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Nazi-Era Looted Art and Artefact Restitution Field

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From the Objects to the Actors of Restitution: Jewish Agency in the Nazi-Era Looted Art and Artefact Restitution Field

Elisabeth Becker

Abstract:

Scholarship on the restitution of art and artefacts looted during the Nazi era has predominantly focused on objects rather than the actors who have shaped this field. This article adopts an actor-oriented approach to examine the agency of Jewish cultural brokers formative to restitution processes since the 1950s. Drawing on interviews conducted with fifteen Jewish cultural brokers from 2022 to 2025 and archival research at the Leo Baeck Institute Archives in New York, it traces how Jewish actors have pioneered and transformed the restitution field. The research reveals two phases of restitution work. In the first phase (1950s–1990s), Jewish lawyers and organisations established legal frameworks for restitution claims. In the second phase (late twentieth century to the present), second- and third-generation Jewish actors shifted the field from national toward moral and global frameworks to emphasise ‘just and fair solutions’. Contemporary Jewish cultural brokers understand their work as both personal heritage practice and moral obligation. They assert agency, seeking not merely the return of objects but the restoration of marginalised stories to history. This actor-centric approach reveals restitution as a processual, relational, and spatial practice of heritage-making that encompasses voice, recognition, and collective memory. By centring Jewish agency, the study demonstrates how marginalised populations can transform institutional fields, offering new perspectives on cultural heritage as an active, lived process rather than a static product of the past.

Key words: restitution, Jewish, cultural heritage, Nazi era

Introduction

On Bergheimer Strasse in Heidelberg, Germany, is a café named Sternweiler, marked by a black sign jutting out from the side of a stone building. Named after a Jewish family, the Sternweilers, who resided here a century ago, three *Stolpersteine* (stumbling stones) are emplaced outside of its entrance to mark the violent deaths of Nathalie Sternweiler, Rosita Wertheimer (born Sternweiler), and Arthur Abraham Wertheimer (Rosita’s husband) following their deportation by the Nazis.¹ Sternweiler is owned by Umut Demirhan, who hails from a Turkish Alevi family, with its own history of persecution and exile.² It is arguably his own family history that led Demirhan to highlight the lives of the Jewish family that once lived where his café today is located,

1 *Stolpersteine* is a project of German artist Gunter Demnig. To mark victims of Nationalism Socialism, he lays small brass stones inscribed with their names, dates of birth and death, and location of death outside of their former homes.

2 The Alevis, an ethno-religious minority in Turkey, have experienced severe persecution by the state since the mid-twentieth century (Mutluer 2016).

not least of all by naming the café after it. For Demirhan, Sternweiler is more than a café. It is part of a process of inhabiting and actively contributing to the cultural heritage of the city he calls home, by narrating, conversing with, and creating space for this history.

In the autumn of 2024, I met Barani Shira Guttzman at Sternweiler. I was working on a research project tracing the agency of those I term Jewish cultural brokers involved in the restitution of art and artefacts looted during the Nazi era, including lawyers, researchers, and mediators.³ Guttzman had moved to Berlin in 2022 to work at the Freie Universität Berlin on a project entitled 'Persecuted and Robbed: The Sultan Family and their Nazi Asset Losses'. While still based in Berlin, she was visiting Heidelberg to access archival holdings on her family, as members of her extended family had resided in the city before World War II. A Heidelberg resident had discovered these holdings in a number of long-unopened boxes in the attic of his house, on a street leading to the Odenwald, the forest abutting the city. He had given the boxes to the archivist at Heidelberg University. Guttzman's research project aims to locate and recreate the art collection of her great-great-grandfather, the Jewish Berliner Adolf Sultan, which had been looted by the Nazis. Guttzman is, however, not only a family representative on this project but also a researcher and historical excavator, dedicating herself to bringing back stories lost to Nazi-era persecution, displacement, and dispersal.

Objects rather than *subjects* of restitution have been at the centre of discussions over Nazi-era looted art and artefacts. The media has tended to focus on high-value works from the pre-eminent artists of the early twentieth century. The restitution of paintings by Renoir, Pissarro, or Klimt, for instance, has garnered the attention of a large public. This focus on objects is also reflected in the scholarly literature, which is concentrated in the disciplines of law, history, and art history. The legal field has focused on seminal court cases in national and transnational contexts, while identifying the notable limits of non-binding global law in the restitution of many objects that crossed national boundaries (Keim 2002; Hay and Hay 2017; O'Donnell 2017). Historical research has examined the contexts and motivations of looting (Fleckner 2015), how individual nation states have redressed Nazi looting in the post-Holocaust world (Barkan 2001; Campbell 2024), and the intersection of restitution and memory regimes (Diner 2003; Diner and Wunberg 2007; Rothberg 2014). And art history has largely focused on tracing the provenance of particular objects and examining the role of institutions, most notably museums, in the display of looted art (Nichols 1995; Schuhmacher 2024).

