

FACTS, PROJECTIONS, VOIDS: MILESTONES OF AUSTRIAN JEWISH HISTORY

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Not even the largest exhibition would be able to cover Austrian-Jewish History in its entirety, and of course, this short paper cannot provide a complete survey of the more than eight centuries of Jewish life in Austria either. A lot of research has been done especially since the so called Bedenkjahr 1988, 50 years after the “Anschluss” and shortly after the heavy debates around the NS-past of Kurt Waldheim, then president of Austria. The amount of data is huge, thousands of documents from the Middle Ages up to present were edited, hundreds of Audio- and Video-interviews were recorded, and dozens of books were published. Preparing this paper, I had to make up my mind and select events that, according to scientific common sense, and in my personal opinion, were milestones in the course of this history, positive or negative ones.

Of course, I am not the first who tried to solve the problem in this way. This very place was the location of an impressive way to structure and present Jewish Austrian history. I am talking about the opening exhibition of the Jewish Museum Vienna, which was shown from 21.11. 1993 till 15. Mai 1994, almost exactly nineteen years ago. As many of you probably remember, the title was “Hier hat Teitelbaum gewohnt” – “Teitelbaum lived here”, curated by then chief curator Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, accompanied by a beautiful catalogue of unusual size. (Slide) The collection of the Jewish Museum Vienna consists of more than 10.000 objects and documents, one of the biggest and most important Jewish collections in Europe. Heimann-Jelinek’s concept to master this abundance was simple: She only chose one significant object for each period or topic, no more than 30 objects altogether, placed on a huge city map of Vienna on the floor – an idea which, in the meantime, has been copied several times. Considering the many exhibitions overloaded with objects and documents, Heimann’s reduction was radical and provocative. The exhibition was discussed and highly appreciated internationally.

Therefore I didn't have to reinvent the wheel and structured my short overview of Austrian Jewish history according to some objects taken from the Teitelbaum exhibition. Of course, a lot of research has been done in the last 19 years, discoveries of new sources, better insights and new methods and questions, like gender, cultural transfer, hybridity, interwovenness of cultures, and more. Like a material object, a historical event is also perceived in different ways by its contemporaries, and even more by the projections of the following generations. The interpretation and meaning of an object, as well as of the past, is in the eye of the beholder, depending on his or her identity, own history, prejudices, and point of view. The perception changes according to the increasing knowledge, reconsideration, reflection and conscience of the perceiver. Heimann-Jelinek made this basic insight visible via a permanent installation of holograms which contained pictures of the icons of Austrian Jewish history, giving only an illusion of their reality, appearing, disappearing and changing with every little move of the observer (SLIDE) – an approach towards history and museology that had not lost and will never lose its actuality. I am following this approach by trying to narrate Austrian Jewish history under different aspects: the inner Jewish or the Christian perspectives, and, where it makes sense, the combination and interdependence of both sides. The fourth aspect is the awareness of voids: sources as well as objects tell a story of power; voices of women, children, lower class, protest movements, suppressed opposition and resistance and many more – remain silent. We can hardly reconstruct their history, but we at least can make note of their presence in the past.

I. Following the Teitelbaum exhibition, I choose a chronological order and start with a famous fragment, the Ketubba of Krems of 1391, Jewish year 5152. (SLIDE) It is the only extant Medieval Ashkenazi Ketubba, and the only figuratively illuminated one. Its formula tells us about Jewish law and custom from Talmudic times to the present, its decoration in Bohemian drawing style expresses shared culture, taste and fashion. The patrons, Shalom bar Menachem and his bride Zemach bat Aron, certainly belonged to the Jewish upper class of Medieval Austria, most probably even to one of the leading Rabbinical families. Their ketubba shows self-assurance of both the groom and the bride, and the delight in representation, in competition, but also in connection and communication with their Christian neighbours of the same economical level. We don't know if the artist was Christian or Jewish, and we don't know to which audience the Ketubba was presented. But we know

from other cities, that Christians, especially the noble and patrician business partners, indeed were invited to Jewish weddings. It was not necessary to read Hebrew; the illuminations were the perfect visiting card for both Jewish and Christian guests. Besides, the Jewish hat here is a freely chosen symbol of Jewish identity and underlines the dignity of its bearded wearer with his precious fur coat and huge wedding ring. The fact that this beautiful parchment was cut to pieces to be used for the binding of a Christian book reflects the end of the thriving and famous medieval Jewish community in the brutal pogrom of the so-called Viennese Gesera, disaster, of 1421. 200 wealthy Jews, men and women, were tortured and burned at the stake, among them probably the offspring of this couple. The other 800 Jews of Vienna and Lower Austria were expelled. Since you will visit the Museum Judenplatz during this conference, I leave my beloved Medieval times and forward to the next milestone.

