

# Archiving a Life: Post-Shoah Paradoxes of Memory Legacies

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After years of struggle for appropriate acknowledgement and commemoration of the Holocaust, as well as for support for teaching, archival collection and research on the topic, the quest for a public presence for the Shoah in Western Europe and the United States has largely been accomplished.<sup>1</sup> That crucial labor has, however, left open, and perhaps to some extent created, another set of questions concerning the relation of the Shoah to European Jewish history as well as that of survivors and their descendants to that experience.

Some of these questions are collective and institutional: there is close to consensus in Western Europe that Germany and other European nation-states should preserve the record of the expropriation, exploitation, and murder of the Jews who lived within their borders during the Second World War. Specifically which traces should be kept, by whom, where, and in what form, however, is far more difficult to determine. What documentation, for example, of prewar Jewish life and the annihilation process should archivists in the state's employ collect and catalogue? Which should be held in Jewish institutions located in Europe, Israel, or the United States? What control can and should survivors and their heirs have over their legacies, over the traces of their lives? What influence should historians have in shaping archival and museum collections? Which narratives should be emphasized in the texts produced from these sources?

A striking example of the challenges these questions pose is the struggle over the fate of Pierre Lévi's suitcase. Pierre Lévi (who went by the name Leleu during the war) was forty-four years old at the time of his arrest, deportation, and death. He left a wife and two young sons who survived the war in France. His suitcase, bearing a label in his wife's hand, was recuperated

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<sup>1</sup> Space limitations have reduced the notes here to a minimum. More complete references to the relevant scholarly literatures will appear in my book, *Conundrums of Commemoration*.

by the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum. In 2005 that suitcase was very reluctantly loaned to the Foundation for the Remembrance of the Shoah in Paris, where it was identified by Pierre Lévi's son, Michel Lévi-Leleu, and granddaughter, Claire. Michel Lévi-Leleu was profoundly moved and shaken by this unexpected encounter with the valise he had last seen more than half a century ago as it accompanied his father on a trip that would end in Auschwitz. He found that he could not bear the idea that it would leave France, once again making that trip, but this time without his father. More hopeful that he would succeed in persuading the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum to leave the suitcase on display in Paris than release it into private hands, he asked the Foundation to assist him in negotiations to that end. Those negotiations failed. The Museum refused to leave the valise in Paris on the grounds that it had an obligation to keep such objects in Poland, on the site of the camp, in order to bear witness to what had happened there. If the Museum were to allow survivors and heirs to reclaim or relocate these traces, they would risk denuding the Museum's collections thereby endangering its crucial mission. The Museum, in other words, defended its position on the grounds that it had a responsibility to "preserve the memory of the Holocaust", and that that preservation had to take precedence over the feelings of the victims' families.<sup>2</sup> Faced with this refusal, Lévi-Leleu filed a law suit in the French courts, settled only in June 2009. That settlement requires Lévi-Leleu to give up all claims in exchange for the suitcase's permanent loan to the Foundation.<sup>3</sup> This example vividly illustrates the tensions among survivors or their heirs and the various institutions charged with preserving the traces of the Shoah.

In this example, everyone at least agrees that the object should be preserved; it is the location of its conservation and who has the right to determine its' fate that are contested. The case raises, however, yet another set of issues directly related to the work of archivists and historians. Phrased very bluntly, the only reason that there is a tug-of-war over Pierre Lévi's suitcase, the only reason it was not thrown away long ago, or left peaceably in the attic of its original owner's heirs, is that he was a victim of the Shoah, and that it was the suitcase that accompanied him to his death. Had Pierre Lévi been allowed to live out his life, his descendants would almost certainly have had other objects by which to remember him and, assuming he had not become famous, it is more than probable that no museum would have

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2 Mariusz Lodkowski, Battle over a suitcase from Auschwitz. *Sunday Times*, 16 August 2006.

3 Alan Riding, The Fight over a Suitcase and the Memories it Carries. *New York Times*, 16 September 2006; Pascal Ceaux, *Le Monde*, 2 September 2006.

acquired any of his possessions, least of all a banal suitcase. The suitcase, and Pierre Lévi himself, is understood to be worthy of public attention only because of how he died, not how he lived or what he accomplished in that life.

