



Jewish Country Houses and the Holocaust in History and Memory



In early May, the JCH travelled to Brno, Czech Republic, for a three day conference on the topic of “Jewish Country Houses and the Holocaust in History and Memory.” In Brno, 51 delegates had the opportunity to gather at the Methodological Center of Modern Architecture (MCMA) and meet with colleagues across academic, heritage and arts sectors and from Europe, America, and Israel, and engage with research and work that touched upon various aspects of the conference topic – such as the history of specific properties/country houses, memory and agency, representation and remembrance, and how to build bridges between the past and the present.

The conference was convened by Jaclyn Granick (Cardiff University, Wales), Cyril Grange (CNRS, France), Abigail Green (Oxford, United Kingdom) and Petr Svoboda (National Heritage Institute, Czech Republic), with support from Pavlína Petrová (Národní památkový ústav) and Briony Truscott (University of Oxford), in partnership with the National Heritage Institute NPÚ Czech Republic. The event ran as part of the “Politics and Philanthropy” strand of the Jewish Country Houses research project, which is funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, and received assistance from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany, support from the German Federal Ministry of Finance, and was sponsored by the Foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future.”

Some of the conference delegates started the first day (Wednesday May 12) of the conference with a visit to Synagogue Agudas Achim, where Jaroslav Klenovský introduced them to the history of the Synagogue and the Jewish community of Brno. The afternoon was structured around two panels. In the first one, “Spoliation,” chaired by Laura Hobson Faure (Université



Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, France), Cyril Grange presented several cases of French properties belonging to the Rothschild family, and demonstrated how some of these properties and their assets were appropriated and spoliated by the French State, not because the Rothschilds were Jewish, but because they had left France in the summer of 1940. Elyze Storms-Smeets' (Gelders Genootschap, Netherlands) presentation was centred around the results from the ongoing research project 'War in Arcadia' which looks at Dutch country houses during

World War II. Storms-Smeets analysed the histories of a selection of Jewish properties identified through the research project, and addressed the challenges of commemorating and preserving war-related heritage sites. The first panel concluded with Yehoshua Ecker's (University of Florida, United States) presentation on the turbulent fates of Jewish country houses, and their inhabitants, in eastern Galicia from the inter-war period to the post-war period. Among other things, Ecker analysed the different roles that properties played in "singling out their inhabitants for attacks, oppression, plunder and murder, and for preservation and protection." Following this, the delegates took a short stroll from the MCMA to the Vila Stiassni (constructed in 1927-1929) where they were guided on a tour about the history of the Stiassni family and the Villa, and their connections to the Jewish history and heritage of Brno.

Under the chair of Monica Bohm-Duchen (University of London, UK), the second panel, "Family Voices," centred around the personal stories and perspectives of the speakers, all of whom are second or third generation descendants of Holocaust survivors. Daria Martin's (Ruskin School of Art, Oxford, UK) presentation recounted the story of Martin's grandmother,



Susi Stiassni, and how sections of Stiassni's dream diaries, focusing especially on dreams featuring intruders in the Villa Stiassni, was used to recreate a "narrative of threat and escape that parallels Susi's lived experience" in Martin's 2019 film 'Tonight the World.' Daniel Low-Beer's (WHO) presentation was about the history of the family-owned Löw-Beer factory (later run by Oskar Schindler) in Brno. From this specific and personal case, Low-Beer's reflections extended to a more general question, which led to an engaging discussion, namely: "How do we bring a sense of newness to the past and to the restoration of

heritage sites?” Finally, Adam Ganz (Royal Holloway College, University of London, UK) spoke about the life of his great-grandfather, Felix Ganz, whose story is part of the *StoryFutures* project. Starting with a sketch sent by Felix Ganz to his daughter Annemarie in 1942, which represented the room Felix was living in with his wife in a so-called ‘JudenHaus’ in Mainz, Adam Ganz reconstructed the room using projected laser scanning. Ganz discussed how he considered the sketch as a portal to tell his great-grandfather story and honour his memory. The first day concluded at the loggia of Villa Stiassni with a screening of three films by Daria Martin, including the gripping and poignant work ‘Tonight the World.’

