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"Die Gute Stube": Fotodokumentation. Source: Archiv des Jüdischen Museum Wien, Sign. 001028-001.

What was "Jewish" about the Old Jewish Museum of Vienna?

by Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek

Abstract

The Jewish museums established in the fin-de-siècle Habsburg Empire postulated the unity of "the Jewish people," with custodians constructing an "us" (Jews) in distinction to the "other" (non-Jews). In the difference-oriented frenzy of the time, Jewish identity was predominantly presented as Central European, enlightened, not overly religious, and middle-class. Then, when the Viennese Jewish Museum opened its doors in 1895, the painters Isidor Kaufmann and David Kohn created an installation called "Die Gute Stube" (The Parlor). This exhibit housed books, furniture, as well as decorative and ritual objects of the kind that were thought to be found in typical Eastern European Jewish households. However, as this article argues, this attempted visualization of the essence of Judaism and the range of Jewish life worlds promoted a paradigmatic stereotype with which Jewish museums would have to struggle for decades to come.

1 Introduction

About a generation before its collapse, three Jewish museums had been established in the Habsburg Empire: first in Vienna in 1895,¹ then in Prague in 1906,² and, finally, in Budapest in 1909.³ As little as they may have been

- Bernhard Purin, Beschlagnahmt: Die Sammlung des Wiener Jüdischen Museums nach 1938 (Vienna: Jüdisches Museum der Stadt Wien, 1995); Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek and Wiebke Krohn, The First Jewish Museum, Vienna 1895–1938 (Vienna: Jüdisches Museum der Stadt Wien, 2005).
- David Altschuler and Vivian B. Mann, eds., The Precious Legacy: Judaic Treasures from the Czechoslovak State Collections (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983); MagdaVezelská, "Jewish Museums in the Former Czechoslovakia," in Neglected Witnesses: The Fate of Jewish Ceremonial Objects During the Second World War and After, eds. Julie-Marthe Cohen and Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek (Crickadarn: Institute of Art and Law, 2011), 103-128.
- ³ Ilona Benoschofsky, "Die Geschichte des Museums," in Das J\u00fcdische Museum in Budapest, eds., Ilona Benoschofsky and Alexander Scheiber (Wiesbaden: Fourier Verlag, 1989); Zsuzsan-

present in the consciousness of non-Jewish milieus, they too were clearly an expression of that European current that would ultimately lead to the dissolution of the monarchy: nationalism. The constructed unity of a given "people," which increasingly separated the "self" from the "other," did not only have real political implications: Cultural mechanisms were thereby set in motion that helped solidify these boundaries and cultural institutions were created that raised these distinctions to a program.

In its very origins, the museum institution generally was a servile instrument of "higher" interests of whatever kind. If European bourgeois Jewry chose to make itself a museum object around 1900, this was especially in Central Europe, not only out of "a sense of responsibility for the image of the Jewish past and implicitly the Jewish present." This also has to be seen in the context of national independence movements and cultural identity/self-consciousness discourses. In the difference-oriented frenzy in which the many peoples of the multicultural state wanted to be accepted as independent entities, the naming of one's own identity became a vital argument for recognition, up to and including statehood. This designation was (and is) based on a real or fictitious common ancestry as well as on a real or fictitious common culture.

In this multicultural constellation, the designation of a collective Jewish identity could appear quite up-to-date and self-evident, if it was at the same time articulated as multinational, or later Austro-, Hungarian-, Czech- or otherwise hyphenated Jewish. The problem was how to elucidate Jewish identity both for the internal community and to the outside world, or in other words: to make explicit what Jewish identity meant. In what structures other than academic discourses and theoretical vocabulary could appropriate representations of identity be found? And what was this collective Jewish identity to begin with?

na Toronyi, "The Fate of Judaica in Hungary During the Nazi and Soviet Occupations," in Neglected Witnesses: The Fate of Jewish Ceremonial Objects During the Second World War and After, ed. Julie-Marthe Cohen and Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek (Crickadarn: Institute of Art and Law 2011), 285–306.