*It was his murder that gave historical significance to Pierre Lévi and to the millions of other ordinary Jews murdered under the Third Reich.*

I find that sentence close to unbearable to write and expect that most readers find it brutal. I have chosen to write it, despite my own reaction and at the risk of alienating my readers, because it catapults us into the dilemma that lies at the heart of the archiving, displaying, writing, and teaching of twentieth-century European Jewish history: what place can and should the Shoah occupy in that history? This is, needless to say, a very different question from the following two: what place should the Holocaust occupy in twentieth-century European history? How can reflection on the Shoah advance our understanding of genocide? My preoccupation in this essay is very specifically with Jewish history, and even more particularly, with the history of unexceptional Jews who, had it not been for the Shoah, would not have been of interest to history. It has, however, implications well beyond the case of Jewish history.

Accomplishment, notoriety, power, and wealth are generally the qualities that grant individuals the possibility of leaving more than the faintest of traces of their lives after their death. Alternatively, large numbers can make the groups to which those individuals belong historically noteworthy. Archives have finite space and cataloguing resources and priorities must be established. Western European Jewry was not significant demographically; Jews composed only a tiny fraction of the population. Their numbers, then, unlike those of Catholics or Protestants, would not earn them space on the shelf. The same may be said, when referring to European Jews collectively, of accomplishment, notoriety, power, and wealth. Some did lead distinguished lives that would have granted them a place in local, regional, and national archives and museums, but most were more ordinary. Those who read newspapers rather than figured in them; those who sat in the audience of theaters, cinemas, and concert halls rather than performed on stage; those who were not the speakers at political meetings but rather among the crowd; those who visited art galleries and museums, rather than saw their works hung on their walls; those who read, rather than wrote, books—of them, had it not been for the Third Reich, only private or statistical traces would have been left behind. Being the victim, or survivor, of a world-historical

cataclysm changed that relation to history; it both generated far more detailed documentary traces than would otherwise have existed and made people, who would otherwise have gone unnoticed, noticeable.

A place on the shelf in a museum or in a file-folder in an archive, acquired in such a manner, is not, however, an unambiguous acquisition. The documentation produced as a side-effect of expropriation and annihilation always bears the stigmata of its original purpose, although, as I have argued elsewhere, that makes its reuse for the writing of life rather than death all the more important (Auslander 2002; 2005). More seriously, since it is victimhood, or survivorship, that is of interest to posterity, those are most often the traces sought by those charged with finding, filing, and storing the material remains of life. Thus, oral history projects, museums, archives, and the historians who base their work on these materials, tend to concentrate their attention on those who had “interesting” or “heroic” experiences during the war, and also to seek documentation of that moment within the victim’s lifespan.<sup>4</sup> Even specifically Jewish archives often cannot, or do not, make space for the traces of ordinary Jewish life.

At first glance such priorities might appear both banal and utterly unproblematic. Have we not learned from the eloquence of such writers as Primo Levi that it was the *silencing* of survivor’s speech about their experiences, which was a central failing of the post-war world (Levi 1989; 1996)? Is it not, in fact, rather obvious that it is *only* when *ordinary* people have *extraordinary* experiences that they become significant to the present? Perversely and paradoxically, it is having been subjected to a practice judged criminal by history—expropriation, enslavement, annihilation—that has provided not just ordinary Jews, but also Native Americans, African Americans, and Armenians (to name only some of the groups one could mention in this context) the honor and dignity of a place in the archive, the museum, the history book. That place may, however, come at a price.

Thus, one may learn anecdotally, as I did, of a woman who survived as a doctor in a concentration camp, and whose entire family was murdered during the war. Late in her life, when her niece tried to persuade her to leave a testimony of her experiences during the war, her response was: “I have had a good life; I don’t want to go back to those years, I don’t want to remember them, *I don’t want to be remembered for them.*”. Her niece was upset by this and said that she had an obligation to history, to the next generation. She replied that her obligation was to honor the dead, and surmount the

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<sup>4</sup> I obviously do not want to denigrate the importance of this crucial work, just to suggest that perhaps the purview should be broadened.

horror, by living well, and leaving to the next generation the record of that good Jewish life. She consciously, thoughtfully, and articulately refused both the repression hypothesis and the idea that it was in the recounting of those dreadful experiences that her moral duty lay. She would rather leave no trace at all, she would rather be forgotten, than leave only a record of her persecution. Her stance, which is not hers alone, poses a challenge on many levels, not least to archivists and to the historians who build narratives from those traces.

Archivists, museum curators, and historians face the extraordinarily difficult and painful task of deciding who will be granted the sort of immortality history provides. Not only must they decide whose lives will be known by successive generations, but what parts of those lives. And, how does having been a survivor of a world historic cataclysm change these questions and their answers? How can archivists and historians deal with the fact that while it is survivorship that makes an individual significant to history, that may neither be how they would wish to have been remembered nor what is actually most interesting or important about them? Thus, the “paradoxes” of the title of this essay are those faced by individuals seeking to archive their life, to leave a trace; archivists and curators and the institutions for which they work; and the “users” of those archives, who also, through interaction with archivists and curators, influence collecting practices—historians.

