STOLEN SILVER

By Dina Gold

In early January 2020, Naomi Karp from Washington, D.C., was vacationing in Mexico City when she opened her laptop over breakfast one morning to find "this crazy email from a curator in Germany." Matthias Weniger of the Bavarian National Museum in Munich had written:

"We have in our museum a silver cup that Hermine Bernheimer had to hand in to the German authorities in 1939 as part of the anti-Jewish persecution. We would dearly like to return this and other similar objects to the family."

Naomi forwarded Weniger's email to her cousin, Ellen Kandell, in Silver Spring, Maryland, who was equally astonished. "I felt a sudden, deep connection to my mother's experience as a Holocaust refugee," she says.

Naomi and Ellen are the granddaughters of Eugen Bernheimer, a once successful liqueur manufacturer and wholesaler in Göppingen, Baden-Württemberg, in southern Germany. Hermine was his sister.

In 1920 Hermine had left her hometown of Göppingen to live with her widowed older sister, Rosa, in Munich. In the late 1930s, Eugen (after release from incarceration in Dachau), his wife and one daughter immigrated to New York. Two older daughters had preceded them. Rosa and Hermine were always referred to in the family as "the sisters left behind." Only Rosa would survive the war.

But what was a Munich museum curator doing with a cup once owned by their grandfather's sister—their great aunt, a tragic victim of the Holocaust? And why had it taken over 80 years since she had been forced to relinquish it for anyone to offer to return it to the family? It would take two and a half years more for the process to conclude.

As it turns out, Hermine's cup was not the only item Weniger was trying to give back. He was attempting to trace the heirs to no less than 112 silver items, tucked away in a cupboard in the Bavarian National Museum, which had been taken away from their previous owners during the Third Reich.

Much has been written about valuable artworks the Nazis infamously stole from Jews across Europe, which today attract worldwide press attention when offered for sale. Pieces such as Gustav Klimt's "Woman in Gold" ($135 million), Vincent van Gogh's "Meules de Blé" ($35.8 million), and Camille Pissarro's "Gelée Blanche, Jeune Paysanne Faisant du Feu" ($17.3 million).

None of the silver objects held by the Bavarian National Museum will ever make the front pages or attract the attention of the big auction houses. But the history of how these objects came to be in the museum's possession is heartbreaking. No price can be put on their emotional value for the heirs of their former owners. Most tragically, in some cases, these small silver objects are the only link to a person or family whose existence was erased.

Spanning Countries and Continents

In Bilbao, Spain, Jorge Feuchtwanger thought he might be the target of a fraudster when, in early September 2020, he received an email in Spanish from Weniger, asking if he was a descendant of Jirko Feuchtwanger and inform-

Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org/Avda

Munich's Bavarian National Museum is known for its decorative arts collections, among the largest and most important in Europe. Before the onset of World War II, curators acquired 322 silver Judaica and table top items, which the Nazis forcibly procured from Jewish owners.

In 2019 the museum published a lavish catalogue containing detailed descriptions and photos alongside an exhibition entitled "Silver for the Reich. Jewish-owned silver objects at the Bavarian National Museum."

The museum uploaded onto the internet photos and documents relating to the 112 objects hoping families researching their ancestors might chance upon this information and get in touch, but only a tiny number did.

Weniger, who is head of provenance research at the museum, obtained funding from the German Lost Art Foundation (about $100,000) and the Bavarian State Ministry for Science and Art (about $50,000) to trace descendants of former owners. Using various online and other sources, he identified about 65 families (some 61 from Munich and four from other parts of Bavaria) with a rightful claim to the 112 objects and established contact with most of them.

As of July 2022, nine families had received their restituted objects.

Eighteen families have promises of restitution from the lawyer at the Bavarian State Ministry for Science and Art, (of which 13 cases were released already before reporting on this story intervened, including Haas and Birnbaum; but Karp—Hermine's cup—and Jorge Feuchtwanger's dish were more recently approved).

"For many," Weniger explained on a Zoom call from Munich, "the object itself is less important than the discovery of new family members."

Due to Nazi persecution, people scattered across the world and often lost contact. "When I started, I didn't think so many heirs would be found," Weniger says.

The process of restitution, however, has dragged on. After their initial excitement, many families have been profoundly disappointed at the pace. Heirs must provide documents—ideally wills, and marriage, birth and death certificates. Weniger says the museum is lenient on what documents must be submitted but is scrupulous in identifying all the potential heirs—in some cases, up to 30. All must agree on what should be done with the object and identify one family representative to sign authorization letters.

Logjam at the Ministry

Weniger collates the paperwork and then passes it to the museum's lawyer, who checks it and forwards it to yet another lawyer at the Bavarian State Ministry of Science and the Arts before an item can be released. In some instances, people have had to wait well over a year for approvals.

