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Holocaust-Era Looted Art: A Current World-Wide Overview

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Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany and World Jewish
Restitution Organization

The main organizations of the world Jewish community active in the restitution of property looted from victims of the Holocaust, namely the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) and the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) have been focusing on the systemic issues involved in restitution of cultural property throughout the world with the intent of improving and creating processes to enable more owners and heirs to recover their property. They have been working with Jewish communities around the world to bring increased attention to the restitution of looted artwork and movable cultural and religious property and in this regard have conducted extensive research over the past years on the status of provenance research and of claims processes for the restitution of artworks and other cultural property in most, if not all, relevant countries. For an overview of the Claims Conference's and WJRO's activities in regard to looted cultural property, please see: <http://art.claimscon.org>

The following paper represents the results of the current best efforts research of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany ("Claims Conference") and the World Jewish Restitution Organization ("WJRO") and is based upon information obtained by the Claim Conference/WJRO to date. It may contain factual or other errors. Governments, non-governmental organizations, and individual experts are invited to make corrections and comments.

Note that in addition to most of them having endorsed the Washington Conference Principles and the Terezin Declaration, the countries in question – almost without exception – are signatories to the Code of Ethics of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), which calls for provenance research to be done on collections.

CLASSIFICATION OF COUNTRIES

COUNTRIES THAT HAVE MADE MAJOR PROGRESS TOWARDS IMPLEMENTING THE WASHINGTON PRINCIPLES AND THE TEREZIN DECLARATION

Countries in which the Holocaust took place:

Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Netherlands

Other countries involved in the history of the Holocaust and its aftermath:

COUNTRIES THAT HAVE MADE SUBSTANTIAL PROGRESS TOWARDS IMPLEMENTING THE WASHINGTON PRINCIPLES AND THE TEREZIN DECLARATION

Countries in which the Holocaust took place:

Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Norway, Slovakia

Other countries involved in the history of the Holocaust and its aftermath:

Canada, Israel, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States

COUNTRIES THAT HAVE TAKEN SOME STEPS TOWARDS IMPLEMENTING THE WASHINGTON PRINCIPLES AND THE TEREZIN DECLARATION

Countries in which the Holocaust took place:

Croatia, Denmark, Greece, Lithuania, Russian Federation

Other countries involved in the history of the Holocaust and its aftermath:

Australia, Finland, Ireland

COUNTRIES THAT DO NOT APPEAR TO HAVE MADE SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS TOWARDS IMPLEMENTING THE WASHINGTON PRINCIPLES AND THE TEREZIN DECLARATION

Countries in which the Holocaust took place:

Belarus, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Ukraine

Other countries involved in the history of the Holocaust and its aftermath:

Argentina, Brazil, Holy See, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, Uruguay

Sweden received 696 books from the JCR after World War II. There is no concrete information on other Judaica looted by the Nazis and their allies currently held in Sweden. The Nordiska Museet (Nordic Museum) in Stockholm is known to have a large Judaica collection, much of which was purchased by Mr. Klein, the Museum's curator, in Hamburg, Germany but before the Nazi era. In addition, the Jewish Museum in Stockholm holds a Judaica collection. So far as is known, with the exception of the Jewish Museum in Stockholm, no provenance research is being conducted on Judaica objects held by cultural institutions in Sweden.

Sweden participated in the 1998 Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets and in the 2009 Holocaust-Era Assets Conference in Prague and endorsed the Terezin declaration. Sweden is a signatory to ICOM's Code of Ethics.

Country Name: SWITZERLAND

In 1945, the Federal Council ordered that looted art that had reached the territory of the Federation should be returned and that the art museum in Basel should serve as a depository for remaining looted art. The art restitution law was largely seen as ineffective, mainly due to lack of publicity and the short time frame provided, but also because it only included objects that had been misappropriated in occupied territories, thereby excluding the looting of cultural property in Germany and Austria.

