

Richard M. Hunt Fellowship Final Report

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My Hunt Fellowship for 2017 allowed me to carry out research in Germany about the compensation programs that stemmed from World War II. I focused on two groups of claimants, Jews and German expellees, each of which had distinctive losses and grievances. While it remains problematic to directly compare the claims of each group because their wartime experiences differed greatly, the evolution of compensation programs in Germany to address property theft and losses, as well as the mechanisms to implement these programs shared several similarities. What I hoped to achieve through this research was an exploration of how individuals pursued claims for compensation and how German officials processed them through an investigation of individual claims. The larger goal for this research was to take these findings and to better understand how wartime property losses influenced postwar memories and the history of Germany and Europe. This is part of a larger project that explores how property theft, loss and compensation has shaped (and continues to shape) Europeans' memories about the Holocaust and the war.

What I found will provide me the ability to begin constructing a history that starts before the war with the earliest Nazi seizures of Jewish property and continues through the postwar expulsion of Germans to the end of the Cold War. The Equalization of Burdens claims and the Jewish restitution claims both tell the story not only of efforts to reclaim lost property, but also how that property was lost in the first place. Claimants who survived the war sometimes reflect on their wartime and immediate postwar personal experiences. In other cases, one can read the files and find clues about a claimant's prewar status and background and then follow their lives in the postwar context. By exploring a number of different accounts one gets the sense of how people felt the loss of their property. Of course, context was important too. The highly bureaucratic, legalistic and accountant nature of the claims processes structured the ways that people remembered the past. By the same token, the claims process was also an opportunity of sorts, without which these testimonies to the past would not have been collected. The claims process thus played a dual role: It gave people the chance to recoup some of the losses from the 1930s and 1940s, and it helped to shape memories of the war and postwar period. The research I carried out with the Hunt Fellowship focused primarily on this avenue of inquiry.

I spent the majority of my research in three main archives. For the first two weeks of my stay (May 21-June 3) I visited the Lastenausgleicharchiv in Bayreuth. There I examined over 30 individual case files related to Sudeten German expellee claims. These claims were part of the Equalization of Burdens Law (LAG) that provided compensation for property that expellees lost when they were kicked out of their homes at the end of the war. The nature of each claim varies widely depending on the amount and type of property that was seized. Some files only had two dozen pages, while others were over two hundred pages in length. The files include forms, individual correspondence with officials, witness testimonies, and internal administrative communications. I was able to copy hundreds of pages from these files, which highlight both the bureaucratic and the personal aspects of this compensation program.

The stories that these files tell involve several themes important for my research. One of the key themes is how property became a locus for memories about the past. In this case, the process of filing claims became a sort of reckoning with what had been left behind. In an appeal to one of the offices involved in the claims process the widow of one manufacturer asked that her sons' claims for portions of the firm be recognized and processed. Because of a technicality in the law they had not yet received payments for the property. The woman's appeal went beyond the specifics of her sons' case however. She placed their claims in the sense of a much larger loss. She said: "It may be the time comes when we are able to travel freely to the spot and place in the old homeland with pleasure and the hearts will beat faster. It would be nice to be allowed to tread upon this earth, a satisfaction, probably a much smaller favor for this current long wait, in no way in proportion to permanent compensation... May God send justice to all the people whom this fate befell from day X, and return the right to their homeland." What is in form a testimony about compensation for a factory became a platform for a much larger claim, that is, the right of return. While these demands were widespread in the postwar years among many expellees they did not proliferate the records of Lastenausgleich claims. In part, this can be explained by the simple fact that many claimants realized that these officials had little ability to effect such policies. Even this expellee thanked the officials for their assistance; this was not an angry tirade. Nevertheless, for her the claims process clearly opened the door to this emotion and the sense of injustice surrounding the past. In this way the Equalization of Burdens program created its own dynamics for the production of memories about the expulsions that lasted for many years beyond the war. This woman's testimony was given in 1962.

There was also an important practical side to the Equalization of Burdens claims by Sudeten Germans and others. The compensation for lost property was really one piece of a larger package to address the integration of millions of expellees. The new West German government began distributing aid already in 1949 with the Soforthilfgesetz and later extended credit to expellee entrepreneurs to restart lost firms from their past. The Lastenausgleich act was much more extensive and offered real compensation for confiscated property. While the payments were made over an extended period of time, it provided money to those who had lost nearly everything. In one of the typical claims a woman received 5,000 DM for her farmland of a few hectares. The buildings and business part of the compensation was calculated separately. She first raised her case in 1955 and received payments for this property in six installments from 1962 to 1964. Many other expellees and their heirs received payments into the 21st century, depending on the nature of the claim and the time it took to process.