3 I use the term 'cultural broker' because not all such individuals utilise the law to broker restitution; some use non-legal mediation, research, and other means.

Behind sought-out stolen objects, however, there have always been Jewish actors seeking redress of Nazi-era looted art and artefacts – people who themselves or whose forebears had been forcibly dispersed across the globe. These actors have contributed to restitution as a process of reclamation, return, and making amends. Guttsman is but one among many whom I call Jewish cultural brokers of restitution: individuals who have devoted themselves not only personally but also professionally to the work of restitution. Whether heads of organisations, lawyers, researchers, archivists, or mediators, these Jewish cultural brokers have been present in, if not recognised as formative to, the restitution field since the mid-twentieth century.

In this article, I explicitly shift the focus of restitution research to the Jewish actors and thereby the agency of a minoritised populace in the aftermath of catastrophic loss. This is an agency that does not undermine or stand in conflict with, but rather one that arose in response to, victimhood. In so doing, I move from an object- to an actor-oriented approach to researching Nazi-era looted art and artefact restitution. Following Bortolotto (2007), I understand Jewish heritage not as a product but rather a process in the post-Holocaust world. Here restitution emerges as an active and engaged form of heritage-making, one that grants and also foments agency among particular Jewish actors in the restitution field. To make this scholarly shift entails, in part, a historiographical methodology: tracing and demarcating the role that Jewish actors have played in this field over time, from the years just after World War II until today. This shift is crucial as no systematic anthropological or sociological research has been conducted in relation to Jewish restitution actors. Such a shift thus requires a distinct disciplinary intervention, drawing on both archival research and interviews with such cultural brokers, to lay the groundwork for sociocultural research on restitution. Such an approach speaks to the ways in which stakeholders in cultural heritage actively and agentively engage with that heritage.

This article is largely based on interviews, conducted between 2022 and 2025, with fifteen Jewish cultural brokers of restitution who reside in Germany, Austria, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. Many of them work across national boundaries, with offices, cases, and/or clients in multiple countries if not on multiple continents. In this article, I draw predominantly from the interviews with the following six people:

1. Barani Shira Guttsman, heir to the Sultan family collection and restitution researcher at the Freie Universität Berlin
2. Richard Aronowitz, Global Head of Restitution at the auctioneer Christie's, in London
3. Anne Webber, co-founder and co-chair of the Commission for Looted Art in Europe
4. Ned, an independent restitution lawyer in New York

5. Michael, director of restitution and lawyer for a major art auction house in New York City
6. Sara, an independent restitution lawyer in Paris, interviewed on 2022 in ...⁴

I also draw from archival research in the Leo Baeck Archives at the Center for Jewish History, New York, and on secondary literature to illuminate how Jewish actors have chartered the direction of the field on the restitution of Nazi-era looted art and artefacts since the 1950s.⁵

Jewish agency: rethinking the twentieth-century field of restitution (1950s–1990s)

Historians have come to reference the Holocaust generation as the ‘silent generation’ – both as witnesses to and victims of unspeakable violence (Anderson 2003). As Hermann von der Dunk writes:

The war generation was the silent generation. It had been witness to the tragedy, and yet had no real knowledge of what was in progress; the architects and perpetrators of the Holocaust had concealed their intentions behind a screen of lies. The executioners would not speak and the victims could not speak. (Von der Dunk 2002: 55, emphasis in original)

From the 1950s until today, however, Jewish actors have in fact both spoken out and acted with agency to shape and reshape a field of claims-making in response to the dispossession Jews experienced during the Holocaust. This includes the so-called first generation, that is those who experienced the Holocaust first-hand.

Exemplifying this generation, I here turn to the story of the Jewish lawyer Hans Deutsch who rose as one of the most renowned restitution lawyers in the early post-war years. Born in 1906 to Jewish Austrian parents, Deutsch fled from Vienna to Palestine in 1938; both of his parents were murdered in Auschwitz. He returned to Austria in 1953 and began to dedicate himself to seeking restitution for Jews who were dispossessed of their property during the Holocaust. In the process, Deutsch became the target of political persecution by the West German state. On 3 November 1964, the German authori-

4 Several names have been changed to preserve anonymity, except when individuals agreed for their real names to be used at all times, as in the cases of Webber, Guttsman, and Aronowitz.

5 Relevant files at the Leo Baeck Archives, Centre for Jewish History, New York (hereafter Baeck Archives) include: Ernst Wertheimer Family Collection; Restitution Claims, AR 6305/MF 876; Erich and Grete Baum Collection, AR 10782; Hugo Windmueller Collection, AR 25214; Hans Reichmann Collection, AR 2236; Walter Breslauer Collection, AR 4129; Hans Heinz Altmann Collection, AR 6294; and Ernst C. Stiefel Collection, AR 5230/MF 744.

ties arrested him on false charges of fraud. He was jailed for a year and a half and it took nine years of battles to clear his name. This was an unprecedented and unmatched attack on an early Jewish restitution figure who had sought redress for the victims of looting in the direct aftermath of the Holocaust.