Jorge Feuchtwanger's file was sent to the Ministry lawyer in October 2020, and the legal release did not come until late March 2022. "We started this process when my father was alive," he said. "He died in March 2021, and I'm sure it would have meant something to him."

Since Naomi Karp received that first email from Munich, she has employed the same internet search tools as Weniger and, to her delight, discovered 15 extended family members in Australia and two in the United States. But her joy was tempered by her frustration with the Ministry, which received her file in April 2021.

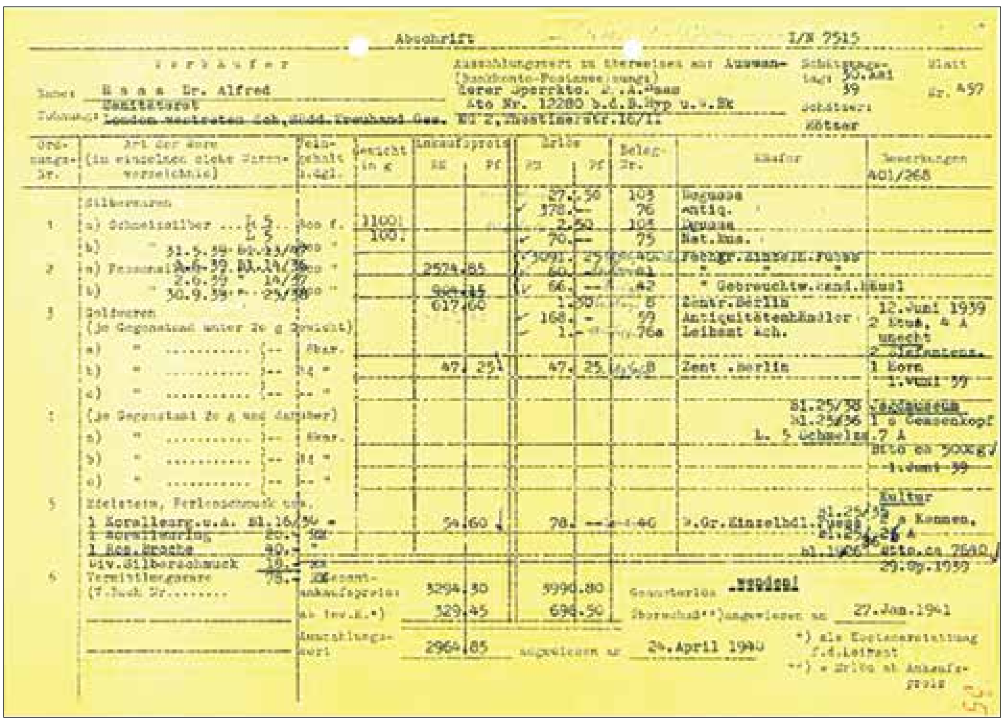
"My two aunts are no longer alive, and it would have meant so much to them," she said. "My mother has advanced dementia and knows nothing about this. It didn't have to be this way. It is a small piece of justice that could have been provided to them."

Photo credit: Courtesy David Haas

David Haas' grandfather, physician Alfred Haas, escaped from Germany to England in 1938. One year later, he and his wife, Elsa, settled in New York.

Photo credit: Bayerisches Nationalmuseum/Bastian Krack

Among their possessions was a small 19th century centerpiece, possibly one of a pair, which may have decorated a luncheon or dinner table. Swan motifs dominate both the glass bowl and the silver mount.



Abschrift I/N 7515

Name: Haas Dr. Alfred

Ato Nr. 12280

Schätzer: Kötter

Nr. 497

401/268

Silberwaren

Goldwaren

(je Gegenstand unter 20 g Gewicht)

(je Gegenstand 20 g und darüber)

Gebrauchtw.

Zentr. Berlin

Antiquitätenhändler

Leihamt

12. Juni 1939

Zent. Berlin

1. Juni 39

L. 5 Schmelze

Kultur

29.09.1939

3294.30

3990.80

329.45

696.50

27. Jan. 1941

2964.85

24. April 1940

Photo credit: Kunstverwaltung des Bundes, Berlin

The 1939 pawnshop dealer's form listing property submitted by the "Suddeutsche Treuhand Geselschaft" (South German Caretaking Company), on behalf of Dr. Haas, legitimizing the theft. Dr. and Mrs. Haas might have been ordered to leave their possessions behind as a condition of immigration.

Photo credit: courtesy of Naomi Karp

Photo credit: Katharina Sophia Hardt

Years before she and her sister were imprisioned in Theresienstadt in 1942, the great aunt of Naomi Karp and Ellen Kandell, Hermine Bernheimer, surrendered an 18th century partially gilded engraved silver beaker to the Nazis. It was accessioned by The Bavarian National Museum in 1940. Hermine was murdered in October 1943. Through the efforts of Curator and Head of Provenance Research Matthias Weniger, ownership was restored to Karp and Kandell, who donated it to the Göppingen Jewish Museum. Family members around the world witnessed the online presentation ceremony on July 25, when Weniger (right) presented Hermine's beaker to Dominik Gerd Sieber, head of the museums and archives of Göppingen. In her remarks, Karp thanked B'nai B'rith Magazine and writer Dina Gold for assisting in the transfer.