⁴ Richard I. Cohen, Jewish Icons: Art and Society in Modern Europe (Berkeley: California University Press, 1998), 199.

2 Musealizing Jewish Identity

The answer to the latter question was highly complex after the Enlight-enment. In both the general European and specific Jewish Enlightenments, the dissolution of the formerly perceived unity between religion and "nation-hood" demanded and prompted new, non-religiously motivated strategies for dealing with the Jewish self during the 19th century. On the intellectual level, the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* emerged, transferring traditional Jewish scholarship into – increasingly differentiated – academic fields of research. On the more popular level, beyond scholarly collections of Hebraica, "Jewish" collections were assembled: conglomerates of ritual objects alongside folkloristic and artistic objects that stemmed from, or were connected with, Jewish life contexts.⁵

At the turn of the 20th century, the transferal of such new and specific collections into a medium of their own made sense, the emergence of which matched the self-assertive efforts of the various communities – the Jewish museums. These museums were based on already existing associations: in Vienna on the Society for the Collection and Preservation of Artistic and Historical Monuments of Judaism (Gesellschaft für Sammlung und Konservierung von Kunst- und historischen Denkmälern des Judentums),6 in Prague on the Association for the Establishment and Maintenance of a Jewish Museum,7 and in Budapest on the Hungarian Israelite Literary Association. In general, their members were individuals interested in the history and culture of their respective upscale Jewish society.8 Their advocacy was also fueled by the incredibly active scene of the Society for Jewish Folklore (Gesellschaft für jüdische Volkskunde), which was founded in Hamburg in 1896 by Rabbi Max Grunwald (1871–1953), who would later serve as a full-time rabbi in Vienna.9

- Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek and Daniela Schmid, "Von der Judaica-Sammlung zum j/Jüdischen Museum," in "Ausgestopfte Juden?" Geschichte, Gegenwart und Zukunft Jüdischer Museen, ed. Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek and Hannes Sulzenbacher (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2022), 36–60.
- ⁶ Purin, Beschlagnahmt, 7.
- Magda Veselská, Defying the Beast: The Jewish Musuem in Prague 1906–1940 (Prague: Jewish Museum in Prague, 2006).
- Andrew Handler, "The Seminary and the Israelite Hungarian Literary Society (IMIT)," in *The Rabbinical Seminary of Budapest 1877–1977: A Centennial Volume*, ed. Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1986), 113–122.
- Ohristoph Daxelmüller, "Hundert Jahre jüdische Volkskunde: Dr. Max (Me'ir) Grunwald und die 'Gesellschaft für jüdische Volkskunde'," Aschkenas: Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur der Juden 9 (1999), no. 1: 133–144.

The custodians employed at the Jewish museums not only had the task of guarding the art and cultural assets deposited and exhibited there, but also of ensuring their correct interpretation. This was no different in other museums, whether ethnographic, regional, or municipal (to the extent that they existed at this time). As instruments of representation, the custodians of the Jewish museums knew approximately, if only vaguely, what they wanted to represent, namely themselves in their own perception: as a Central European, enlightened, not too religious, middle-class, and homogeneous Jewry. The museums meanwhile presented themselves as modern (and they were indeed modern), knowledge-based, and as research and educational institutions. They wanted to simultaneously capture, portray, and shape Jewish history and culture, to present the success story of Jewish integration, and at the same time to demonstrate an "us" (Jews) in distinction to the "other" (i.e. non-Jews). As with the encyclopedias of their time, they were not only products of scholarship, research, and knowledge; they were also manifestations of progress, self-assurance, and self-empowerment.

For many, the Jewish museums were not only modern but even revolutionary, a minority claiming the right to its own history and historical representation. They thus differed markedly from the Ethnological Museum (Volkskundemuseum) in Vienna, where a folklorist and an ethnologist sought to stereotype the many peoples of the empire through a serial collection of more or less specific utensils and costumes. By contrast, the Jewish museums were sites of visualized narratives, of the manifestation of one's own group, its cultural, political, and social expression, in short: of its representation.