Because the first, and essential, step in this process is the preservation of the materials from which historians work, this essay focuses on archives and museums. And because the selection and placement of those documents, photographs, and objects is done individually, by those seeking a home for their traces, and institutionally, by archivists and curators charged with acquisitions, I have chosen to approach it through those individuals and those institutions. In order to allow the complexities of the dilemma to emerge more fully, I will follow my discussion of Pierre Lévi with that of three other individuals and two institutions, rather than focusing on a single case. The two institutions are the Jewish Museum Berlin and the Stiftung Neue Synagoge Berlin-Centrum Judaicum.<sup>5</sup> I have chosen to juxtapose these two institutions because they are inscribed in very different historical trajectories.

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5 Information on both may be found on their websites: <http://www.juedisches-museum-berlin.de> and <http://www.cjudaicum.de>. Largely because of the controversies over the building (see below) far more has been written on the Jewish Museum, Berlin. For the Museum's self-narrative see: Jüdisches Museum im Berlin Museum (1998). *Jewish Museum Berlin: Concept and Vision*. Berlin: Jüdisches Museum im Berlin Museum. For the history of

Those histories have enabled the institutions to offer complementary, and different, spaces for trace-leaving. The three individuals are Erna Proskauer (who left her papers and her art collection to the Jewish Museum), Fritz Selbiger (who left his to the Stiftung Neue Synagoge), and Bettina Roth (who at the time this article was written, was still trying to determine where the bulk of her archive would best be housed). All three were young in Berlin before the war, all three survived. Their experiences were, however, quite different.<sup>6</sup>

### The Jewish Museum Berlin: Erna Proskauer

Berlin's Jewish Museum opened only in the fall of 2001 although its planning considerably predated Germany's unification. It is both administratively and physically an extension of what had been the City Museum of West Berlin. The explicit founding mission of the Museum was to incorporate Jewish Berliners into the history of Berlin (and Jewish Germans more broadly into German history). It is, therefore, a secular, state-run institution, funded by the municipality, the German Federal Government, and private donations (particularly from Jews around the world). The Museum follows the German, not the Jewish, calendar; its restaurant does not prepare food according to Jewish dietary law; and it has no official connection to Berlin's Jewish community. It is, however, on the "must-see" list of virtually every Jewish visitor to Berlin (as well, of course, as many non-Jewish tourists).

The City Museum of West Berlin, of which the Jewish Museum is a part, had been located in the Kollegienhaus, the former Prussian Chamber Court, built in 1735, severely damaged during the Second World War, but rebuilt for the City Museum in 1963. The Kollegienhaus is located at the edge of Kreuzberg in a neighborhood that, since the nineteen-seventies, has been largely occupied by those of Turkish descent, on the one hand, and

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the first Jewish Museum see: Hermann Simon (2000), *Das Berliner Jüdische Museum in der Oranienburger Straße: Geschichte einer zerstörten Kulturstätte*. Teetz: Hentrich & Hentrich.

<sup>6</sup> I would like to express my profound gratitude to the staffs at both the Jewish Museum, Berlin and the Stiftung Neue Synagoge-Centrum Judaicum, where I received a warm welcome and great assistance as I pursued research on the larger project of which this essay is a part. At the Jewish Museum, I owe particular thanks to Inka Bertz and Aubrey Pomeranz. At the Centrum Judaicum, Hermann Simon and Chana Schuetz have gone so far as to let me know when new collections of interest to me have arrived and put me in touch with Bettina Roth.