II. (SLIDE) This is one of initially nine border stones marking the corners of the second Jewish quarter from 1624 to 1671. While the first Medieval Jewish quarter, Judenstadt, was not a ghetto, this one, 200 years later, deserved the name. No Christians lived inside its walls, no Jew was allowed to live outside, in the city of Vienna. The quarter was located in the so called Untere Werd, a swimming island between the branches of the river Danube, today Vienna's fancy second district. From that time onwards it continuously had a Jewish population, even during the Nazi period. The number of houses grew from 24 in 1624 up to 132 at the eve of the expulsion in 1671. At this time approximately 2000 to 3000 people lived in this Jewish town, well organised, even with their own garbage removal, and a prison. As you see, even this simple border stone with its height of 1 meter aboveground marks the encounter of Jews and Christians, here in the field of property law. The year is given according to both the Christian and the Jewish calendar; it shows the Magen David of the *Kehila*, the Jewish community, and the cross of the hospital of St. Marx, the owner of the district. This second Jewish town was populated by famous court Jews, even two female ones, wealthy moneylenders, merchants, doctors and astronomers, scholars, rabbis and cabbalists, led by Shabtai Sheftel Horowitz, whose grave at the oldest Jewish cemetery in Vienna 9, Seegasse 9, still attracts pilgrims. (SLIDE). I am not sure if the restoration of the cemetery is already done, so just in case, I show you a picture of the graves of the famous *parnassim*, leaders, of this community. (SLIDE) The Viennese Judenstadt also was the

rabbinical and administrative centre of the rural settlements in Lower Austria. At the time of the Teitelbaum exhibition, almost no research had been done yet on the rural Jews of Lower Austria. As Barbara Staudinger has found out, more than 70 Jewish communities and settlements existed in Lower Austria, consisting of only one up to 24 families. We know, however, how much tax these people paid and that they had every day contacts and conflicts, even scuffles with their Christian neighbours. But we don't know how they practiced kashrut and the holidays in the middle of a totally Christian environment, many kilometres away from any Jewish infrastructure. We know more about the big networks of both trade and scholarship, which reached from Germany, Hungary, Moravia and Bohemia eastward to Galicia, Poland and Lithuania. The expulsion of this community in 1671 was caused by the pressure of the estates and the burgers of Vienna. This time no Jew was murdered, most of them went to the neighbouring territories, where they either settled in existing communities or founded new ones. The strong family ties and contacts between Austria and the other Habsburg territories started at this time. The modern Jewish community of Berlin was founded by Viennese Jews, as was Sulzbach and other centres of pre-modern Judaism. After a very short time, Emperor Leopold I. regretted this expulsion and gave special permission to prominent and wealthy Jews to settle in Vienna, in exchange for financing his politics, wars, and luxurious court life.

III. One of these wealthy and outstanding personalities was Samson Wertheimer, born in Worms in 1658. The Teitelbaum exhibition did not show his famous portrait, but this nice *aron ha-kodesch* in Wertheimer's possession (SLIDE). After the death of his forerunner and uncle Samuel Oppenheimer, Wertheimer was appointed chief agent of the court (Hoffaktor). As chief administrator of the financial affairs of Emperor Leopold I., Joseph I., and Charles VI. Wertheimer financed the Spanish War of Succession and the war against Turkey, and he fulfilled diplomatic tasks such as negotiating royal dowries etc. It seems like a contradiction, though a characteristic one, that the same deeply catholic Emperor, Leopold I., who had expelled his Jews from Vienna, completely trusted one of their representatives.