3 Visualizing Jewish Identity

But how was Jewish identity to be captured? And which identity? And how could and should this be exhibited? For example by trying to explain oneself, so to speak, through a serial accumulation of specific objects? In a sense, this was the case. On the one hand, regional history was exhibited from the perspective of Jewish experience, but on the other, as in ethnographic museums, objects were exhibited that were considered by the museum operators to be representative, i.e. typical of the Jewish collective, or better of an imagined Jewish collective.

Beyond this very genteel and rather tame self-presentation, however, Vienna explored the power of object-based communication in quite a revolutionary

way. In 1899, the painters Isidor Kaufmann (1853–1921) and David Kohn (1861–1922) created a three-dimensional installation for the museum called the "Gute Stube" (Parlor), which was filled with objects identifiable as "Jewish." One may imagine its creation as a result of both ethnographic field research and artistic creativity. In the process, the notion of a "typically Jewish" home was nourished by Kaufmann's travels through Jewish habitats in Galicia, Hungary, and Poland. After all, the museum also had a collection focus on the culture and history of Eastern European Jewry, given that a large proportion of Vienna's Jewish families had roots precisely in Eastern Europe. Thus a "Führer durch das Jüdische Museum" (Guide through the Jewish Museum) published in 1906 already listed Russian, Polish, and Hungarian materials. 11 The collections of objects of Eastern European origin grew considerably in the following decades. From the perspective of an urban Central European community, the structures and values of small-town or even rural Eastern Jewish life seemed much more genuine and authentic than their own.

Even if Kaufmann himself laid no claim to the authenticity of the interior design of this room as specifically Jewish, the result of this method, which can be called rather projective, was received with enthusiasm in Vienna. The traveling physician and anthropologist Samuel A. Weissenberg (1867–1928) mused: "But the room where a 'Jewish heart' can really rest and find pleasure is the 'Gute Stube' built by Isidor Kaufmann." Indeed, Weissenberg got quite carried away with the dreamy fantasy:

"One is overcome by a wistful feeling about the beautiful, good, old times that shall never again return; one feels transported to one's childhood years and one involuntarily looks around, searching for one's grandparents, in order to wish them 'a good Shabbos'."¹²

- For background and classification, see Bernhard Purin, "Isidor Kaufmanns kleine Welt: Die 'Gute Stube' im Wiener J\u00fcdischen Museum," in Rabbiner-Bocher-Talmudsch\u00fcluer: Bilder des Wiener Malers Isidor Kaufmann 1853-1921, ed. G. Tobias Natter (Vienna: J\u00fcdisches Museum der Stadt Wien, 1995), 128-145. See also Leon Kolb, "The Vienna Jewish Museum," in The Jews of Austria: Essays on their Life, History and Destruction, ed. Josef Fraenkel, 2nd ed. (London: Vallentine, Mitchell & Co. Ltd, 1967), 147-160, here 148.
- Gesellschaft für Sammlung und Conservirung von Kunst- und historischen Denkmälern des Judenthums, ed., Führer durch das Jüdische Museum (Vienna: Jüdisches Museum Wien, 1906), nos. 272–282 and 476–481; see also nos. 220–221 and no. 96.
- For this and the previous quote, see Samuel Weissenberg, "Jüdische Museen und Jüdisches in Museen," Mitteilungen zur jüdischen Volkskunde 10 (1907) no. 23, 77-88, here 87. Weissen-

This sentimentalization of the Jewish ghetto existence also corresponded to Kaufmann's romantic visual transcription of Jewish shtetl life in his artworks.¹³

It is difficult to judge whether or to what extent the idea of depicting this nostalgic habitat was influenced by exhibitions of folkish living rooms, for example at the Bavarian State Exhibition in Nuremberg. He Both Kaufmann and Kohn may have been too young to have been influenced by the self- and other-staging with which the 1873 World's Fair in Vienna had flaunted itself. But later and elsewhere in the Habsburg Empire, there were other such recreations of life and living spaces, for example the "Exhibition Village with Wallachian Settlement" in Prague in 1895 or the "Skansen" at the Hungarian Millennium Exhibition in 1896, which consisted of 24 farmhouses, a Transylvanian church, and a "Gypsy Tent Camp." These inspired not only ideas of the "other" (i.e. non-Jews) but also possible modes of (self-)depiction.