While Deutsch was eventually acquitted of all crimes, his career was ruined. This scandal, referenced alternatively as ‘the German Dreyfus Affair’ and ‘Deutschland gegen Deutsch’ (Germany against Deutsch), revealed the uncertainty and danger of engaging in restitution work in the context of a post-war Europe that was in flux (Juncker 2005; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2007; List 2018; Gaudenzi 2023). Indeed, it was later revealed that his persecution had been orchestrated by several former leaders of the SS, the Nazi special police force.

While he became a public figure through this case, Deutsch was only one among many European Jewish lawyers who devoted themselves to restitution efforts in the early post-war years (Hoffmann 1971). This undermines the commonly held view that organised restitution efforts began only several decades after the war. Walter Schwarz was another German-Jewish lawyer who became a publicly recognised figure in these early years. Schwarz had also fled to Israel, leaving Germany after the rise of the Nazis. He returned to Berlin in 1950 and began to litigate cases for Nazi victims across the globe (Petersen 2021; Schwarz 1981). The Jewish lawyers who turned to work on restitution cases had often been trained in other, often unrelated subfields; most did so from exile in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Israel, where they had fled as a result of the Holocaust; few returned to Germany.⁶ Personal exchanges and case files from numerous such lawyers can be accessed at the Leo Baeck Archives (Lowenstein 1989).

It is important to note that at the time many of these lawyers did not see themselves as restitution lawyers. They worked on restitution from various positionalities: some worked independently, others for private law firms, and some formed organisations to collaborate, such as the Berkeley Juristenkreis, a group of German-Jewish lawyers based in California (1946–1980).⁷ Still others worked with or for restitution organisations that emerged in the immediate years after the war, in particular the United Restitution Organization. Since the late 1940s, the institutional terrain of the restitution of Nazi-era looted art, artefacts, and property has been made up of organisations founded and led by Jewish actors, notably including Jewish Cultural Restitution, the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization, the United Restitution Organization, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany

6 In his book *Deutsche Juristen im amerikanischen Exil (1933–1950)* the lawyer Ernst Stiefel (1991) traces the biographies and fates of German-Jewish lawyers who fled to the United States.

7 Nothing has been published on the Juristenkreis yet. Archival information is held at the Baeck Archives, Ernst Marcus (Breslau) Collection, AR 25006.

(hereafter Claims Conference), the World Jewish Restitution Organization, and the Commission for Looted Art in Europe.

The first of these organisations, the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, emerged in April 1947 and remained active until 1952. It had the explicit goal of identifying and relocating heirless Jewish property in the American Occupied Zone of Germany (Rauschenberger 2008). Led by German-Jewish scholars – such as Hannah Arendt, Salo Baron, and Gershom Scholem – it quickly became nested under the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization. This organisation, founded in 1948, entailed a conglomerate of Jewish organisations on a transnational scale, including Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the Anglo-Jewish Association, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Council for the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Jews from Germany, the World Jewish Congress, and numerous others (Takei 2002; Gallas 2019).⁸ It focused on reclaiming heirless property in Germany and redistributing it to Jewish organisations (Lustig 2017). The United Restitution Organization, founded in London in 1948 with support from the Council of Jews from Germany (in exile), aimed to provide legal aid to the victims of Nazism. Many of the litigators involved in this organisation were German-speaking Jewish lawyers who had fled from continental Europe. The United Restitution Organization also established a German journal, *Rechtsprechung zum Wiedergutmachungsrecht*, on law and restitution, edited for over three decades by the German-Jewish lawyer Walter Schwarz (1949–1981) (Hockerts 1989; Siemens 2023). The Claims Conference was founded in 1951 and included leadership from twenty-three Jewish organisations across the globe. Its aim was both to bring about the return of looted property and objects and to seek retributive payments for Holocaust survivors (Claims Conference 2024). A resurgence of institutional activity in this field occurred in the late twentieth century. The World Jewish Restitution Organization was formed in 1993 to recover stolen properties across Europe (aside from Germany and Austria) (Clearfield 1998; Zabudoff 2007). This organisation emerged through the cooperation of a conglomerate of already established Jewish organisations seeking material redress for victims and their heirs. Finally, the Commission for Looted Art in Europe, a non-profit organisation founded in 1999, seeks to recover looted art and artefacts, using research and mediation with institutions and individuals who hold objects identified to have been looted by the Nazis. It has also increasingly become a major player in the development of policies on restitution across the globe.