In the last ten years, research on court Jews has been intensified mainly from the point of view of cultural innovation and exchange with the Christian nobility. This is also true for Wertheimer, as we can conclude from his habitus on this picture (SLIDE), but we don't know very much about his private environment. He was related to the most important court Jew

families of his time, one central knot in a widespread network of money and power on the one hand, and a main target for anti Jewish attacks and endangerment on the other hand. A rabbi's son and scholar himself, he left us some manuscripts of Halacha, Midrash and kabala and even some response. For his re-establishing of destroyed Jewish communities and building of synagogues, one still extant in Eisenstadt, he received the title "Landesrabbiner", "territorial rabbi of Hungary", and other honours, perpetuated on his gravestone in the Seegasse cemetery, now restored. (SLIDE)

But all his influence, wealth and honour did not give him the permission to buy his own house and to establish a Jewish community. He lived in the so-called Mätz house, which must have been large, because court Jew's households could consist of up to 60 people. Hardly anything is known about his religious customs. His landlady remembered the quiet and unremarkable way of the "old Wertheimer", building his Sukkah on the roof of her house and celebrating the feast of tabernacles. (SLIDE) Obviously, this ritual performed in the public space of a house roof was observed by the Christian neighbours, the decoration and the food was seen, the prayers and songs were heard. Even a family so distinct by religion, status and habits lived in constant closeness to Christian society.

His son Wolf shared the fate of many court Jews, he went bankrupt in 1733, because Bavaria refused to pay its debts. Samuel Oppenheimer also had left his family in poverty. No member of a court Jew family succeeded in obtaining the right to a permanent stay in Vienna and to establish a Jewish community. In this respect, the Baroque period was more restrictive than the medieval conditions.

IV. This situation did not change by the Edicts of Toleration, although they were a veritable milestone for the whole monarchy. Emperor Joseph II. abolished the serfdom of farmers, attempted to reduce the influence of nobility and clergy and permitted the free practice of religion to the Protestant and Greek Orthodox denominations. He introduced drastic reforms in the areas of education and science, art and law that have been influential up to today. In his Edict of Toleration for the Jews of Vienna and Lower Austria from 1782, Joseph II stressed that the founding of new communities was by no means wanted and that further on only individual families would be privileged. He allowed Jews neither a public synagogue nor their own printing office; each single import of Jewish books had to be sanctioned and

was censored. Further, the moving in of Jews from the Monarchy to Vienna continued to be restricted as the number of Jews was not to increase. In the case of a permitted settlement, a special fee, the "*Toleranzgebühr*" was to be paid. The Teitelbaum exhibition showed the permission of a 14-day stay for a Jew from Pressburg (SLIDE), Hundreds of documents of this kind are preserved in the Archives of Lower Austria, for men and women alike. The bribes to get these permissions were a profitable source of income for the emperor's officials. New research shows, how the permissions of long-term residence with their extensive questionnaires transported images and fantasies. The officials got guidelines, how a Jew was supposed to look like: dark curly hair, long nose, watery eyes – it was not Der Stürmer who invented this caricatures.

The Edict of Toleration allowed a permanent settlement only for founders of a factory or trade. Some pioneers used this opportunity and migrated to lower Austria and to the villages surrounding the city of Vienna, today districts. Wealthier Jews who ran any other business had to pay their regular tolerance tax. If the head of the household lost his income or died, the family lost the right of residence and had to leave the city. Jews of lower classes just got daily permissions or tried to somehow get in illegally. Their existence becomes visible only in court files.

V. But there was another Jewish group living in Austria who got much better privileges, permanent residence and the right to found a community. I am speaking of the Turkish-Sephardic Jews, citizens of the Ottoman Empire. In 1718, the peace treaty between Emperor Charles VI. and Sultan Achmed Chan ended the wars between Austria and Turkey; it ensured mutual protection, so that Austrians could settle in the Turkish Empire and Turks in the Habsburg monarchy. Some twenty Turkish-Jewish families founded a community here, with their own customs and rabbinate, newspapers in their language Ladino and a beautiful synagogue in the Zirkusgasse, second district. Actually, they hardly intermingled with the Ashkenazi Jewish society (think of Canetti's autobiography). After the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde was officially constituted in 1852, a lot of Sephardic archive material disappeared, nobody knows whereto. As Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek has researched, the founding fathers of the first Jewish Museum in Vienna rarely collected Sephardic objects. This policy of exclusion lead to a void in the general and even in the Jewish history of Vienna.