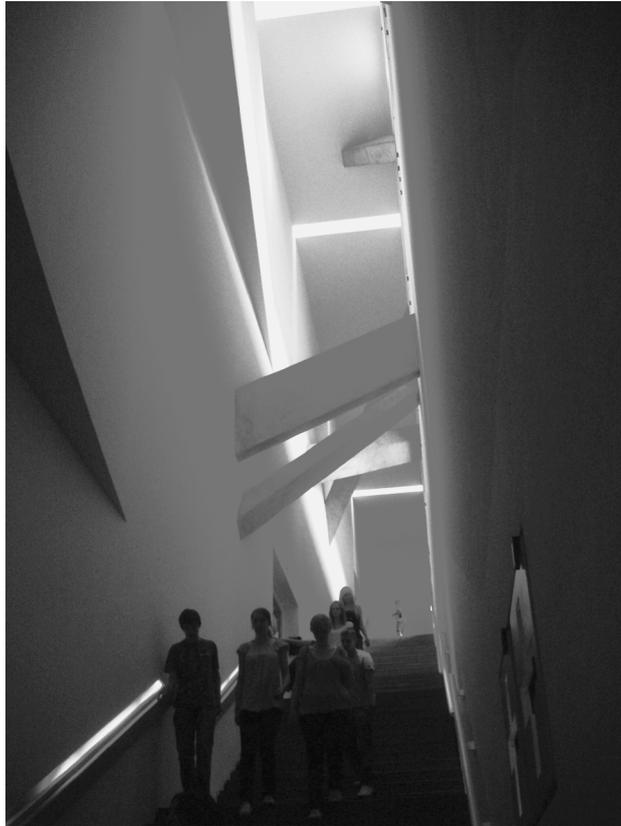


*Fig. 1: Entrance Jewish Museum Berlin (Source: Author's Photograph)*

participants in the counter-culture, on the other. It is geographically distant from both the historic and current centers of Jewish life in Berlin. Tellingly, visitors enter the Museum through the gracious portal of the rebuilt eighteenth-century structure, and then follow an underground passage to the “extension” added to house the Jewish Museum. (Figures 1 and 2)

Passers-by are confronted by a stark and jarring juxtaposition between the eighteenth-century and twentieth-century parts of the building, (Figure 3) The purpose-built extension is, in fact, much larger than the original building and, once inside, it is the new building that quickly seizes the visitor.

The extension, designed by the American architect Daniel Libeskind, has been highly controversial. It is a radically destabilizing building, characterized by jagged lines, sloping floors, steep staircases, dead-ends, uninviting intersections, and few windows. It is a building which never lets one forget the Shoah. The catastrophe lies at the heart of this museum and yet it also



*Fig. 2: Main Staircase into Exhibition (Source: Author's Photograph)*

documents Jewish life; it is an institution and building in Berlin, and yet it sits somehow apart from it, occupying a cosmopolitan, Jewish-German secular space.<sup>7</sup>

The archival section of the Museum is both supplemental to it and important in its own right. It is also an archive with one foot across the Atlantic, and one foot in Berlin. In addition to housing its own collection, much of New York's Leo Baeck Institute's holdings may be found there on micro-film. The reading room is sometimes closed to provide high-school groups studying the Shoah to work in the collection and sometimes meet a

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<sup>7</sup> Space constraints prohibit me from providing a full bibliography on the controversy. For an overview and recent bibliography, see: Karen E. Till (2005), *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.



*Fig. 3: Front Facade, Jewish Museum Berlin (Source: Author's Photograph)*

survivor donor. The Museum is very actively engaged in collecting the traces of German Jews, and is very open in its policy, attempting, at least, to find a home for whatever the donors choose to give.

Jewish Germans seeking to donate their private traces to an institution have a variety of options and those who choose the Jewish Museum are not a random sample. Although the Museum focuses on Jewish life in Berlin and Germany rather than on the visual arts, many of those whose papers now reside in the Jewish Museum had some connection to the world of the arts. As of 2006, they all had come from the upper strata of Berlin society; during the Third Reich they went into exile as opposed to hiding; and, all of those who lived in Germany after the war had lived in the West. All were “acculturated” or “assimilated” Jews. All of the documentation of their lives bear traces of the Shoah, some heavier some lighter. In some of the personal archives, the Shoah is largely present as an absence, a glimpse, a sense of being off-balance, a trail that leads nowhere [...] Sometimes it seems as if those leaving the traces were asked by a younger generation to underscore the Shoah more than they might themselves have done. Often, it is a work of art that provides a bridge between the pre- and post-war worlds.

Their traces, thus, in a fascinating way, echo the building and institution in which they are housed. Although one cannot claim typicality for any of these collections that of Erna Proskauer allows me to demonstrate these rather allusive statements.

Erna Proskauer (1903–2001) lived a life profoundly shaped by the practice of law; first her father's, then her own and her husband's.<sup>8</sup> She was born Erna Aronsohn in Bromberg (Bydgoszcz) in Eastern Prussia, but the family moved to Berlin at the close of the First World War, so that her father could continue his practice. (Bromberg having become a part of Poland at the war's end.) Quite exceptionally for a girl, Erna herself studied law and in 1930 became one of eight women practicing law in Berlin (out of a total population of lawyers of about 3,000). Even more remarkable was her appointment shortly thereafter to a judgeship. The law also seems to have influenced her choice of marriage partner; in 1930, she married fellow lawyer Max Proskauer, the son of a furniture manufacturer. Three years later, at the age of thirty-three, she was, as a result of anti-Semitic legislation, forcibly "retired". Erna and Max Proskauer's legal careers were thus interrupted for twenty years, decades during which the couple would attempt to remake their lives first in France, then in Israel, and finally, once again, in Berlin.