4 The Spatial Arrangement in the Jewish Museum Vienna

In the above-mentioned guide through the Jewish Museum from 1906, the authors had to limit themselves to 400 objects out of a total of 3,000. The objects were listed by room and accompanied by an overview of the physical possibilities offered at the museum in this early stage. The guide opened with "I. Anteroom," with objects unrelated to one another in content. It is no longer clear today why, for example, a Torah curtain from the Jewish community of Hohenems was shown here next to the "Fauteuil des Predigers Dr. Adolf Jellinek s.A." (armchair of the preacher Dr. Adolf Jellinek of blessed memory) and why, next to this, tombstones discovered during construction work around Vienna were exhibited together with "tombstones from Southern Arabia," all of them "gifts of Hofrat Doktor D[avid] H[einrich] Müller, Member

berg became famous with the study: Die Südrussischen Juden: Eine Anthropometrische Studie mit Berücksichtigung der Allgemeinen Entwicklungsgesetze (Braunschweig: Vieweg und Sohn, 1895).

See in particular the chapter "Nostalgia and 'The Return to the Ghetto'," in Cohen, Jewish Icons, especially 171–175.

Purin, "Isidor Kaufmanns kleine Welt," 140.

Timea Galambos, Magyarisches Millenium 1896: Glanz- und Schattenseiten der ungarischen Tausendjahrfeier (published Master's thesis, Vienna University, May 2008), available online at: https://fedora.phaidra.univie.ac.at/fedora/get/o:35047/bdef:Content/get (April 27, 2023), 64.

of the Board of Trustees, Vienna" (1846-1912).16 In "II. Main Room," there were graphics of biblical scenes, paintings, portrait medals, and memorabilia of famous, mostly Viennese personalities, next to various Judaica objects. "Room III" again offered biblical subjects mainly in the form of copperplate engravings, some ceremonial objects, historical Austriaca, but also two peculiarities, namely watercolor copies that the Viennese synagogue architect Max Fleischer (1841-1905) had made of the illustrations of the famous Haggadah of Sarajevo¹⁷ and the painting "Morning Prayer" by the Viennese Hagenbund member Lazar Krestin (1868-1938).18 "Room IV" showed, in addition to many mainly Austrian Jewish celebrities, Jewish folkloristic objects from the collection of the above mentioned Samuel Weissenberg, and depictions by Bernhard Picart (1673-1733) of Jewish rituals and customs. 19 These served the museum (and not only the one in Vienna) to illustrate Judaism as a religion beyond any historical experience, beyond different traditions, and beyond time and space – as a static religion. A "Cabinet" finally showcased a few more items that did not remotely form a coherent group. Even after the museum moved to new premises in 1913, there was surprise expressed that it "gave the impression of a painter's studio or antique store rather than a scholarly collection."20 Particularly harsh criticism of the lack of focus in the presentation and of the cult of personalities practiced through countless memorabilia came from the founder of the Berlin Art Archive Karl Schwarz (1885–1962), a contributor to the renowned journal Ost und West and later director of the Jewish Museum of Berlin, who vehemently demanded quality over quantity.²¹