8 Baeck Archives, Jewish Restitution Successor Organization Collection, AR 1485.

Jewish cultural brokers in the contemporary restitution field

As can be gleaned from this list of individuals, lawyers, and organisations, Jewish actors have been formative to the restitution of Nazi-era looted art and artefacts. Equally, they have been transformative of the restitution field. The restitution field has not developed in a linear fashion since the Holocaust, though it has generally followed a similar trajectory across the affected nation states – utilising and/or expanding national laws in order to retribute looted art and artefacts after World War II. The first phase of restitution (1950s–1990s) occurred largely through national legal regimes and means, focusing on returning objects or providing reparations equal to the value of looted objects (Bazyler and Fitzgerald 2002; Bazyler and Alford 2006; Dostal et al 2014; Campbell 2021). The late twentieth century has seen a shift in approach, marked by the coming-of-age of the second and third generations of Jews after the Holocaust. This shift has entailed interlinked globalising and moralising trends. Two major global meetings on restitution were held since: the Washington Conference (1999) and the Terezin Declaration (2007). These meetings have emphasised the need for ‘just and fair solutions’ for an aging generation of Holocaust survivors and their heirs. Ultimately, they framed restitution as a moral responsibility and a form of justice. Their efforts showcase the increasing internationalisation of the restitution field, owing to the forced dispersal of both persons and objects (Rowland 2013; Bazyler et al. 2019).

My interlocutors all belong to the second or third generation after the Holocaust, as children or grandchildren of the generation that experienced the Holocaust first-hand. In coming to terms with their own relationality to the Holocaust, which is still present, still haunting, those in these second and third generations have come to embody a certain form of becoming in the aftermath of this at-once personal and collective tragedy. This is true not only for the professionals in the restitution field examined here but for all who belong to these generations more broadly (Sigal 1998; Aarons and Berger 2017).

For most of my interlocutors, the desire to discover and situate themselves in relation to their family history was a major motivating factor regarding their involvement in restitution work. In trying to more fully understand and give voice to these family histories, they also zoomed outwards towards the broader collective of Jews persecuted during the Holocaust. Thus, the personal and the professional became intimately linked in the larger field of restitution work. When Michael, a restitution lawyer for an art auction house in New York, spoke to me of his work in the restitution field, he began with his family history, recounting his mother’s unlikely escape from Europe. Reframing her as a person with agency – rather than solely as a victim – motivated him to work in this area. Aronowitz, in the restitution team at Christie’s, spoke of his mother’s experience on the *Kindertransport* – the separation of children from their families and their transport away from their

homes by the Nazis, leading to trauma of dislocation and separation – as the motivating factor for his work. As he described it in the interview, his family story and profession ‘feed into and bleed into each other’. Similarly, Sara, an independent restitution lawyer in Paris, detailed her family’s history, including her grandmother’s internment in Auschwitz, as what had drawn her to the restitution field in spite of more lucrative opportunities in other legal specialisations. She said that her parents were initially surprised, but that she was convinced that she could have the most impact by working in this field.

While locating themselves and their identities in relation to their family histories, my interlocutors notably shifted away from seeing themselves and their generations as victims. Instead, they consistently highlighted their turn towards agency in the post-Holocaust world. ‘I’ve grown into not wanting my identity to be based in that victimisation,’ Michael explained. In his case, such a sense of agency was largely shaped by his involvement in the famous Mauerbach case, in which he refused to be cowed. The Mauerbach case emerged from a 1996 auction at Christie’s of Nazi-looted artworks that had been stored at the Mauerbach monastery outside of Vienna since the war. At this auction the government of Austria intended to auction off hundreds of supposedly ‘unclaimed’ art objects for US\$14.5 million to benefit Holocaust victims, despite the fact that the Austrian authorities were indeed able to identify the former owners of these objects (Akinsha 2009).⁹ Michael described the case as follows:

In this Mauerbach trope, we were told to let sleeping dogs lie. It was seen as unseemly and greedy, [the] same tropes as always about Jews. But this is fucked up. This [art] is clearly looted. This is called ‘heirless property’. ‘Heirless’ probably means they were murdered [...] I wanted to take it on as a sale. I thought it was the righteous and just thing to do. We did the sale in Vienna, and it broke the taboo about talking about these issues.

The language that my interlocutors used to describe their motivation and influence in this field is a language not of passivity or victimhood but of giving voice – to themselves and also their forebears – through agentive action. Here, for instance, Michael broke a taboo through his choice not to remain silent but to confront the legacies of this ‘heirless’ property. Such an overriding of silence – *speaking* about the horrors while also *acting* to right the

9 Such practices of impunity at the level of the state, often characterised by ‘grey zone[s] of justice’ – and grassroots resistance to them – are also present in other contexts of rupture and transition (Sanford 2003: 393). For example, Noa Vaisman (2022) examines how grassroots protests contest impunity, while also exposing the complex entanglements in contemporary Argentina. She terms ‘irreconciliation’ an active response to impunity, seeking not closure but rather consistent engagement with violence and its aftermath – and in so doing ‘keep[ing] the past alive’ (Vaisman 2022: 112).

wrongs of history – was a narrative employed by every Jewish cultural broker whom I interviewed. As Ned, an independent restitution lawyer in New York, asked of the role of his (second) generation in both speaking and acting against such silence: ‘How could our parents’ paralysis be overcome? Could we somehow speak for the silenced?’

