



The Book

Finding Nazi Loot

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Leopold and Nancy Scheyer, photographed in Holland, May, 1940.

In July 2011 an extensive inventory project at the library of the Institute of Psychology at the Free University of Berlin led to the decommissioning of a book by Wilhelm Wundt. Considered one of the founders of psychology as an independent scientific discipline, Wundt did work that is in many ways a precursor to cognitive neuroscience.

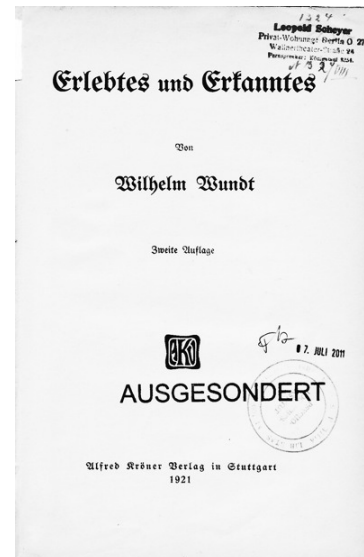
About a year later, we bought the book, a second edition of Wundt's 1920 autobiographical reflections, *Erlebtes und Erkanntes (Experienced and Perceived)*, over the Internet from a Berlin antiques dealer. We planned to present it as a gift to our academic director, Ernst Pöppel, a renowned neuroscientist and psychologist.

A close inspection of the book, however, raised doubts about whether it would be a suitable gift. The covers were sealed under a layer of plastic film, and a signature on the back had been crudely removed. The book's interior was marred by stamps. Among them, several

times, DISCARDED, initialled in handwriting—from the Library of Philosophy and the Institute of Psychology. Why would a book by Wundt—who founded the first Institute for Experimental Psychology at the University of Leipzig, whose work is part of the canons of science—be rejected by the library of a world-renowned university?

We found another name in the book. At the upper right of the title page was stamped, “Leopold Scheyer, private home: Berlin O. 27, Wallnertheaterstraße 25, Telephone: Königstadt 8254.” The letters were slightly blurred, suggesting that the stamp had been used often. Added in handwriting, twice, was the number 1324/VIII. Only a collector would number books in this manner. We began to investigate the previous owner.

We searched Google for the name and address stamped in our book. The first hits revealed two books—one on orchids and another on minerals—as well as an ex libris that had been catalogued and owned by a Jewish pharmacist, Leopold Scheyer, with the same residential address in Berlin. All three were registered by the Central and Regional Library Berlin as Nazi loot. From this moment on, the book became something different for us. We already knew it was a piece of history, but we realized there was much more to learn.



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Responding quickly to our request, the Library staff shared what they knew. They emailed us excerpts of a reparations claim filed by the heirs of Leopold Scheyer and his wife Nanny. The claim came under Germany’s Federal Compensation Act, introduced amid international pressure shortly after the Second World War. The Act was created to grant victims of Nazi persecution compensation for loss of life, personal injury, deprivation of liberty or property, and professional or financial loss.

In an excerpt from one of the case documents, Leopold Scheyer’s eldest daughter, Else, described his library as she remembered it:

From one side of the hall you entered a very spacious living room or salon, where my father’s desk, made from black ebony, was located right by the large window. On either side of this desk hung several valuable paintings; some were good reproductions of well-known works of art. Over the desk on the wall was a large bookshelf, where the complete works of Goethe in the well-known Weimar edition were kept. Next to the desk was a heavy bookcase with glass doors. On both sides of this cabinet, because my father’s library grew constantly, bookshelves had been fitted in a style that matched that of the cupboard. There were first editions of classics among these books. My father was a great collector of Goethe’s works and possessed a number of rare treasures. Besides this collection of books, there was a small library, mostly pharmaceutical and scientific works of interest to my father as a pharmacist.

We also know from Else’s account that her parents fled for Holland in 1939 and her father left his collection behind. What did he have in his suitcase? One of the “rare treasures”?

book by Wundt was certainly not in it. According to his daughter, her parents took from their home “only enough furniture for a single room.”

But the Scheyers did not flee to safety. Nazi forces invaded Holland in May 1940 and occupied the country for the rest of war. On March 9, 1943 in Naarden, Holland, 76-year-old Leopold Scheyer, threatened with deportation, took his own life. His wife Nanny was not spared a bitter end. Their daughters, who had escaped in time to save their own lives, state in the compensation file that their mother died in a “concentration camp prison in Holland.” They did not know the exact location. Nanny may have been interred, as were Anne Frank and most of the German Jews who fled to Holland, in the transit camp Westerbork. Most died there or in another camp in Holland. Nanny’s death certificate, issued for inheritance purposes, was formally dated May 8, Victory Day in Europe.