All cases of compensation did not go smoothly. The woman above, who one day hoped to return to her homeland, was driven in part by the fact that the family's claim had been held up for so long. The reasons for the delays in processing varied. In some cases it took a while for claimants to file the necessary forms or to follow up with officials' communications. In other cases, it seemed as if officials could not keep up with the pace of the claims. As one lawyer noted in the case of his client, "I had written to you about this matter in May, but since then I have heard nothing about it." This letter was written in September. He also noted that his client was old and her husband's LAG claim had gone unfulfilled until his death. He requested a "speedy" and "conclusive" decision on these cases. The claims process assumed a bureaucratic character that hampered a quick resolution to any given claim. Different offices were involved in determining compensation and the process itself was filled with forms and regulations that seemed endless. In one case I found for instance, some witness testimony was deemed inadmissible because they did not put their answers in the proper space on the form. In another example authorities questioned the validity of the claim because different amounts appeared on two different forms. The obstacles that expellees faced when submitting their claims often resulted in frustration and added to expellees' sense of injustice with the postwar settlement.

While at the Lastenausgleicharchiv, I also discovered another collection of files related to my project, which I had not encountered before. These were the internal communications of the Heimatauskunftstellen, which were offices responsible for collecting a range of information to help process individual claims for a given locality. One of their responsibilities was to vet Jewish claims of being "German" enough to be allowed to make property compensation claims under the

Lastenausgleich provisions. While this development has a complicated history of its own, these documents offer a fascinating window into the ways in which Germans evaluated Jews' prewar behavior in the wake of the Holocaust. So, for instance, in one case a Jewish survivor living in Israel made a claim that had to be vetted through the Heimatauskunftstellen. This office, in turn, contacted several people who lived in Teplitz-Schonau prior to the war. A few responded and gave very positive accounts of the man, a lawyer and a Zionist. One said: "In my 20 years as an attorney I never heard the slightest problem with him. In all the districts he enjoyed the best reputation." Another witness remarked: "he was undoubtedly raised in German circles and perhaps also active. He was and is married to a German-Aryan woman. He did not speak Czech." This witness also noted that he was a Zionist, but he stressed that he had never done anything "anti-German." In another case, a co-worker attested to the prewar situation of one Jew who managed a firm in Gablonz. She provided information about his salary, "about 6,000 crowns monthly," and his living conditions, "through the firm Mr. B had a very good apartment with 5 rooms and furnishings." She knew what bank he and his family used and noted that "they had interacted with no one other than Germans. Mr. B according to my memory was also a member of the German Cultural Organization up until the time of difficulties in Bohemia. Mr. and Mrs. B had exclusively attended German schools. In 1938 the 6 or 7 year-old son of Mr. B attended German school in up until the expulsion."

It is difficult to develop much of a character portrait about these "German Jews" from these sources, which tend to be short and focused on questions of German behavior and property ownership. Yet, for the most part the testimonies tend to provide positive portrayals. In many ways they raise more questions about Sudeten German and other expellee attitudes toward their former Jewish neighbors in the wake of the Holocaust. At face value these sources suggest a nuanced and personal view of Jews held by Sudeten Germans. These Germans clearly had long term relationships with these Jews and often knew specific details about their lives. Another interpretation might suggest that these testimonies represent a kind of guilty amnesia that began to surface in the 1950s as Sudeten Germans wrestled with the wartime past. Most intriguing for my research, is to consider these sources in connection with Sudeten Germans' own claims for compensation as discussed above. Was there some sense that given that both expellees and Jews had suffered massive material loss because of the war that they shared a common purpose? I will have to further evaluate these sources in light of other historians' work and the other sources I located on this trip.

I also visited archives in Berlin, where I stayed from June 4 to June 24. My plans involved visits to three archives there. One of the three, the Bundesamt für zentrale Dienste und offene Vermögensfrage, proved to be rather inaccessible. Visits to the archive had to be pre-arranged with the single archivist according to her schedule, and the files had to be ordered by personal data for which there was no existing finding aids. Even the files I was able to secure in my visit there held little information. Thankfully I had more success in the Berlin Provincial Archive (Landesarchiv) and in the Federal Archive (Bundesarchiv). The Federal Archive in Lichterfelde houses several collections related to my project. I spent some time reexamining the reparations program established by the Soviet authorities in what became the German Democratic Republic. While reparations from what became the German Democratic Republic were minimal, they did occur despite many scholars' dismissal of the project. Following the Soviets' large-scale dismantling of their occupation zone in postwar Germany, there was little in the way of excess capacity to offer anyway. Even so, that the Soviet Union established a system of reparations there suggests that it took seriously the governing structures initially established after the war as Allies with the West.

