogues of auctions that took place during the Nazi and postwar period beyond Germany, which will allow for a systematic full text search, not only for art, but also for applied art and Judaica, even though descriptions will possibly permit identification in relatively few cases.¹⁴⁶

Another integral, yet time demanding part was our search for descendants. After about three years, a call posted on a Jewish commercial genealogical website finally yielded success when a genealogist in Israel and Lootedart.com were able to help us tracking down members of the Lessmann family. It goes without saying that the photographs of the collection that we found in Lessmann's grandson's possession are of crucial significance for future matching.

144 SAA, archive no. 5225, inv. no. 6181, 20th September 1944.


145 Compromise settlement offer of the Sondervermögens- und Bauverwaltung beim Landesfinanzamt Berlin, Berlin, 10th March 1966, in: LAB, 8 WGA 5912/57, 200.

146 Within the international cooperation project *German Sales 1930-1945. Art Works, Art Markets, and Cultural Policy* already over 3.200 auction catalogues published between 1930 and 1945 in Germany, Switzerland and Austria have been indexed, digitized and made freely available online, full text searchable. See <https://www.arthistoricum.net/themen/portale/german-sales/about>, <06.09.2023>.

This case-study has shown that it is also crucial to consult sources that relate to the compensation process but are not part of the WGA-files. Dutch sources uncovered the otherwise unknown strategies of URO and the claimant and gave more insight into the organization of the looting (or the lack of it), which helped to interpret and frame its contents. Against this background, it is productive to work as a research team, simultaneously with German and Dutch sources and with knowledge of both archive cultures. Our work is by no means finished yet, however, for now, specific details of our research may emerge to be the missing link in future efforts to trace the collection, or in finding out what remained of it.

With regard to Judaica in general, provenance and *quovadience* research broadens our knowledge of many aspects of collecting, looting and restitution. In this process, the key to success is the continuous exchange of knowledge, joint working groups, and the sharing of all relevant sources from archives or private property. Only collaboration can craft answers to the many questions that the Nazi looting and the postwar history of Judaica in general and the Leo I. Lessmann case in particular continue to raise.

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Reference

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