The French stay proved brief. The Proskauers migrated there in 1934 but continued on to Palestine where they lived for almost twenty years, although Erna reported that neither ever felt at home there. Erna adapted more successfully, and her laundry became the main source of financial support for the family. The couple finally returned to Berlin in 1953, settling in the West. After their homecoming, Erna Proskauer attempted to use the restitution process to regain her judgeship but was foiled by gender discrimination. A 1932 law against double-career households had never been repealed; since her husband had resumed his practice, her petition for a state position was denied. She was, however, able to practice law privately and chose to specialize in restitution cases. Although she and her husband were divorced in 1960, she inherited his general law practice when he died in 1968. Having been deprived of her professional life during her years in exile, Erna Proskauer was uninterested in retirement working until 1989 when she was 85 years old.

Erna Proskauer left five major traces behind: a published memoir; a video; restitution/repairation documentation; her art collection; and,

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<sup>8</sup> This narrative has been constructed on the basis of her memoir (see below) as well as the information assembled by the archivists at the Jewish Museum Berlin.

her private papers including family photographs. In each of these traces emerges a different facet of her life. Let me start with the trace over which she had the greatest control, her memoir. In *Wege und Umwege: Erinnerungen einer Rechtsanwältin* (*Paths and Detours: Memories of a Female Lawyer*), published in 1989, Proskauer put considerable emphasis on her first migration—from Bromberg to Berlin after World War I at the age of seventeen. She recounted that she had felt excluded in Berlin, not because she was Jewish, but rather because she was not a native of the city. In this memoir, furthermore, the constraints imposed by gender norms loom as large as her experience as a Jew and a non-Berliner, although she did not dwell here on one of her gendered experiences—her divorce. She also described her continued inability, despite her long residence there, to feel at home in Palestine/Israel; she systematically underscored that despite her forced flight, and despite her father's death in Theresienstadt, she continued to feel profoundly German. In this memoir, her Jewishness does emerge as significant, but it was her professional story—as the title indicates—that she chose to stress.

The video, *Totengräber beim Weißbier oder Mich wundert, daß ich so fröhlich bin* (*Film über Erna Proskauer*), made by Sigrid Kumm and Regina Ulwer for the Goethe Institut in 1993, tells quite a different story. The video opens with Erna Proskauer sitting in an outdoor Café—a *Biergarten*—drinking, or at least holding, a very large glass of *Weißbier*. The setting is unsurprising—Berlin is dotted with beer gardens—the beer somewhat more so. It quickly emerges that the film-makers have used the fate of a canvass, *Totengräber beim Weißbier* painted by Philipp Franck in 1903, the year of Erna's birth, as a structuring device to recount the history of Berlin Jewry and, more incidentally, that of Erna Proskauer.

*The Gravediggers Drinking Beer* hung first in Proskauer's father's study in Bromberg. He had seen it in the 1903 Secession show, fell in love with it and bought it; the painting then moved with them to Berlin, and finally he took it with him to the Jewish old people's home from which it was confiscated when he was deported to Theresienstadt. The painting then disappeared until it turned up in an exhibit in 1961 (where Erna Proskauer saw it) and was acquired by the National Gallery in 1976.

The center of this film is a set of parallelisms between Erna Proskauer's life and the painting's life, between modernism and Jews in turn-of-the-century Berlin. The complex titling is an accurate reflection of the complexities of the film. First comes the painting's rather literal title, then Proskauer's musing remark, "I wonder how I can be so happy", and then, in parenthesis, "the story of Erna Proskauer". The story of the painting

is, and is not, an appropriate vehicle for telling Proskauer's life story. She herself became an art collector, and both her trajectory and that of the painting were profoundly shaped by German and German-Jewish history. Both, furthermore, emerged triumphant—the painting hanging in a place of honor in the National Gallery—and Proskauer retiring as a respected and decorated lawyer in Berlin. But Proskauer herself never liked the painting—she found it lugubrious—and in the other traces she left of her life, gender played as important a role as Germanness and Jewishness.

The third element in Erna Proskauer's archive is the selection of her private papers she chose to give to the Jewish Museum Berlin. These documents are intensely personal. There is, for example, a great deal about her divorce, and she included photographic documentation of her family before the war, but very little from the war years themselves. Finally, she also left her collection of visual arts, particularly graphic arts from the nineteen-sixties, to the Museum.