Understanding restitution in moral terms: healing the past

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Jewish cultural brokers of restitution have ushered in a new era, in which restitution work operates not only at the national but also the global level, with restitution largely framed in moral rather than solely legal terms. Through this framing of their work as ‘righteous’, ‘just’, and ‘fair’, these brokers of restitution have not only come to see themselves as agents rather than victims but also as moral actors, imbued with a responsibility to right the wrongs of history. For them restitution work as moral work facilitates both a healing of the past and a better future for all. In fact, they linguistically frame their work in the field in terms such as ‘trying to set things right’ or ‘fix[ing] something in the broken world’. Such articulations reflect the central notion of ‘tikkun olam’ in Judaism, which means repairing the world.

Such moral terms of restitution are, on the one hand, universal. On the other, they draw on the particular position of Jewish actors in the post-Holocaust world. This includes invoking not only personal histories of persecution, dislocation, and loss but also Jewish practices and (biblical) narratives. While my interlocutors identified in various ways with Judaism and Jewish culture more broadly, the utilisation of these Jewish terms, or what Bortolotto (2007: 21) calls ‘cultural expressions’, transcended the ways in which they identified, whether this was as ‘religious’, ‘non-religious’, or something in-between.

For instance, Guttsman did not explicitly identify as Jewish but rather as ‘human first’, rooted in both her Jewish and her Hindu familial ancestries. Still, she spoke about restitution work as a Jewish practice. Following our meeting at the Sternweiler café, Guttsman and I walked to the Heidelberg University archives, to look at the personal papers of the Sultan family, which she had laid out in neat piles on a table. From one of the neatly arranged stacks, Guttsman pulled out two personal letters. The paper on which they had been written was thin but still intact, with words that remained a hundred years after they had been written. It was at this point that she spoke about Judaism and its role in her restitution work. ‘I don’t have to go to synagogue for my Judaism. I don’t have to daven or stand up each time the Torah Ark is opened. But this right here,’ she said, gesturing towards the papers, ‘this is as much an act of reverence as those.’ She spends long days working alone in the archives, connecting to members of her family through

their letters, personal documents, and artefacts. Sara offered a similar comparison with Jewish religious practice and restitution efforts. She drew an analogy between the increasing organisation and collaboration of Jewish cultural brokers in the global restitution field and the *minyán*, the group of people needed for communal prayer in Orthodox Judaism. ‘I mean, we need ten people to pray. So those ten people need to get together. So we organise ourselves.’ Throughout the interview, Sara consistently emphasised the collective action required for restitution.

Ned, too, framed the contemporary restitution field in terms of collective action among Jews and non-Jews alike. He perceived restitution not as an act of reverence (as per Guttsman’s description) but rather one of atonement. He did so by invoking a parallel between restitution work and the Jewish high holiday of Yom Kippur.

In the Yom Kippur service, there is a point at which we stop saying ‘forgive me’. We are asking God, ‘forgive us’. The understanding is that we are not only asking for forgiveness for something that we, as individuals, have done. We want the strength to recognise that there are sins and not to repeat them. Redemption is in atonement. Transitional justice is in atonement.

Interestingly, whether or not they used Jewish practices or narratives as a narrative frame, all of my interlocutors saw themselves as implicated in such atoning acts. To ‘set it right, to the degree that we can’, as Sara expressed it, requires continued, consistent, and collective action in the restitution field. This again speaks to the idea of cultural heritage as not only an object-oriented but also process-oriented practice – of confronting, narrating, and conversing with the past over time.

The moralising of the restitution field by twenty-first century Jewish cultural brokers must also be seen in light of the reality that most legally straightforward cases of restitution have been resolved while those that fall into a legal ‘grey area’ remain. As Michael explained,

the ones that slipped through are mainly not pictures that were literally looted but works of art in terms of forced sales. We need a more expansive notion of restitution: not just things that were stolen [but] things sold to fund life in another country or pay the German Tax [a Nazi requirement imposed on people wanting to flee Germany]. These are works sold under what claimants would say is undeniably under duress.

