

CONFERENCE ON JEWISH MATERIAL CLAIMS AGAINST GERMANY

Contact: Hillary Kessler-Godin
646-485-2021; 917-776-3695 (mobile)
Hillary.Kessler-Godin@claimscon.org

DISPERSED NAZI RECORDS OF ART LOOTING LOCATED AND DOCUMENTED IN NEW SURVEY SPONSORED BY THE CLAIMS CONFERENCE, AIDING RESTITUTION EFFORTS BY PROVIDING ART WORLD AND CLAIMANTS WITH ACCESS TO ORIGINAL FILES

April 28, 2011, New York -- In response to complaints from the art world of the difficulty and expense in viewing the scattered and complex records needed to ascertain whether an artwork was looted, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) has initiated and supported a series of interlocking projects that provide greater access to and information about the records of the main Nazi agency responsible for looting cultural valuables in Nazi-occupied countries. Original Nazi files of the looting of hundreds of thousands of art, books, archives, and other cultural valuables have now been located and documented in the latest project to make accessible the Nazis' own records of their plunder.

"Smaller museums and individual art dealers in particular often do not have the resources and personnel to do the research necessary to establish the provenance of art objects they have. We are making it easier for them to carry out their professional and moral obligation to identify objects that may have been looted in the Holocaust," said Julius Berman, Chairman of the Claims Conference's Board of Directors.

Reconstructing the Record of Nazi Cultural Plunder: A Survey of the Dispersed Archives of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR) has been published online at www.iisg.nl/publications/errsurvey. The detail with which the ERR – the special operational task force headed by Adolf Hitler's ideological henchman Alfred Rosenberg -- documented the art, archives, books, and Judaica it plundered has proved essential for recovery efforts. However, after WWII, original ERR documents were scattered and today are found in 29 repositories in 9 countries. This survey documents the current locations of all ERR records, details their contents, and provides links to online sources.

The survey was written by Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, the preeminent expert on WWII displaced archives. It was funded and assisted by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) and published by the International Institute for Social History, whose own massive Amsterdam and Paris library and archival collections were plundered by the ERR, and whose building on the Keizersgracht in Amsterdam was used for the ERR headquarters in the Netherlands. The Survey also describes considerable documentation regarding the subsequent fate, postwar retrieval, and restitution of the ERR loot.

In October 2010, the Claims Conference launched the website, *Cultural Plunder by the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg: Database of Art Objects at the Jeu de Paume*: www.errproject.org/jeudepaume.

This searchable database of the looting of more than 20,000 individual art objects from Jews in France and Belgium showed that at least half the objects were not restituted to their original owners. The Claims Conference, working with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, now presents each of the original ERR registration cards for over 20,000 art objects in electronic form, listing Nazi ERR code numbers, artwork titles, artists, and detailed descriptions of each work. Many entries include photos of the artworks or objects as well as a scan of the original Nazi record. The database can be searched by owner, artist, or collection, or a combination of criteria.

Links are provided in the just-published Survey to 140,000 pages of ERR documents that went online in Kyiv in 2010. The Claims Conference arranged for the documents, held by state archives in Ukraine, to be imaged and adapted for the Internet. Many documents describe individual items. Others list the number of crates from specific museums or libraries, detailing their origin, date of plunder, and where they were stored or relocated by the Nazis. The records held by the Ukrainian State Archives since 1945 (in secret before 1990) is the largest collection of ERR documents in the world and is at <http://err.tsdavo.org.ua>. Another major related group of ERR records is on the website of the Federal Archives of Germany, also assisted by Claims Conference sponsorship of digitization, at <http://startext.net-build.de:8080/barch/Midosasearch/NS30/index.htm> and [http://startext.net-build.de:8080/barch/Midosasearch/B323-5209 Version online/index.htm](http://startext.net-build.de:8080/barch/Midosasearch/B323-5209_Version_online/index.htm). Additional digital contributions are expected soon that will provide improved access to a major component of the record of wartime cultural plunder and retrieval.

In 2006, the Claims Conference carried out a survey of U.S. art museums that showed the difficulties that institutions were having in doing provenance research on their collections, difficulties that are not unique to the United States. The online publication of the Survey and of masses of ERR documents held in various countries should go far in alleviating such problems. Even greater improvements in this regard can be expected with the establishment this coming May of the International Research Portal for Records Related to Nazi-Era Cultural Property under the leadership of the National Archives of the United States, in which the Claims Conference is participating.