The sum of Erna Proskauer's traces compose a multivalent image. She emerges as a person who found the challenges she faced as a woman and as a Jew a surprise and a headache. She was determined to overcome all obstacles and faced life without self-pity. In her memoir, which was the first trace she created, she emphasized her professional identity, although her family life was also recorded. The traumas of the Nazi period were noted but with little emphasis. This lack of focus on the effects of anti-Semitism is particularly striking since, by the memoir's date, the wall of silence had broken and many survivors were writing about their experiences. The archival and photographic material, by contrast, focused much more on her family life, including the bitterness of her divorce. The art collection stands on its own as her carrying on her father's legacy and in her commitment to universalism and modernism. The film strikes a quite different note, but it is the trace she controlled least. A certainty, however, is that neither Erna Proskauer's life, nor that of her experience of the Third Reich, was one that could be well-told without the banal details of her experience of birth family, her move as a young girl from Bromberg to Berlin, her marriage and divorce, her secularism, her professional ambition, her engagement with art. The way she told it, the Shoah was one moment, albeit a life-shaping one, in a rich and complex life. Had the only trace of her been the one composed by others—the film centered on the Shoah—then she would have been ill-served. Erna Proskauer was lucky; she was able to leave a complete enough documentation of her life so that a conscientious historian would be able to do justice to its complexity. That opportunity depended on the existence of

an institution she could trust and its willingness and its archivists' willingness to see the significance of the insignificant. Very shortly before her death (the Museum opened only a year before she died), Erna Proskauer chose to leave this array of traces to the Jewish Museum Berlin. She could, of course, have left them to a variety of other institutions—including the Centrum Judaicum in Berlin, the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, or the German National Archives. All had solid track records; each would have had certain advantages. And yet, she chose the Jewish Museum Berlin. The choice made profound sense. She was a committed Berliner and a committed German—sending her collection abroad would have made no sense to her. And yet, she was also an internationalist and a modernist. She had lived away from Germany for twenty years, and her aesthetic commitments were firmly modernist. The Jewish Museum would also have seemed comfortable from that perspective, in Berlin but not entirely of it, about Jews but not part of the Jewish community, German but also Jewish. The Centrum Judaicum was, by contrast, far too embedded in the religious Jewish community, and also in East Berlin, for her to find a home for her traces there.

Stiftung Neue Synagoge Berlin-Centrum Judaicum:  
Fritz Selbiger

The Centrum Judaicum, in contrast to the Jewish Museum, is located in an addition to the old Neue Synagoge on Oranienburger Straße in Mitte, a neighborhood that, until 1989, lay in the eastern sector of the divided city. The synagogue was built in 1866 in the “oriental style” to hold some 3,400 worshippers. It was largely destroyed by British bombing in 1943; most of what was left was torn down in 1953. Restoration was started by the East German government in 1988 and completed after unification in 1995.

This part of the city had been one of the centers of Jewish life from the nineteenth century until the Third Reich and is now the heart of the visible Jewish revival—Israeli and Jewish-style restaurants abound, there is a Jewish school, Klezmer music is to be heard many nights of the week, and bookstores and gift-shops stock an impressive array of both texts about Judaism and German-Jewish history and Judaica. Insofar as there is a publicly “Jewish neighborhood” in Berlin this is it (although most Jews have chosen to live in the Western districts of Charlottenburg and Schöneberg) and its “Jewishness” is a heavily commercial one.



*Fig. 4: Synagogue and Centrum Judaicum (Source: Author's photograph)*

The Centrum Judaicum is the official record-keeper of Berlin's Jewish community and the modern addition to the synagogue that houses the archive as well as classrooms where recent Russian Jewish immigrants learn German or study Yiddish or Hebrew, a small library for community members and the offices for everyday needs of the community. The reading room is small—with five researchers it feels crowded—and most of those working are descendants of members of the community looking for their ancestors. The archival holdings are far greater than those of the Jewish Museum, including all extant records of the Jewish community in Berlin, but also relevant to many aspects of Jewish life, particularly organizational life, in Germany over the centuries. Although some Jewish tourists to Berlin come to the Centrum Judaicum, it conveys a powerful sense of embeddedness within the past, present, and future of Berlin Jewry. The Shoah is certainly also present here but not nearly as forceful a presence as the ongoing challenges of maintaining a viable Jewish community in contemporary Berlin.