For the greater part of my stay at the Bundesarchiv I focused on searching for information about Nazi confiscation reports from occupied areas of Poland. The results here were mixed. Because several offices were involved in the administration of confiscated property, it was not always clear where the richest source material pertaining to this part of my research was located. I searched several different collections, including: Umwandererzentralstelle Posen, Reichsfinanzministerium – Generalgouvernement, Deutsche Polizeidienststellen in Polen, Haupttreuhandstelle Ost und Treuhandstellen, and Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle. All of these collections had some information regarding the transfer of property during the war.

In particular, I focused on gathering information regarding the expropriation of Polish and Jewish properties in occupied parts of Poland, destined to be resettled by ethnic Germans—the so-called Volksdeutsche—who obtained these farms, apartments and livelihoods. Most valuable for my purposes was the collection: Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums (RKFDV). Several different offices within the RKFDV oversaw this process in a number of ways. The records, while not always complete, demonstrate the largescale transfer of property from Poles and Jews to immigrant German speakers. Some of the records were simply in the form of property registrars showing, for instance, the confiscation of farmland from individuals. In other cases, officials corresponded about the confiscation of household items for delivery to Germans. Officials in charge of resettling Baltic Germans,

for instance, complained that the low quality and unavailability of furniture from local Jews and Poles did not meet the needs of resettlers and newer better quality furniture would have to be shipped to Posen. While just a small snapshot of how Nazi policies involved the transfer of property, these local level stories help to paint a broader picture of the multiple ways that property was seized, lost, valued and needed in the context of the war and Holocaust. I am hopeful that with additional records and sources from survivors, I will be able to provide valuable insights into part of the largescale confiscations that occurred in Nazi-occupied Europe.

The other archive I visited in Berlin was the Landesarchiv. This archive has Jewish restitution files, which were submitted through the Wiedergutmachungsamt, for property seized by the Nazis. These were the main files I explored here, though I also examined two other collections regarding wartime Nazi seizures. One had rather little useful information. The other, the Landgericht Berlin-Archiv für Wiedergutmachung, collected testimonies and other useful information that officials used to help track property for the Wiedergutmachungsamt. Like the Lastenausgleicharchiv the files from the Wiedergutmachungsamt are organized according to individual claims and the amount of information they contain varies. I researched 45 case files and found several that should serve as excellent case studies for the restitution processes established by Germany in the 1950s and 60s. Many of the cases extend decades and there is correspondence between Jewish claimants and officials as well as rulings and administrative correspondence similar to that which I found in the expellee claims. Also similar was that many of the Jews expressed great dissatisfaction with the bureaucratic nature of the claims process. One large difference, however, was that Jewish claimants suggested that what might have been bureaucratic hurdles was actually a lack of moral concern on the part of German officials. Sometimes Jews reflected extensively on the nature of the crimes they suffered and the people they lost. In other cases they felt that the restituted value of their property or loss was inadequate. In some of these cases it might be said that the restitution process opened old wounds and created new reasons for anger at Germans.

Several themes and realities emerge from the variety of documents in the restitution case files. For instance, Jews had little patience for German reasoning about the legal strictures of the multiple reparation laws. It was often the initial rejection of claims that brought dismay and anger. In one case a gentlemen continually returned to this theme. After experiencing difficulties having his case resolved due to seeming technicalities he wrote: "It is clearly no secret that after completing deportations that the Gestapo and Finance Offices had stolen Jewish belongings and then the courts tell me that the files

of the so-called Chief Financial President should have finality. The Nazis had just stolen my entire worldly possessions, where does it end?" Such frustrations called into question the extent to which Germans were willing to "make good again" the losses brought by the Holocaust.

A key theme for my project is how property became a means through which Jews recalled loss and how Germans remembered the Holocaust. For Jews the process of filling out various forms and calculating lost property brought to mind lost loved ones and recalled experiences of flight and forfeiture. The detailed lists that sometimes accompanied these claims point us in this direction. I plan to use some of the methodologies associated with material cultural studies to analyze how possessions served as a vehicle for memories of loss and for claims of redress. For instance, in one of the case files I examined there were several drawings of jewelry by the daughter of a woman who had been killed during the Holocaust. She was using the drawings to help support her reparation claim, but such detail and care suggest that other memories were at play. Was this a sign that she had her mother in mind as she worked on the drawings? Similarly, several of the property lists are juxtaposed with the stories of loved ones lost. For instance one claim begins: "My sister... was taken away by the Gestapo on February 27, 1943 and has not returned. In her apartment was located the following items, which were my property..." Again, here it is both the claims process and the memory of things lost that connect(ed) Jewish survivors to the past.