Information regarding the Claims Conference/WJRO Looted Jewish Art and Cultural Property Initiative and the 2006 survey of U.S. museums may be found at www.claimscon.org/art.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) is most pleased to sponsor the electronic publication of *Reconstructing the Record of Nazi Cultural Plunder: A Survey and Preliminary Guide to the Dispersed Archives of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR)* and to have assisted in some of its preparation. Compiled by Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, the preeminent expert on archives displaced as a result of World War II, this work promises to be of great use to historians, archivists, provenance researchers, museum curators, art dealers, and the heirs of families and communities that were plundered. Dedicated since 1951 to providing a measure of justice for Jewish victims of Nazism, the Claims Conference has always been concerned with the restitution of plundered artworks, religious artifacts, archives, libraries, and other cultural property. But restitution efforts in this area have in the past yielded far fewer results than have efforts to reconstitute non-cultural assets such as immovable property and bank accounts, insurance policies, and other financial holdings. The reasons for this lack of progress include the ease of transporting artworks and books across international borders, the lack of public records documenting original ownership, the difficulty of tracing art transactions through the decades, and in some countries, the lack of government commitment to restitution, appropriate legislation, or a central authority to arbitrate claims.

At the Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets in 1998, attention turned to the importance of archival records in understanding the plunder of art and other cultural property by the Nazis and their allies. Subsequently at a seminar presentation at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2000, Patricia Grimsted made an appeal for a virtual compendium of the widely dispersed records of one of the most important Nazi cultural looting agencies, the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR). This idea was discussed with interest by delegates from many countries later in October of that year at the Vilnius International Forum on Holocaust-Era Looted Cultural Assets. During the next few years, Dr. Grimsted continued to uncover the locations of the scattered ERR files and completed an article on patterns of ERR library and archival plunder during World War II, as well as articles on the postwar fate of the ERR's loot and its documentation.

At the same time, the Claims Conference and the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) began a comprehensive program to assist the further restitution of Jewish-owned art and cultural property lost and plundered during the Holocaust. Although a number of countries have compiled lists of cultural losses, there has been no large-scale attempt to determine the full scope of cultural property seized by the specific agencies of the Nazis and their allies that has not been restituted. Instead, the focus has been on checking the provenance of museum collections and on claims made by individual survivors and heirs of owners. But more often than not families and communities do not have full knowledge of what was taken from them. Art dealers, major collectors, and institutions may have kept lists of artworks or catalogs of libraries and archives prior to World War II, but often such lists and catalogs – like their owners – did not survive the Holocaust, and in any event, the vast majority of the millions of persons who were robbed had no such lists or catalogs. We therefore decided to try to reconstruct the historical-archival record so as 1) to develop listings of what was plundered by the Nazis and their allies;

2) to assemble listings of cultural property known to have been restituted; and thereby 3) to produce net listings of outstanding items of cultural property that have yet to be returned.¹

In consultation with Dr. Grimsted, the Claims Conference therefore undertook to support three major activities in regard to the records of the ERR. The first is the online publication of the current survey and preliminary guide. The second is the ongoing imaging of the ERR files located in Kyiv, Moscow, Vilnius, Berlin, Koblenz, Amsterdam, Paris, New York, and Washington with a view to making the ERR records generally available. And the third is the joint creation with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum of a Database of Art Objects at the Jeu de Paume that brings together in searchable form documentation, including photographs, of the over 20,000 major art objects that the ERR confiscated from Jews in Paris, in other parts of France and parts of Belgium and brought for processing to the Jeu de Paume in the Tuileries Gardens.

These three activities should prove to be very helpful to the field of provenance research that has developed so greatly in the art world – but also in regard to libraries and Judaica - over the past decade or so. Indeed, in some respects these three activities taken as a whole may constitute a paradigm shift for the field. Instead of looking at collections in museums today, at lists of objects being sought by claimants, or at lists of objects found after World War II, the aim is to reconstruct the original record of what was seized and from whom by bringing together what remains of the detailed records that the Nazis – in this case specifically the ERR - kept of their looting.

This approach should prove helpful not only in the restitution of Jewish cultural property but also in the identification of the losses by non-Jewish institutions and families. In particular in its activities on the Eastern Front, the ERR necessarily had different priorities and different patterns of plunder than in Western Europe, since the only small private or Jewish-held collections were found in western areas annexed to the USSR in 1939. As a result, unlike France, the ERR plundered cultural items primarily from Soviet state institutions. Countries such as Russia and Ukraine that are seeking the return of their cultural property often lack knowledge of what was taken from where by which Nazi agency and what was returned after the War.

In June 2009, forty-seven countries along with relevant non-governmental organizations participated in the Holocaust Era Assets Conference held in Prague and agreed to the Terezin Declaration, which calls for international cooperation in provenance research and the restitution of cultural property. This *Survey of the Dispersed Archives of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR)* directly relates to the goals of the Terezin Declaration and such international cooperation, and Dr. Grimsted appropriately presented the project at the Prague Conference.

¹ Information regarding the Claims Conference/WJRO Looted Art and Cultural Property Initiative may be found at www.claimscon.org/art.

The importance of this *Survey* goes well beyond its relevance to provenance research and the restitution of cultural property, however. In its allocation grants to institutions in research and education, the Claims Conference has for many years been the principal supporter of Holocaust-related archival work. The importance of this *Survey* is equally in its relevance to the restitution of history.