The architectural choices here are correspondingly very different than that of the Jewish Museum. (Figure 4) The part of the old synagogue visible from the street was fully restored, the archive and community center



Fig. 5: Selbiger's Shop (Source: Centrum Judaicum-Stiftung Neue Synagoge)

addition (to the right on the image) is a banal building designed to be as unobtrusive, functional, and economical as possible. The synagogue was not fully restored—it is a fragment of its former self but is, once again, a synagogue, a center of Jewish life, and presents a proud, in fact, grandiose face to the city.

The Centrum Judaicum, like the Jewish Museum, has been chosen by a substantial number of people as the home for the traces of their lives. Given the history of the Centrum, those who make that choice tend to bear a

different relation to Judaism and to Berlin than those whose traces lie in the newer institution. Fritz Selbiger (1904–1989) is a good example.

Fritz Selbiger, the son of a Jewish father and a Protestant mother, was born in the heavily Jewish Berlin suburb, Pankow. Although his mother did not convert to Judaism, the family was firmly embedded in the community, and Selbiger was bar mitzvahed at 13, married a Jewish woman, and continued to attend synagogue (with a short pause for a crisis of faith in his youth) until his death. After attempting a career in banking and discovering that he disliked that work, he quit and joined his father in his framing shop. Included in the photographs he left to the Centrum Judaicum are a series of the shop, of which he was clearly very proud.

The firm was expropriated in 1938 and Fritz Selbiger spent the war in forced labor. His wife and two sisters were killed in concentration camps. He and his mother survived and after the war he was able to reclaim his business and continued in it until he retired in 1962. He died in 1989 and was buried in the Jewish cemetery. Fritz Selbiger was a Jew and a Berliner (and ultimately an East Berliner) from his birth to his death. He appears never to have thought seriously about emigration, nor did he ever distance himself from the Jewish community.

Selbiger left a very substantial archival collection to the Jewish community. This collection included: photo albums; a diary (from 1920–1932) he kept as a young man, a family history, the beginnings of a memoir, his musings on Jewish history, ration cards from the war, documentation of his having been declared an official victim of fascism after the war, short-stories, treatises on effective advertising, and, his correspondence with a cousin who emigrated to the US (who had a strong interest in genealogy and who gave his papers to the Leo Baeck Institute).

A reading of this body of material leaves a sense of a complete life. One sees him as a young man, struggling with his father, attempting to figure out what to do with his life, preoccupied with sex, somewhat interested in politics, disenchanted with formal religious observance. Personal details become sparser after that, as the introspection and self-absorption of the very young faded, a life in which his relationship with Judaism changes—from severe doubts as a young man through a greater commitment later in life—in which the Third Reich is clearly a critical moment, but only a moment among many. One could have imagined him doing a triage—removing the “trivial” papers, or the unflattering ones, but he chose to leave it all to Berlin’s Jewish community. This is a very different set of traces than that of Erna Proskauer. Fritz Selbiger’s parents had not bought celebrated

artwork, nor was he himself a collector. Neither he nor his father was particularly noteworthy professionally, and he led a rather circumscribed life. No film was made involving him, nor did he ever publish a memoir. But he, too, felt he had something significant to leave to posterity and chose to leave it, with all its intimate detail, to the community of which he was a part. That community was fortunately able and willing to give his traces a home, since his story, too, in all of its everydayness, is an essential part of the history of Jewish history in the twentieth century.

At the time Fritz Selbiger died, of course, the Jewish Museum was not an option—it did not yet exist—but the nature of the Selbiger file leads one to think that this would, in any case, have been his choice. His traces are, in some senses, consistent with the Centrum Judaicum's building and holdings. The focus here is on Jewish life in Berlin. The Shoah is one moment in a collective history understood in a much longer, and very German, frame. Likewise, the family and individual papers focus more on the long-trajectory and on people's relation to the community and the nation. They also bear essential witness to Jewish life in the GDR. Selbiger's is the kind of life that normally goes unarchived—too ordinary to take up space in a municipal or national, or even community—archive. And, although the fact that he was a survivor of the Shoah was, no doubt, crucial to the archive's making room for him, the traces he chose to leave make clear that that is not merely, or even especially, as a survivor that he would seek to be remembered. Bettina Roth, whose life has otherwise been very different from Fritz Selbiger, would, no doubt share that sentiment.

### Bettina Roth

Bettina Roth, a generation younger than Erna Proskauer and Fritz Seliber, is still alive, but she feels that time is short and that her major life-task at this point is to find a home for her painstakingly collected and safe-guarded traces. Bettina Roth was born in 1927, the daughter of a lawyer and his legal assistant wife, also in Berlin. She left the city as a young girl in 1933 and unlike them, never returned, and yet Berlin, or more specifically, Dahlem has remained home to her. As she put it when we talked in her current home in a suburb of Paris:

“Every morning, every morning of my life for the last seventy-three years, my first impression as I start to wake up is that I am in my bedroom in Dahlem, the room

that I was forced to leave, and to which I have never returned, never want to return, never can return. Each day commences with a cruel disappointment.”