Chaired by Abigail Green (Oxford, United Kingdom), the second day (Thursday May 11th) began with the Keynote Lecture of Rebecca Clifford (Durham University, United Kingdom). Through the history of the Weir Courtney property, Clifford recounted the story of the Lingfield children, who had survived the Theresienstadt ghetto camp and immigrated to Great Britain at the end of World War II. More than just a simple refuge site, Weir Courtney was perceived by the staff members, who were trained in psychoanalysis, as a place of scientific experimentation, and by some of the children as a second home. Linked to this presentation, the third panel “Houses of Refuge,” chaired by Jaclyn Granick (Cardiff University, Wales), explored Jewish country houses from Italy, France, and Czechia from the perspective of rescue.



Luisa Levi D’Ancona Modena (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel) presented the history of the Villa Mayer (northern Italy), which sheltered hundreds of Jewish displaced persons (DPs) between 1945 and 1948, before they immigrated elsewhere. Levi D’Ancona Modena also discussed how most reconstructive studies in this area have overlooked the role Italian Jews played in assisting Jewish DPs, and how this perspective can enrich the history of Jewish heritage in Italy post-Holocaust. Michal Frankl (Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic) analysed the evolution of family residences and other socially privileged spaces, into places of refuge in Czechoslovakia in connection to Czechoslovakia (and several other countries) closing their borders to Jewish refugees fleeing persecution in 1938. Frankl highlighted that while the remaking of Jewish spaces during the Holocaust has already attracted interest of researchers, the consequences of refugee trajectories and their spatial experience still remain underexplored.

Laura Hobson Faure (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, France) discussed the history of the Château de la Guette, a Rothschild family hunting lodge turned into a refuge home for around 130 Jewish children from Germany and Austria in the spring of 1939. Hobson Faure analysed how the Château continued to shelter Jewish children under the impetus of progressive educators, following its requisitioning by a pro-Pétain organisation (the “Entr’aide d’hiver du Maréchal”), and its transformation into a home for Jewish orphans after the war.

The fourth panel, “Heritage from European houses – Telling Jewish Stories after the Holocaust,” chaired by Aubrey Pomerance (Head of Archives, Jewish Museum Berlin, Germany), looked at the histories of institutions in Ukraine, Poland, Austria, Germany and Great Britain. The panellists – Iryna Lozynska (Villa Gartenberg, Ukraine), Maria Krakowiak (Villa Żabiński, Poland), Joachim Zettl (Schloss Rothschild, Austria), Eliah Sakakushev-von Bismarck (Villa Seligmann, Germany), Lucy Armstrong-Blair (Croft Castle, UK) – recounted the histories of their properties, which functioned as both private family homes and places of business and entrepreneurship at different points in time, as well as the stories of the families who inhabited them. The panellists focused especially on the fate of the estates post-Holocaust,



and analysed what became of these family properties in the following decades and what significance they have in imparting Jewish heritage and history to the modern visitor of today, and how this connects to the collective memory of their respective countries, as well as the wider cultural landscape of the 21st century. Following the fourth panel, the delegates visited and toured Villa Löw-Beer, the Art Nouveau villa built in 1903-1904 for Moritz Fuhrmann and acquired in 1913 by Alfred Löw-Beer as the Löw-Beer family home, and Villa Tugendhat, one of the pioneering prototypes of modern architecture in Europe, and a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site (2001), which was built in 1929-1930 for Fritz Tugendhat and his wife Grete (née Löw-Beer).

The fifth panel, “Heritage from the Czech context,” chaired by Kateřina Báňová (National Heritage Institute, Czech Republic) and held at Villa Löw-Beer, centred around the histories of Jewish families, collections, and properties in the Czech Republic. The panellists – Petr Svoboda, Petr Czajkowski, Martin Šolc (all from the National Heritage Institute, Czech

Republic), Iveta Černá (Villa Tugendhat, Brno City Museum), and Kateřina Vajdánková, (Masaryk University) – discussed, among other things, the effects of occupation, confiscation, and spoliation during World War II, and the importance of examining and tracing the fates of individual people and property in order to preserve and perpetuate our collective memory. This panel opened into a discussion into the way in which Brno itself has addressed the memory of its former Jewish residents and the city’s relationship to surviving descendants. This led directly into a powerful performance of Hana Mikolášková’s “The Story of the Book” set in the hall of the



Villa Löw-Ber. The performance, introduced by Eva Yildizová (director of Štetl Fest, Brno) and Rabbi Štěpán Menashe Kliment (Brno Jewish community), connects uncountable stories of lives and objects irretrievably lost, through the nearly century-long story of the Strach family machzor, highlighting how a single object can become a signifier for the near destruction, and carry the memories of dispersion, of multiple generations.