In 1996, the Swiss Federal Assembly created the "Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland-Second World War" (ICE), which was headed by Jean-Francoise Bergier ("Bergier-Commission"). As part of the Commission's work, research was initiated into cultural assets that found their way into Switzerland during World War II. In 2001, the ICE published its report on looted cultural assets (primarily works of art) in Switzerland.

Four years prior to that, in 1997, the historian and journalist Thomas Buomberger was appointed by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture and the National Informational Office for the Preservation of Cultural Goods to research Switzerland's position as a transit country for looted art. Around the same time, in 1996/97 the Swiss Federal Office of Culture initiated a research study to investigate what art transactions took place with Nazi Germany during World War II and what, if any, artworks were still located in Switzerland's federal museums. In 1998, the research, which focused on the provenance of artworks in Switzerland's federal museums, was published. However, considering that most museums are under the auspices of the cantons and are not federal, in addition to the fact that most important collections are in private hands, the survey did not cover a lot of artworks. In 1998 the Federal Assembly of Switzerland established an office at the Swiss Federal Office of Culture that exclusively deals with looted-art.

More recently the office has conducted a survey of the cantonal and communal museums. In January 2011, the FDHA (Federal Department of Home Affairs) and the FDFA (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs), partly as the result of discussion with the Claims Conference/WJRO, released a report on the state of work on Nazi-looted art, in particular, on the subject of provenance research. The report can be seen at: <http://www.bak.admin.ch>. In June 2013, the Federal Office of Culture (FOC) launched a new website devoted to provenance research. A report entitled "FDHA/FDFA report on the state of work on Nazi-

looted art, in particular, on the subject of provenance research” can be accessed at: <http://www.bak.admin.ch/kulturerbe/04402/index.html?lang=en>

Following Cornelius Gurlitt’s passing in May 2014, the Kunstmuseum Bern was named as the sole heir to his collection. The museum noted that if it accepts the inheritance, it will be committed to upholding the Washington Principles.

Judaica:

Switzerland received 7,843 books from the JCR after World War II, including part of the Breslau collection that had been stored in the Wiesbaden collecting point and which was deposited into the Genf, Zürich and Basel libraries.

Switzerland’s Historical Commission was not specifically tasked with researching Judaica that might have entered the country during the war. However, information regarding Judaica also did not surface in the course of the Commission’s work.

Various museums of Switzerland hold isolated Judaica pieces in their collections. Some provenance research has been conducted, but none of it has been made public.

Switzerland participated in the 1998 Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets and in the 2009 Holocaust-Era Assets Conference in Prague and endorsed the Terezin declaration. Switzerland is a signatory to ICOM’s Code of Ethics.

Country Name: TURKEY

Turkey has not initiated any research into looted cultural and religious property that may have reached Turkey during the Holocaust or afterwards. It does not appear that Turkey’s cultural institutions are conducting provenance research. Research into Turkey’s role is further complicated by the fact that not all archives are open for public viewing and research.

Turkey participated in the 1998 Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets and in the 2009 Holocaust-Era Assets Conference in Prague and endorsed the Terezin declaration. Turkey is a signatory to ICOM’s Code of Ethics.

Country Name: UKRAINE

Ukraine holds thousands of objects originally owned by Jews that were looted by the Nazis. Many of these objects belonged to Jews outside the Soviet Union and were either brought directly to Ukraine by Red Army trophy brigades or were distributed to Ukraine under Stalin. In the 1990’s the “National Commission on the Restitution of Cultural Treasures to Ukraine under the Cabinet of Ministers” was established, which primarily deals with Ukrainian losses and does not deal with Jewish cultural and religious property currently held in Ukrainian institutions. Although attempts have been made at creating a restitution law, to date nothing concrete has materialized.

Ukrainian museums generally do not conduct provenance research. However, museums, libraries and archives hold cultural and religious artifacts taken from Jews in Ukraine during World War II or taken from Jews in other countries and brought to Ukraine as part of those trophy items that Ukraine keeps based on the law that gives people and organizations that