For Roth, her home is a synecdoche of her homeland and native city. After emigration to England where she learned to speak fluent English, she then made a life in Paris where she writes novels in French, but considers German her only real language. She has lived her postwar life psychologically on the margins, never fully in one place.

She and her husband did not have children; their direct heir is her sister's daughter, who lives in London and has stated that she is utterly uninterested in the family archive. Bettina Roth has, therefore, been engaged in an intensive, and very difficult, effort to find a home for her papers. She is a lively and dynamic (if frail) woman, and has been perusing this task with great determination, although also with considerable ambivalence and difficulty.

When I spoke with her about possible homes for her material, she replied that it absolutely had to go to an archive in Germany. When asked why—given that she has refused to ever return there, even for a brief visit—she replied somewhat obliquely, saying that her life had been a German life, and Germans would have to live with it. Yes, she had lived in England, she had lived in France, but that was incidental and fundamentally irrelevant. Her life-story was part of German-Jewish history, and it was to that community that, somehow, it should go.

The quest is partially accomplished, her photograph album and some other materials have gone to the Centrum Judaicum, and she may well give more to that archive. She chose the Centrum Judaicum which, on first glance, is not the most plausible institutional home for her papers, because giving her material to an archive associated with the German state—as is, of course, the Jewish Museum Berlin—is inconceivable to her. She is not a practicing Jew, but it is only a Jewish archive that could be trusted with these traces of her life. She has lived her life liminally and feels that this is an appropriately awkward place in which to leave a record.

That liminal existence was foreshadowed in the photograph album her parents commissioned very shortly before the family emigrated in 1933. It displays a series of images of a typical enough bourgeois home, garden, and family in the Berlin of the early nineteen-thirties. (Figure 6) One quickly realizes, however, that while the home was typical the photos are not; they are almost all images of thresholds, standing in one place looking into another. Such thresholds, between inside and outside, home and not-home,



*Fig. 6: Bettina Roth's home in Dablem (Source: Centrum Judaicum-Stiftung Neue Synagoge)*

are omnipresent in the documentation of twentieth-century European Jewry. A striking, if unsurprising, manifestation of the impact of the Shoah on survivors.

## Conclusions

This essay opened with a son's struggle to keep the suitcase that accompanied his father on his long train ride to annihilation in Poland from retracing that voyage. He wants, he needs, that relic to stay home. It has closed with the story of the struggle of a survivor to find a way to send home the traces

that will remain after her life and death in exile. Lying between is the story of one survivor who was able, after a long absence, to make Berlin home again and who chose to leave the multivocal traces of her peripatetic, rich, and complex life to an institution itself as complicated, housed in a building that melds Berlin and the world, the “final solution” and an open-ended future. And, then, there is a story of a Jewish life, deeply and consistently rooted, despite it all, in Berlin.

Without the Holocaust, probably only Erna Proskauer would have had the opportunity to, and thought of, leaving behind a trace. The other, more ordinary, lives would have disappeared from history as such lives do. That the quest to never forget the efforts of the Third Reich to annihilate European Jewry, and to never forget those individuals victimized by the regime has had the side-effect of allowing some ordinary Jews the possibility to leave the mark of their lives is an odd kind of poetic justice. The Third Reich sought not just to exterminate a people, but to remove all trace, all evidence that they ever had been. It failed. It even failed to make Germany a place where no Jew could be at home, a place where nothing Jewish could find its place.

The stories of Pierre Lévi, of Erna Proskauer, of Fritz Selbiger, and of Bettina Roth underscore the importance of diverse archive/museums like the Jewish Museum Berlin and the Stiftung Neue Synagoge-Centrum Judaicum (and the Foundation, although it has not been much discussed here). It also emphasizes the importance of the existence of institutions whose mission is centrally the preservation of Jewish history. Museums, archives, oral history projects, and historians, whose focus is the Holocaust, the Third Reich, genocide, or anti-Semitism, are obviously doing crucial work. Their task is a different one than recording and writing the history of European Jewry, however. Even, however, if one's goal is bounded by a desire to understand how Jews responded to the annihilation project, one will never understand a Holocaust diary, letter, or drawing, one will never understand a postwar restitution or reparations claim, novel, memoir, or interview, if one has not learned what it meant—in all of its immense complexities—to be a European Jew before the war and, for those who survived, in postwar Europe.

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