For the Teitelbaum exhibition, the museum borrowed this beautiful Parochet, 350 by 220 centimetres, (SLIDE) made in 1857 by Carl Ciani Jr., initially for the Sephardic synagogue of Vienna. It was lost in the war and later showed up in the Israel museum in Jerusalem.

VI. The revolution of 1848 was a big step towards civil rights, freedom of speech, reform of the election system and equal rights for the Jews. Jews were among the fighters in the National guards (SLIDE), proved by this sabre of a certain “Frankl” – I assume, it belonged to the journalist Ludwig August Frankl, later secretary of the Jewish community, who fought in the student’s legion and composed a revolution hymn named *Die Universität*. In 2010, Wolfgang Gasser, staff member of our institute, edited a diary written in German but with Hebrew letters, covering the time between 27. August 1848 and 31. May 1850, written by a – at this point – unknown Viennese Jew. It was found at the waste disposal site of Bad Zell in Upper Austria: an attentive employee had pulled the inconspicuous volume (SLIDE) from a garbage heap. The book eventually came into the monastery library of Melk and was forwarded to our institute. The diary's author, who has been identified as Benjamin Bernhard Kewall from Polna/Bohemia, offers an extensive description, allowing a new view on the events in Vienna in 1848. You can download the original from the Austrian National Library website, have fun. (SLIDE) On his densely written 368 pages, Benjamin Kewall rarely mentioned women, and when so, never by name. Perhaps this is symptomatic. Together with Joan Kelly-Gadol, who asked in her famous article in 1987: Did women have a Renaissance?, , we can consequently ask: Did women have a Revolution, did women, Christian or Jewish, benefit from its achievements? Although women took an active part in the revolutionary movements and actions, the answer is certainly negative.

After a few setbacks, the Basic laws (Staatsgrundgesetze) of December 1867 finally gave full equal rights to all subjects of the monarchy, without distinction of religion, but indeed with distinction of sex. For Jews, this meant first of all unrestricted migration to the capital and to other attractive towns. The Jewish population of Vienna increased from 109 tolerated families in 1804 (0,5 % of the entire population) to 2700 local and 14.800 foreign Jews in the middle of the 19th century, and after the Staatsgrundgesetze to 73.000 in 1880, which was 10 per cent of the total population. In 1910, 175.300 Jews were counted in Vienna (of 1 Million 300.000 in the Austrian half of the Monarchy), and this number did not change very

much in the following twenty years. In 1934, there were 191.000 Jews living in the first republic of Austria, 176.000 in Vienna. 34 Jewish communities, Kultusgemeinden, provided the infrastructure for Jewish life.

VII. The variety of religious, political, cultural, and social involvement was enormous. After the Anschluss in March 1938, the Jewish associations had to be registered: 559 Jewish associations were active or at least officially existing. 78 were so called *Betvereine*, prayer associations who had synagogues or *stibln*, prayer rooms. One third of the associations were devoted to welfare. 57 associations were conducted by Zionistic movements. The Jewish soldiers of World War I had founded the *Bund jüdischer Frontsoldaten* and continued their fight, this time against Anti-Semitic propaganda. In the second district alone, you could find 6 Synagogues, 33 Prayer houses, 14 Hebrew and Bible schools, 5 libraries, 25 kindergartens and charity associations (for Eastern Jews, impoverished traders, Talmud students, widows, poor brides etc.), 9 charity kitchens, 5 women's societies and about 20 other associations (Youth, sports, Zionistic, religious). 5 theatres had a Yiddish program, to a great part frequented by Non- Jews. Among this great number and variety of commitments, the Teitelbaum exhibition chose the Jewish sports club Hakoah (SLIDE), which not only strengthened body and mind, but also was of eminent importance in the fight against Anti-Semitism. The diversity of Jewish culture and religion varied from orthodoxy and Chassidism, whose members would not pray in the Seitenstettengasse synagogue, to the modest reform practiced there. There were even synagogues with an organ. Jews were politically active, some of them prominent leaders in the left wing political parties. Individual acculturation ranged from participation to non-Jewish, bourgeois or rural culture (SLIDE) to the total abandonment of Jewish religion. These Jews were hit particularly hard by the Nurnberg laws.