- Müller was one of the leaders of the South Arabian expedition of the Imperial Academy of Sciences in Vienna in 1898. His research results aroused broad linguistic, cultural-historical, and ethnological interest.
- This Sephardic Haggadah was among the first objects of academic research in Hebrew illuminated manuscrips and was edited and published as: David Heinrich Müller and Julius von Schlosser, Die Haggadah von Sarajevo: Eine spanisch-jüdische Bilderhandschrift des Mittlelalters, Textband von Dav[id] Heinr[ich] Müller u[nd] Julius v[von] Schlosser, Nebst e[inem] Anh[ang] von David Kaufmann (Vienna: Alfred Hölder, 1898).
- Georg Herlitz and Bruno Kirschner, eds., Jüdisches Lexikon, III (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1929), 891; see also: Richard I. Cohen and Mirjam Rajmer, Samuel Hirszenberg 1865–1908: A Polish Artist in Turmoil (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2022), 289–290.
- Gottesdienstliche Ceremonien oder Andachts-Uebungen und Religions-Pflichten der Juden, Türcken ec.: In V Ausgaben abgetheilt, welche alle Völcker, die sich durch die Beschneidung unterscheiden, begreiffen. Mit Kupferstichen nach Bernhard Picart (Zurich: David Herrliberger, 1746).
- Anonymus (presumably Max Grunwald), "Jüdisches Museumswesen", Archiv für Jüdische Familienforschung, Kunstgeschichte und Museumswesen, 4, 5 und 6 (1913): 30.
- ²¹ Anonymus (presumably Max Grunwald), Jüdisches Museumswesen, 30–31.

5 The Image of the "Gute Stube" (Parlor)

The last room listed in the 1906 guide is "The Parlor." The description of this room was cursory: "Interior, built and furnished by Isidor Kaufmann, member of the Curatorium. The furnishings and fittings contained therein mostly date from the 18th century." This misjudgment of the period of origin reflects the state of knowledge of the curators. Just as the showrooms were unorganized and unstructured in terms of content, so the "*Gute Stube*" seems to have been furnished at random, rather as a stage than an exhibition room.

Looking at the photos of the "*Gute Stube*" today, one is involuntarily reminded of Kaufmann's early genre paintings. Just as he had often organized these as stage spaces, ²² so in the Jewish Museum he organized a space as a theater on which (a) Judaism was staged.

The items that Isidor Kaufmann had collected for the purposes of illustration and reproduction were books, furniture large and small, everyday decorative objects, and ritual objects of the kind that were in the metropolis thought to be the norm in Eastern European Jewish households. Concrete provenances were not recorded, which means that acquisition contexts, occasions, and criteria cannot be traced. Almost certainly, the parlor was simply furnished as the curators saw fit. It is true that some Judaica objects were scattered around the room, such as "1 iron Torah box with the date 5584 [...], 1 pewter seder bowl [...], 1 brass bessamim box [...], 1 parchment scroll (Megillah Esther), 1 tallit [...]." However, there were also tables, chairs, a chest of drawers, and bookcases in front of a so-called "doorway with stairs."

The contexts of the exhibited objects are not immediately clear. Why the "1 Hanukkah lamp" hung next to "2 wall arms in the shape of a deer" is somewhat puzzling, whereas "5 candlesticks" as well as "5 different pictures" can probably be interpreted as what they were named in the inventory: "Kommodenaufputz" (essentially window dressing). The table and chairs were probably meant to emphasize the familial nature of Jewish life.

G. Tobias Natter, "'Geschreibsel und Zuckerwasser?' Verklärung und Standpunkte bei Isidor Kaufmann," in Rabbiner-Bocher-Talmudschüler: Bilder des Wiener Malers Isidor Kaufmann 1853–1921, ed. G. Tobias Natter (Vienna: Jüdisches Museum der Stadt Wien, 1995), 12–41, 18.

On the furnishing, see Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, "Aus der Schabbatstube," in Rabbiner-Bocher-Talmudschüler: Bilder des Wiener Malers Isidor Kaufmann 1853–1921, ed. G. Tobias Natter (Vienna: Jüdisches Museum der Stadt Wien, 1995), 146–163.