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In January 1950, the same year that the Scheyer daughters filed for compensation, the library of the newly founded Philosophical Seminar of the Free University of Berlin inventoried “our” book along with other works by Wundt that had come from a mysterious source called the Sillner Library. On March 1 it was passed on to the Institute of Psychology at the same university.

The book’s years in the Sillner Library probably explain the numerous notes and underlinings, which could not have been made by Leopold Scheyer. His handwritten notes in his books on mineralogy and orchid culture do not agree in substance or style. The other Wundt books do not have Scheyer’s stamp inside. The new clues did not bring us any closer to knowing what happened to the book in the decade after the Scheyers fled.

We wondered, what is the Sillner Library and who compiled it? How and when did Leopold Scheyer’s Wundt book arrive there? During or after the war? From Nazi stock or from an antique dealer? We were unable to find out more about the Sillner library, and we assume that it must have been a private collection that obtained the book illegally. Although we had bought the book legally from a dealer, we could not, as a result of our research, consider ourselves the rightful owners.

We registered the book as Nazi loot. Not only works of art fall into this category, though so far these have been given preferential treatment. Books commonly bear traces of the owner and are therefore of particular importance to the descendants. Often a book is the only personal record of a lost childhood or adolescence. For us, books are like our present witnesses, voices from the past. In themselves inconspicuous, books can tell a story beyond what is printed on their pages. For many reasons, the sensitive and careful handling of looted objects, regardless of their material value, is essential. We cannot afford to overlook or ignore traces of the past whose unearthing may reveal what happened during the Nazi regime.

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After learning what we could from the digital excerpts of the reparations claim, we sought the complete archives from the Berlin Restitution Authority. When the box arrived, we noticed a yellow cloth with a registration number hanging from it. Without wanting to

exaggerate, we must mention that this strange identification method reminded us of the yellow Star of David and the numbers tattooed on concentration camp prisoners. Even if the folders contain only bureaucratic notations and no personal records, the symbolism of this labelling is distressing: people first and then their property losses were numbered. Turning these numbers back into people would have been a first act of reparation. A well-known example is the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem, where the names of the dead are restored and remembered.

The file contained more than 200 forms and documents, including docketts and orders, deeds and powers of attorney, fines, assorted certificates, letters from lawyers, assessments and rejections from courts, acknowledgments of receipt, and notices of document delivery. Even a police “good conduct” certificate had to be furnished for the deceased. We can only imagine how much time it took the Scheyer daughters—Else and her younger sister Eva—to fill out these forms and comply with the necessary procedures, the financial and emotional burden involved. It is difficult to express the suffocating feeling we had as we read the files because one searches the bureaucratic mess in vain for any trace of good will on the part of the authorities.

The papers are yellowed and slightly tattered. There are stamps and handwritten notes on almost every page. We know that processing was carried out with formal enthusiasm but with little real effect because more than a dozen years passed before a final settlement of the claim was reached in 1964. Form letters were sent to the applicants, asking them or their lawyers to be patient: “The large number of applications received by our office compels us to follow a certain processing order, which the attached leaflet will explain.” A report shows that internal records requests consumed more time than anything else. However, it is not clear why and what the requests were for. One might venture that the delays created a sort of hibernation phase, which created distance from the reality of the horrors. However, as slow as it was, the bureaucratic machinery installed after the war seemed efficient enough to satisfy allied powers.

The old tone from Nazi times remained. The documents are marked with commands—“Very urgent!” and “Do immediately!” Comments such as these stressed the importance of the respective employees and their departments. Law, order, and compliance with formal bureaucratic processes were, as they had been during the Nazi era, sedative drugs.

In February 1952 Else and Eva—who were living in Stockholm and New York respectively—presented a generic request for compensation: an application under the Act on the Compensation of Victims of National Socialism. This general application was then processed into the different categories of loss: C, loss of freedom; D, damage to property; and E, unspecified damages to economic progress.

Damage category C included “detention” with “star wearing and concentration camp custody” and “restriction of liberty” with “star wearing.” This formulation is irritating from the first, for the phrase “star wearing” glosses over the repressiveness of the measure. Equally amazing is the mere 150 Deutschmarks (about \$320 currently) granted in compensation for both categories of deprivation of liberty. The bureaucrats counted the days:

The persecuted was deprived of liberty through star wearing and concentration camp custody in the Netherlands from 2.5.1942 to 05.05.1945 / 35 full months / 34 days. A further claim for monetary compensation for the period 6 May 1945 to 8th May 1945 cannot be accepted because the liberation of Holland by the Allied troops was completed by that date.

Those two days saved the postwar German government ten Deutschmarks.