Similarly, Webber, from the Commission for Looted Art in Europe, noted that the law is not always the right place in which to redress wrongs:

These shouldn't be legal cases, especially when the law is out of time, eighty or more years after these artworks were taken [...] Fundamentally these are moral and ethical issues, matters of justice, and should be resolved on that basis rather than through polarising and expensive litigation and the deployment of legal and technical defences to prevent restitution. Most of the time it shouldn't need to come to that. But where it does, and frequently that's the case in the USA, it means that museums spend vast amounts of their scarce resources on legal fees, and the families have to as well, and then it doesn't necessarily achieve the aim, which is to establish the facts and find a just and fair solution, as the Washington [Conference] Principles set out.¹⁰

My interlocutors emphasised the need to both expand and think beyond the legal frameworks of individual nation states – again in at once global and moral terms – understanding themselves as responsible for enacting alternative processes. In the words of the post-war Jewish restitution lawyer Walter Schwarz (1959: 55): '[L]aws one can create; climate one can not; it has to emerge. The ground out of which it can blossom is human behaviour'.

Narrating history: another story?

A few months after we first met, I sat with Guttsman in another café, this time in the centre of Berlin. The red-brick building in which the café is located – a former post office – is among the few buildings that survived bombing of the street. Guttsman gifted me two books, of which one was a compendium of *Grimms Fairy Tales*, which I had once read in translation as a child. Both books had belonged to her great-grandmother and were inscribed with her name, Beate Berwin. They had recently been returned to Guttsman by a bookseller in Berlin. The value of these objects – this gift – lay not in their fiscal worth but in their story, passed between us and across time. In Jewish culture, we lay stones on the graves of our dead. This too is a way of laying (metaphorical) stones, exchanging the gift of stories in order to remember that they have been here: re-inscribing those who were purposefully erased from history into our lives, keeping them alive through collective memory. In re-inscribing the dead, by tracing and re-emplacing not just stolen objects but also their attendant human stories, we are also enacting a more multicultural memory, which makes space for difference and expands the bounds

¹⁰ The Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets, which took place in 1998, set up eleven non-binding principles as a framework for identifying Nazi-looted art and facilitating the return of such works to their rightful owners or heirs (Commission for Looted Art in Europe 2025). The principles were signed by forty-four countries.

of the ‘we’ – those who we imagine as being part of our story both today and yesterday (Becker et al. 2025).

Recent news coverage regarding the restitution of Nazi-era looted art exposed the case of Camille Pissarro’s painting *Le Repos*, also called *Girl Lying in Grass*, sold under duress by a Dutch Jewish family during the Holocaust and today held at the Kunsthalle Bremen, Germany. At the centre of this story sits not the physical object of the painting but rather the actors, in particular an heir who negotiated a form of restitution different from that of the return of the work of art: the restitution of her family story to history. The headline in the *New York Times* on 13 November 2024 read: ‘Their Pissarro Is Staying in Germany, but their Story Is getting Out’ (Siegal 2024). In the article, Dutch restitution expert Rudi Ekkart explains the matter as follows: ‘It turned out that the financial part was not the most important part to her [the heir] [...] The publication and the exhibition were more important to her. That’s the reason we came to this very original solution.’ The solution that was found was this: the heir allowed for the painting to remain at the Bremen Kunsthalle, while the museum helped to publish a book on the heir’s family, which appeared under the title *Girl in the Grass: The Tragic Fate of the Van den Bergh Family and the Search for a Painting* (Muller and Kool 2024).

Today’s restitution work is about restoring individual and family stories to history, thereby telling a collective story that includes rather than erases the victims of Nazism. This was expressed across my interviews with Jewish cultural brokers, who pointed time and again to restorative approaches to life stories/histories as a desired outcome of their work. As Webber explained:

In every single one of our cases, we are writing the history of the family. Our work is about restituting not just the object that was taken, whether a painting, a drawing, a book, but about restituting the history, restoring the family and their experiences to the historical record [...] the story of a family whom the Nazis intended to erase from history.

To not return a stolen object is problematic, according to Webber, not simply because of its fiscal value or legal obligations but equally because of moral obligations, as this entails an outright denial of history:

In one of our current cases the looted painting represents a member of the family [...] And the people who have it today are saying, ‘well, this painting is in private ownership now and we can keep it, we don’t have to do anything.’ It starts with them saying, ‘there’s no evidence of what took place.’ But we’ve done the research and there is compelling evidence of what happened, and that the family member who commissioned and owned the painting was deported and murdered. Despite this, the current

possessors say, ‘under the law, we have title because it’s been inherited several times from the person who originally took it, and we have it in good faith.’ Well, yes, under that legal system, an inheritor has no legal obligation to return. But their family has had it for over eighty years, hidden all that time, so do they really have good title, do they really have it in good faith? [...] It’s a form of denial of history.

And yet, Webber emphasises that it is not only the return of an object that is sought through restitution. To restitute a work is to recognise wrong and to respect the agency of the wronged – regardless of whether an actual object is ever exchanged in this process.

Why would you be reluctant to return something when it was taken in these circumstances? [...] Museums represent our view of ourselves, don’t they? They represent our views about our social, aesthetic, and cultural values, they are a public reflection of our aspirations, whether about art, society, morality, or ethics [...] And yet directors and curators in many countries are often reluctant even to acknowledge the Nazi-era history of the works in their collections. They see their primary role as to study and look after the objects in their care. But why choose to disconnect the object from its history and choose to disconnect themselves from understanding and acknowledging that history?