For Germans the reparation programs raised several modes of remembering the Holocaust. For some this involved accounting for the confiscation and use of Jewish possessions. While most of the restitution cases involved claims directly against the German Reich, others were directed against individuals. While the reparations program in many ways became associated with a nation's guilt for the crimes committed by the Nazis, in individual cases Germans were called to account for their actions. In one case, a dispute arose regarding the value of furniture left in a Jewish apartment that had been taken over by a German family. The German woman appeared to downplay the value of the furniture when questioned by the authorities. Her list of items included things like: "1 dark damaged chaise lounge (worthless), 1 laundry washer in the cellar, 1 red wardrobe (worthless), 5 simple defective chairs and stools." The Jewish relative making the claim on behalf of her deceased sister, on the other hand, argued that "my sister had left an entire number of nicer and better quality furniture, such as rugs, lamps, curtains, linens, handicrafts, artwork, precious tableware and glasses, etc." Such disagreements about the personal possessions of Holocaust victims became an important way that broader memories of the Holocaust were shaped for Germans and Jews. Germans also played the role of witnesses, called

in to support or to help reject claims. In the case of I.F. a German housecleaner testified that the claimant had told her that she sold her belongings to the defendant before fleeing Germany in 1938. The claimant, however, stated emphatically that her testimony was untrue and that she had to hand over everything to the defendant before leaving Germany with nothing. Whatever the reasons or truth behind the testimony, the claims process brought German witnesses back to the 1930s and 1940s and gave them the opportunity to relive the past. German officials also played a key role in administering the reparations programs and German lawyers became active agents assisting Jews in the claims process. Thus, this research demonstrates that there were a number of ways that the reparations program brought Germans face-to-face with the past and this, in turn, helped to shape the way that they remembered the Holocaust.

The other valuable aspect of the Berlin Wiedergutmachungsamt was that it was also the office responsible for dealing with cases of lost property that may have reached postwar Germany from other places. Thus, the Berlin Restitution office received claims from survivors from all over the world, not only about property located in its vicinity. However, one aspect of the restitution laws stated that the property had to be located in the Federal Republic or Berlin at the end of the war. This provision effectively prevented millions of claims by excluding property losses in Poland and other countries the Nazis had occupied. Even so, many Jews from these countries still submitted claims and despite being unable to prove that the property in question was in the Federal Republic their claims shed light both on the Holocaust and the reparations process. One case involved A. K., who was from Czechoslovakia. He and his parents had been sent to Theresienstadt in 1941 and were deported in May 1944 to Auschwitz, where his parents perished. Among other things, he claimed reparations for the clothes and personal belongings that had been stripped from him and his parents in Theresienstadt. He argued that the clothing had been boxed up and shipped back to Germany: "The good pieces of clothing and consumer goods were carefully packed and later sent to the cities, which had suffered heavy bombing and there were distributed to bombed-out families! (in Germany)". There was a lengthy investigation into this situation that involved everything from trying to track down the SS guards in charge of the "clothing office" to debates about whether Theresienstadt was a ghetto or a concentration camp. The case dragged on for years. German officials questioned the veracity of one of A.K.'s witnesses stating: "it is unlikely that after 36 years he can correctly recall the details." A.K., in turn, condemned the German officials who dismissed his claim. In a letter from 1993 he wrote: "To deny this is from a historical

vantage, and from my view, a big mistake.” While the war was long past and even the Iron Curtain had fallen, the desire for reparations and justice continued to weigh heavily on some survivors’ minds.

Of course, I will need more time to study and evaluate these sources and to place them in a broader historical context. Even so, I can tell that these sources will be extremely valuable in my efforts to reconstruct the dialogues about the war and the Holocaust among Germans and Jews. One tentative conclusion I have already reached involves the way that these stories might reshape the way that historians think about memory. Until now historians’ focus on memory has often been to seek a unified or shared “German” memory about World War II and the Holocaust. This research suggests, rather, that there were multiple memories of the past that could be shaped in various ways.

I am very grateful to the American Council on Germany for providing me with the necessary funds to continue working on this project. The Hunt Fellowship gave me the opportunity to collect a range of valuable materials and will allow me to get started on several chapters of the book. Exploring the archives also gave me time for reflection about this project’s scope and its goals as I listened to the voices of those who had often lost everything because of the war. This research opened a window into the attitudes of Germans and Jews living in the wake of the war and the Holocaust and the varied ways that they began remembering and constructing the past. I hope that I will be able to successfully convey this complex and contentious history in a meaningful way that sheds light on the important ways that this past continues to surface in Europe today. Thank you.