Damage D included all assets, less amounts payable, such as property tax and a substantial “Reich flight tax,” which was first applied to Germans who emigrated during the Weimar years and later to those who left the country in understandable fear for their lives. Claimants were rarely able to measure precisely the losses they incurred, which kept damage D payouts as low as possible. Only after many years was a settlement of 2,200 Deutschmarks negotiated for the eight-room home and large garden—a mansion by local standards—in Charlottenburg, one of Berlin’s most sought-after areas. Compensation for furniture and possessions was included in the sum, the equivalent today of about \$10,000. Not taken into account was the fact that in 1936 Leopold Scheyer had been forced to sell his pharmacy with the corresponding plot at Alexanderplatz for a sum far below market value and that he had received only a small part of the agreed amount from the buyer. A new request was made, and new evidence presented, which was rejected by the regional court, although the court of appeals awarded an additional payment of 500 Deutschmarks.

Damage category E—“damage to economic progress”—applied only to Leopold Scheyer, who could no longer perform his job, but not his wife, who “only” ran the household. Lost revenue was calculated at 300 Deutschmarks per month. In total, 24,600 Deutschmarks in compensation was paid out from October 1955 to March 1968 in several installments. To obtain this meagre amount, the heirs fought and waited for sixteen years. What happened to them and their children in all this time, and how might having that money have helped their lives? Else would die in 1972, a few years after the final payment was made.

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The Berlin Nazi loot project staff had tried for quite some time to find the heirs of Leopold Scheyer, since the project had two books from his library. Inspired by the book we had purchased, the staff did further research and soon put us in touch with the Scheyer’s granddaughter, Edith Wiener. Edith thanked us with kind words for our interest in her family and wrote that she would like to have her grandfather’s book. When her grandparents emigrated to the Netherlands in February 1939, she and her twin sister, Renate, were seven years old. She had known her grandfather’s library, and she had heard stories about it from her mother, Else. A few months after her grandparents had left, shortly before the war, her parents fled with her and her sister to Stockholm, where her father, formerly a lawyer in Berlin, died five years later.

Else was left alone with the two children, and they lived in modest circumstances. Else worked for several prestigious bookstores in Stockholm but was poorly paid. She also suffered from vision problems. She had counted on compensation arriving quickly after the war, and her lawyer instructed her to file a letter requesting an advance payment. Meanv

her two daughters had to finance their studies themselves, lacking not only the financial backing of the grandparents' assets, but also their emotional and moral support.

On April 12 of this year, Edith accepted the return of the Wundt book in the name of her late sister's children, the Scheyers' two great grandchildren who live in the United States. The book was handed over in person at a small ceremony in London. The object has been returned, but the debt has not been adequately acknowledged or paid.

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To be expelled from your country, to lose your parents and children, to not be able to exercise your profession, and to die lonely and miserable in a foreign country or to live in shame of your origins and without the help of others—such loss can never be made good. But stolen or wrongfully acquired goods can be refunded and the economic losses compensated. But this had not happened in the case before us. It took a long time for Germany to get serious about reparations, and many objects, such as “our” book, slipped through.

Distinguished German historians such as Götz Aly and Norbert Frei agree that in the postwar years many Germans saw themselves as victims. Almost no one admitted to being a perpetrator and still less did they admit guilt. So it is no surprise that the compensation laws that were implemented in 1947 by the Allies were rejected and criticized in Germany. For example the Federal Association for Loyal Restitution, formed by Germans obliged to pay compensation, argued for more lenient laws.

Even the authorities were unenthusiastic about fulfilling their task. Sometimes these were the very same officials who had, during the Nazi era, been responsible for seizing, cataloguing, and auctioning assets. Since the opening of the archives in the 1990s, we know Nazi politicians and civil servants responsible for “Aryanization”—the banishment of non-Aryans, mainly Jews, from social and professional life—were put in charge of compensation because they were experts in bureaucratic procedures. The evidence has been documented by Wolfgang Dreßen in his well-known exhibition *Betrifft: Aktion 3—Deutsche verwerten ihre jüdischen Nachbarn (Re: Action 3—Germans Exploit Jewish Neighbors)*, and in Constantin Goschler and Jürgen Lillteicher's 2002 book on Aryanization and restitution.

Fair and equitable resolutions to reparations claims have been possible since the Washington Conference of December 3, 1998, and, according to Edith, the Scheyers' heirs received reasonable compensation in 2004 for the pharmacy, although not for the home, as the German government considered the full debt on the home paid on the basis of the 1964 settlement. Since the conference, other institutions such as libraries and museums have become more sensitive to the presence of Nazi loot.

But these institutions cannot bear the burdens of restitution alone. Individual choices also determine whether good intentions are fulfilled. People are still unwittingly acquiring Nazi loot and must not hesitate to question its provenance. It is not only an issue of stolen property, but of restorative justice and moral obligation. The clues are there if we will only be mindful not just of things but of people.



Niko Kohls returning the lost volume to Dr. Edith Wiener.
*Courtesy of the **Samueli Institute**.*