The last day (Friday May 12th) began with the Keynote Presentation “Sixteen Objects: Rethinking Remembrance” from Ruth Ur (German section of Yad Vashem and urKultur). Ur presented the work underpinning the “Sixteen Objects” exhibition, which featured one Holocaust related object from each of the sixteen German states (*Länder*), that belonged to Jews who lived in Germany during World War II. Ur highlighted how collective and individual memories were intertwined in the exhibition, and how objects and exhibitions can create



bridges between the memories of the past and the present. The Keynote also served as an introduction to the ‘Memory Lies in the Objects’ – Workshop chaired by Jaclyn Granick, where the delegates were asked to focus on excavating Jewish traces after the Holocaust through objects of their own choosing. The objects were incredibly varied in nature, and the following discussions explored themes such as the dichotomy of presence and absence, prioritising inclusion and communication with Jewish communities and other stakeholders, and the importance of sensitivity in relation to intergenerational trauma.

The final panel of the conference, “Ruptures and Afterlives, East and West,” chaired by Tetyana Pavlush (Cardiff University, Wales), looked at the ruptures created by both the Holocaust and the Cold War in the history of Jewish country houses and their owners. Lucy Wasensteiner (Liebermann-Villa Am Wannsee, Berlin) explored the history of the Liebermann Villa, the summer house built for Max Liebermann and his family, from the Third Reich to the establishment of the Villa as a museum in the early 2000s. Wasensteiner also discussed the fate of the Liebermann art collection, and how post-war politics and the German government’s focus on holocaust memory and provenance research has, and continues to, impact the work at the Liebermann Villa. Finally, Tullia Catalan (University of Trieste, Italy) recounted the story of the Brunners, one of the most eminent families of the Trieste Jewish élite. Catalan discussed the fate of the family estate, the Villa Antonini-Brunner (Campolongo al Torre-Cavanzano, Italy), which was affected by the Nazi legislation put into place to facilitate seizures of Jewish properties. Catalan’s presentation also reflected on the decades following World War II in order to gain a deeper understanding about the processes of local collective memory in connection to the relationship between the Brunners and the inhabitants of Campolongo al Torre-Cavanzano. Similarly, Milena Woźniak-Koch’s (Polish Academy of Sciences in Berlin) presentation also focused on the histories of the properties of the Kronenbergs, a major Jewish family who converted to Christianity, in Poland. Woźniak-Koch especially demonstrated how the family’s palace in Warsaw, as well as their estates in Brzezic and Wienic, reflected the family’s newly acquired social status. However, Woźniak-Koch also pointed out that these properties – except Wienic – shared the fate of many other estates that belonged to aristocrats and landowners, namely that if they were not reprivated or came under state ownership, their stories became “forgotten and gradually fell into disrepair.”

In six panels, three guided house tours, two Keynote presentations, one Workshop, one synagogue visit, and too many thought-provoking questions and discussions to count, the conference and its delegates provided a very rich overview of the history of Jewish Country Houses through the prism of the Holocaust and its memory. The conference was also punctuated by artistic presentations reminding us of the importance of art in tackling sensitive issues. On behalf of the JCH, we want to extend our thanks to all the conference delegates for their enthusiastic participation and the many moving moments across those three days, which we hope will lead to continued dialogue, reflection, research, and successful collaborations across borders.



Nota: Nota: A review in French of this conference was also published in the issue 218 “Le Vatican, l’Église catholique et la Shoah. Renouveau historiographique autour des archives Pie XII” of the *Revue d’Histoire de la Shoah* in October 2023.

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Images (in order of appearance): 1, the Methodological Center of Modern Architecture (MCMA); 2, delegates walking to Synagogue Agudas Achim; 3, The loggia of Villa Stiassni; 4, Keynote Lecture of Rebecca Clifford; 5, Visit/guided tour at Villa Tugendhat; 6, Performance “The Story of the Book at Villa Löw-Ber; 7, ‘Memory Lies in the Objects’ Workshop; 8, Group photo of delegates at Villa Löw-Ber.