As Joshua Abarbanel, a Jewish American artist whom I interviewed and who worked with the Jewish Museum Berlin, asserts: ‘Whether the context is personal, communal, or even global, we live inside our own stories’ (Wecker 2020). The work of Jewish cultural brokers in the restitution field thus turns from a focus on the return of objects to the return of marginalised actors to history – to the shared stories of the societies in which we live – which in turn gives shape to the sociocultural imaginaries that bind or divide us.

Revaluing restitution as processual, relational, and spacial

The online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines ‘restitution’ as ‘an act of restoring or a condition of being restored: such as a: a restoration of something to its rightful owner, b: a making good of or giving an equivalent for some injury’. Restitution is not always a discrete act but can also be understood as part a broader process of restoration, return, or otherwise making right. The role of Jewish cultural brokers in this field is also processual. Whether through law, research, mediation, or storytelling, they participate in ongoing processes of restitution, which are aimed at healing small slivers of history: bringing not only objects back but bringing recognition, justice, and atonement to bear on how loss is redressed in the post-Holocaust era. In so doing,

they shed light on their own agency along with the agency of the claimants they represent, whether those directly dispossessed or their heirs. Webber in particular emphasised the need to bring claimants more centrally into these *processes* of restitution, arguing that restitution is not simply about outcomes (i.e. the handing back of an object) but about conversation and participation – again, the combination of voice and action in the post-Holocaust world. She provided an example to illustrate this:

We're currently having a settlement discussion with a museum which has had the painting in question for over sixty years, knowing to whom it had belonged and the role the owner played in championing the work of the artist. The owner had to flee with nothing but a few small paintings; everything else had gone. But he fled to a country where he was to be persecuted again, and he had to sell the painting just to be able to have something to eat. Then the persecution intensified, he was interrogated and died. And all the museum is saying is, 'well, we'd like to keep it'. But they have never actually asked the family, 'do you want it back?' They've had it for sixty years; it's only rarely been on display, and they're saying, 'we would like to keep it'. And that is the beginning of the conversation when surely the conversation should start with, 'we understand and respect the history; we accept that this is a case for restitution. What does the family want?' Then they can say that they would like to keep it and ask if there is a way that could happen. That would create the possibility of a mutually respectful conversation rather than one where those who suffered feel treated as unequal and unseemly supplicants.

While restitution is processual, it is equally relational, built on the engagements and interactions between multiple actors. This includes compromise and negotiation between actors just as between actors and objects. Rethinking the object in relation to the actor exposes the objects themselves as having not only financial but also moral worth.

An interesting case that sheds light on the 'pricelessness' of these objects is that of Klimt's painting *Woman in Gold*, portraying the Viennese socialite Adele Bloch Bauer. In 2006 it was famously restituted to its heir, Maria Altmann, a citizen of the United States and a resident of California. The restitution emerged from a court case, arbitrated by the Jewish American lawyer Randol Schoenberg, grandchild of a Jewish Holocaust refugee from Austria. This case had made headlines when the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in 2004 that Altmann could sue the state of Austria for the return of the painting and other artworks owned by her forebears. Altmann subsequently sold the painting through Christie's to Jewish philanthropist

Ronald Lauder, who purchased it for US\$135 million – the highest recorded amount ever paid for a single painting. He bought it for the Neue Galerie in New York which he had opened in 2001 to collect and feature German and Austrian modern art. Lauder conceptualised the gallery as a space akin to an early twentieth-century Viennese gallery, providing a kind of portal to a lost world (Findling 2012). The act of overpaying for the Klimt artwork highlighted its priceless nature, pointing to the fact that restituted art carries a profound moral significance surpassing monetary worth (Impert 2008; Sezgin 2012; Christie's 2016).¹¹ Referenced today as the 'Austrian Mona Lisa', *Woman in Gold* sits at the centre of the Neue Galerie's permanent exhibition and draws visitors from across the globe (Findling 2012; Regatao 2015).

This case thus also speaks to the *spatial* implications of restitution – how objects are emplaced as representations of peoples and their histories. Today, the Neue Galerie holds multiple restituted paintings, many displayed in the 'Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937' special exhibition in 2014 that sought to recreate the famed Nazi exhibition of degenerate art. In terms of spatial representation, Guttsman has called for pairing museum exhibitions with restituted artworks and artefacts that portray the objects alongside their individual and family stories.

The case of the *Woman in Gold* speaks to the potential to claim a space in the broad public imaginary even further, namely through media representations of restitution in the form of the 2006 film *Woman in Gold* starring Helen Millen. The film emphasises Maria Altmann's agency (as well as that of her Jewish lawyer, Randol Schoenberg) in the struggle to recover part of her family's heritage, and through it also their histories.