Why does it take so long? Bureaucratic hurdles, it seems, and funding.

B'nai B'rith approached the Bavarian State Ministry for Science and Art to interview the minister and lawyer responsible. The Ministry responded by email on March 4, 2022, that "we strive to accelerate the procedure of restitution as much as possible without falling short of the high diligence standard required by the legal framework." The unit was dealing "with an unusually high number of restitution cases," but "we currently are aiming at positively closing as many cases as possible in a very timely manner."

Another email response on March 18 cited the need to confirm that "the prerequisites for a restitution are met," and "the beneficiaries of the restitution (respectively the signatories of the restitution agreement) are indeed to be considered as the legal successors of the former owners."

By the end of March, approval was given for restitution of several pending files on the lawyer's desk, including the Karp and Feuchtwanger cases.

Although funding has been provided for research, none had been provided to complete the task of physically returning objects.

As long ago as April 2020, David Haas received approval from the Ministry for the restitution of his grandparents' glass and silver bowl. But it was still sitting in Munich as of August 2022. "The Nazis stole it, and you'd think the German government should take full responsibility to return it," he says. What perplexes him is that "they went to the bother of funding the determination of ownership, so why not finish it by completing the task?"

The Bavarian Ministry, having partly funded Weniger's research, said the museum was "in charge of putting into effect the single restitutions."

In early March, B'nai B'rith requested an interview with Frank Matthias Kammel, general director of the Bavarian National Museum.

On March 21, Kammel responded by email that funding remains an issue. He stressed that it would be "irresponsible" to use regular mail "simply because these objects are not our property." It was essential that "the best possible care" be used and that these objects needed to be shipped "like every work of art in our possession." He ended with assurances that he was "convinced that we will very soon have found suitable solutions."

Photo credit: courtesy of David Birnbaum

This footed drinking cup was crafted in 1743 by Christian Franck in Augsburg, known for the production of silver, including Judaica. It is one of three Munich Museum pieces that belonged to David Birnbaum's grandmother, Fanny Feust, and great grandmother, Friederike Feust, (seated, right). Although both escaped to England, Fanny was killed in London by German bombs in 1940.

The German Lost Art Foundation, which helped fund the research, operates the Lost Art Database of cultural property seized between 1933-1945 and provides advice, mediation and support to institutions and individuals relating to looted works. In April, the foundation told Weniger that some of the money allocated to him for research could now be used for the physical restitution of objects.

For Birnbaum in Rehovot, when he comes to finally hold his grandmother's and great-grandmother's silverware, it will feel as if history "has come full circle." He says it will be like "a hello across the chasm of time."

All of Hermine Bernheimer's inheritors met on Zoom and together decided to donate the cup, whenever it was restituted, to the small Jewish Museum in Göppingen where, sadly, no Jewish community currently exists. The museum, which opened in 1992, was keen to accept it. "I would like to make a family trip and see the cup appropriately displayed alongside its history" says Ellen Kandell.

Intriguingly, far from being connected to Jewish religious observance, Hermine's silver-marked cup bears an inscription denoting that it was made for the occasion of the baptism of Johanna Magdalena Steydelin, born on May 2, 1706, and donated by her godfather, Samson Tercelat. How, and why, it came into her possession will likely forever remain a mystery.

Finally, on July 25, Weniger presented Hermine's cup to Dominik Gerd Sieber, Göppingen city archivist and head of the Jewish Museum. Family members watched on Zoom, from the United States, Australia and Germany.

Photo credit: courtesy of Jorge Feuchtwanger

Above: German dignitaries were in attendance during a ceremony on May 13, 2022, when Weniger restored the bowl to Feuchtwanger (left) and his family. The event (in German) can be viewed at: bit.ly/3DdRd6q
Right: Therese Lippmann, killed in Theresienstadt in 1942, owned a footed bowl and lid with a pineapple-shaped knob from Nürnberg, another important silver city, dating from the late 18th century. In September 2020, Weniger contacted Lippmann's great-great-grandson, Jorge Feuchtwanger, about the bowl and other pieces in the museum collection.

Photo credit: © State Archive, Munich

Sieber said the donation will become part of the museum's permanent exhibit alongside an explanation of its history.

Naomi Karp thanked B'nai B'rith Magazine for hastening the return of Hermine's cup and recognizing the importance of its restitution. Adding "this little cup, its history mostly unknown, could keep the legacy of Göppingen's Jews alive." She also praised Weniger's "tremendous dedication to undoing the wrongs of the past."

For Weniger, the mission to return these silver items to the families has become personal. "It's very late, but better to do this now than never," he says. "It's been satisfying for me to do something to heal some wounds after such a long time."