VIII. As you all are familiar with the history, research, memories, testimonies and some of you even with family experience of the Shoah, I want to restrict my information only to bare figures. Perhaps this approach seems cold and distanced, but we are all aware that behind each figure stands a human being and a fate. To symbolize the masses of victims on the one hand and the individual on the other, Heimann-Jelinek chose an object which she had discovered in the inventories of the Kultusgemeinde, a bale of cloth to cut out the Yellow star. (SLIDE) Vienna was a trendsetter in the Nazi policy of extinction: One year after the

“Anschluss”, 96 per cent of the Jewish population had lost their property and income. In the “Aryanised” Rothschild palace in Prinz Eugen Straße (later destroyed by bombs), Adolf Eichmann, as a role model for Nazi-Germany, established his *Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung*; whoever could flee, did so, until the outbreak of the war cut off the escape routes. As early as October 1940 Reich governor Baldur von Schirach suggested deporting the Viennese Jews to Poland. By then, around 130.000 Jews had already left Austria, but more than 16.600 of them were caught in Nazi occupied territories and murdered. In February 1941 the deportations started, organised by Adolf Eichmann with the enforced cooperation of the Jewish community. After these first transports, the Jewish population was concentrated in the 9th, 2nd, and 20th districts. Altogether, around 65.500 Jews and persons of Jewish origin were murdered. You can find their names and basic information in the database of the Documentation archive of the Austrian Resistance, *Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstands*, DOEW (www.doew.at). At the end of the war, 8000 Jewish men and women had officially survived in Vienna, an estimated number of 300 to 600 had been hidden by non-Jewish saviours as so called “submarines”. After this attempt of extinction, the problems to start a new life were two fold: the survivors were physically and mentally traumatised, without possessions and financial support, and had to confront the murder of their relatives and friends. Furthermore they could not count on empathy and understanding from the non-Jewish society: A survey in August 1946 showed, that 46 per cent of the questioned Viennese did not want the Jews to come back. The common parlance is significant: Soldiers came “home” from war captivity and were called “Heimkehrer”. Opposed to that, the expelled Jews came “back” and were “Rückkehrer”. The private opinions reflected Austria’s official policy, which saw itself as Hitler’s first victim and focused on its own suffering. Austrians did not want to be reminded of everyone’s collective and individual perpetration. This mechanism of suppression was only broken after the scandal around Waldheim’s concealment of his SS-past.

The Teitelbaum exhibition closed with a painting of Georg Chaimowitz, a Heimkehrer from Argentina. (SLIDE) He called it “Surface”, the exhibition titled it “The white void”, *Die weiße Leere*. Kurt Schubert’s association in the catalogue was: “Judaism is scepticism without resignation”, but every visitor was invited to have his or her own allusions.

For many years, the Jewish community did not believe in its own future, symbolized by giving its archives, dating back to the 17th century, to the Central Archives of Jewish People in Jerusalem. Now, there is a lawsuit going on to get them back – a good sign, in my opinion. A few days ago, 7000 community members elected their managing committee. The competing groups reflect the variety of origin, political opinion, and religious orientation of the community. Compared to the past, the Kultusgemeinde is just a fractional part of the former institution, but it is a vibrant community with a good educational system, care for the elderly, and cultural life. Therefore I would not want to end this paper with a void, but I will close with a picture taken by Harry Weber: At the site of the central part of the huge Leopoldstädter Temple, destroyed in November 1938, Jewish kids are playing football, guarded by an Austrian policeman. (SLIDE)

Please allow me a Postscript:

Walking in the Viennese Neubaugasse one month ago, suddenly this poster caught my eye. (SLIDE) Certainly, for the majority of pedestrians it was just an exotic artistic design, or perhaps some people identified it as Hebrew scripture. But the advertising column is placed across the Levantine Israeli restaurant Maschu maschu, so at least some staff members and guests could probably read this question: lama yesh museyonim yehudi'im? Why are there Jewish Museums? Or, in another translation: What are Jewish museums for? I hope this conference will provide inspiration to answer this question.