Restitution as a form of cultural heritage-making thus entails a reclaiming of histories together with a (re)claiming of space (Apaydin 2019). Reconsidering the role of museums brings to the fore questions not only regarding the relations between actors and objects but of the interlinked spatiality of restitution. Where can and should restitution be enacted? And how can – or should – such spaces be demarcated for onlookers, visitors, witnesses, and other stakeholders in implicated or contested histories? Today museums across the globe have put in place restitution research and implementation teams, marking looted objects, telling the stories of their movement across place and time and of the actors attached to them as well. At times there is also a performative aspect to restitution in such institutions. For instance, in 2018 the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York hosted a public ceremony for the return of the Renoir painting *Deux femmes dans un jardin* to Sylvie Sulitzer, heir of Alfred and Marie Weinberger, who had owned the art until

11 Viviana Zelizer (1985), in her seminal cultural sociological work *Pricing the Priceless Child. The Changing Social Value of Children*, writes of the rise of framing children as 'priceless' as a modern cultural phenomenon. Just as the child's worth cannot be measured in fiscal terms, restituted art has increasingly been culturally framed as 'priceless'.

its looting in 1941 from their Parisian collection. Sulitzer described this moment of restitution as one of '[h]uge emotion, but not especially for the painting [...] It's more the symbol of the justice, and the huge work that everybody did to make this day possible' (Glassman 2018).

Conclusion: rethinking Jewish cultural heritage

Objects of restitution have been at the centre of scholarly work on the restitution of Nazi-era looted art and artefacts, with topics such as the motivation of looting, provenance, and legal regimes. Yet the actors involved in restitution, Jewish actors in particular, have been largely left out of the story. This is again at least in part a disciplinary issue, since the scholarship on restitution has been generally relegated to the fields of law, history, and art history. The disciplines of sociology and anthropology are better positioned to explore agency, networks, and meaning and are therefore apt at tracing, describing, and analysing the mechanics of human interaction. Silence surrounding the role of Jewish actors may also be due, in part, to their overwhelming framing as victims in the post-Holocaust world and the silencing of the generation that experienced the Holocaust first-hand (Anderson 2003).

An actor-centric approach as put forward in this article is at its heart an agency-centric approach, showing how those at the social margins put pressure on – and thereby transform – the centre. Such agency relates restitution directly to heritage, here the re-emplacement of both looted/lost/hidden/erased objects and actors in the post-Holocaust world. Jewish actors laid the foundations of the restitution field in the early decades after the Holocaust and World War II – as individuals (often lawyers) and through Jewish organisations. They have also instigated the reform of the restitution field, leading to its moralisation and globalisation, highlighting the many, often complex cases that cross international boundaries and that may not be easily or sufficiently dealt with through (national) law.

This article identifies the pressing need to rethink the nexus of restitution and Jewish cultural heritage, moving beyond seeing it in terms of the relationship between a minority and the state. It has done so by suggesting that Jewish actors, both individual and institutional, filled a void after the Holocaust and World War II, thus pioneering the restitution field; and that Jewish cultural brokers have been equally formative to moralising and globalising shifts in this field – beyond the individual state and beyond the law as the singular place of redress. Such an approach has shown how involving Jewish actors who experienced looting (or their heirs) – their voices and also their (desired) actions – in a process of restitution also paves the way for alternatives to a simple and singular return of an object, such as the return of subjects to history. For instance, telling the stories of families whose lives were lost during the Holocaust, as per the recent case of the *Girl Lying in*

Grass, is an alternative form of restitution; ceremonies of return, whether the object stays in a museum or not, also speak to the vitality of recognition and to the ways in which different spaces can be re-thought as part of the larger restitution field. As Guttsman explained of a course on restitution offered at Freie Universität Berlin that she is attending and that discusses the case of her family:

You can hand me a two million painting back, but it wouldn't come close to sitting in a classroom at the Freie Universität and seeing a wall-sized photograph of my great-grandfather projected in front of us. In that moment, the schism in history was coming back together [...] It's healing.

Restitution at once informs and is itself a form of Jewish cultural heritage work, specifically when it is reconsidered as not only a stolen object's return but also as an active process – what Jones and Yarrow (2022) reference as a 'heritage practice'. Such a practice of return entails various forms of reclamation and restoration: giving voice, enacting agency, and ultimately re-inscribing into history the lives lost or marginalised (and the objects they held and which, in turn, hold their stories). Restitution as a practice, that is restitution in action, requires a better understanding of the actors who have shaped the field over time – here Jewish cultural brokers who asserted agency in and from the margins, often in and from exile. These cultural brokers recognised the globality and the morality of restitution as an ongoing process in the post-Holocaust world – disfigured and reconfigured as it is. In so doing, they became practitioners not only of law, research, or art history but also of Jewish heritage.

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