All in all, the composition of the objects, the authenticity of which cannot today be verified, suggests that the furnishers were never concerned with depicting a reality. Otherwise, what were the "3 women's headdresses," models visualizing traditional female Jewish headdresses, doing next to the Torah cabinet, and what were two amulets "for a woman in childbed and a newborn child" doing up there? Was the oil-based "Portrait of a Rabbi" a characteristic wall decoration in Jewish homes? What was the inner connection between "1 tobacco pouch" and a "synagogue prayer bench" (and whoever defined it as such)?²⁴ Museum curator Maurice Bronner (1890–1971) claimed the parlor to be "an 18th-century Jewish house as can actually still be found today in Galicia and southern Russia."²⁵ How this student of French literature should have known such houses remains unclear, even if he had lived with his grandparents in Bielce (modern-day Moldavia) for a while as a child.²⁶

Finally, the ceiling of the room was also especially designed. Wooden beams were fitted into the "good room" or "Shabbat room," as the "Parlor" was also called. Hebrew inscriptions were carved into these beams from the Shabbat tradition, beginning with: "So the Israelites shall keep the Shabbat" (Ex. 31:16) and "When the Shabbat comes, rest comes" (from the Shabbat prayers). A "Jewish ceiling" thus completed a "Jewish room," enclosing the room, giving a frame to its disjointed individual parts, defining it with its disparate "filler materials" and giving it its lasting name.

6 Conclusion

Looking at the featured "Gute Stube" (The Parlor) in particular, the question arises to what extent the presented material artifacts portrayed such a thing as a "genuine" Judaism or rather created such a thing in the first place. In the search for visualization methods for what the Hungarians, the Czechs, the Ruthenians, and all the many peoples of the empire put forward for their (aspired) independence, the Jewish Museum in Vienna created a backdrop

For this and the previous quotes, see Heimann-Jelinek, "Aus der Schabbatstube," 146–163.

Christa Prokisch, "Chronologie einer Ansammlung: Jüdische Museen in Wien 1893–1996," in Papier ist doch weiss? Eine Spurensuche im Archiv des Jüdischen Museums Wien, ed. Werner Hanak (Vienna: Jüdisches Museum der Stadt Wien, 1998), 14–25, here 16.

Felix Bronner, As I Remember my Father's Life, off-print, digitized by the Center for Jewish History in New York and avaiable online at: https://digipres.cjh.org/delivery/DeliveryManager-Servlet?dps pid=FL8885863 (April 27, 2023).

as an ostensibly "authentic representation" of a "genuine" Jewry: modest, simple, Eastern European, family-oriented, supra-temporal and trans-spatial, untouched by secularization and industrialization, by nationalization and internationalization, by class struggle and feminism, by poverty, and girl trafficking. The image of the Jewish "Gute Stube" went around the European world both physically and as a photograph and postcard. The distribution was comparable to, and possibly an imitation of, the cycle of "Bilder aus dem altjüdischen Familienleben" (Pictures from Old Jewish Family Life) by Moritz Daniel Oppenheim (1800–1882), who worked in Frankfurt am Main. From 1866 onwards, his cycle was sold all over the world both as a portfolio work and in individual sheets and also formed part of the collection of the old Jewish Museum in Vienna. Isidor Kaufmann's parlor was – willfully or not – misunderstood as reality.

The identity-assuring search for a Jewish self resulted in the artistic reproduction of an idea, becoming an artificial decal that was supposed to visualize the Jews of the Habsburg Empire in their cultural independence and uniqueness. Ultimately, it was the original failure to visualize the essence of Judaism and the range of Jewish life worlds that promoted the auxiliary of a stereotype from which the Jewish museums could later only slowly liberate themselves. In their desire to become seen as an entity in its own right amid this seething and sinking multicultural empire, the museum protagonists ended up finding only inadequate means to visually explain "the Jewish."³⁰

- Leon Kolb, "The Vienna Jewish Museum," in *The Jews of Austria: Essays on their Life, History and Destruction*, ed. Josef Fraenkel, 2nd ed. (London: Vallentine, Mitchell & Co. Ltd, 1967), 147–160. here 148.
- ²⁸ Purin, "Isidor Kaufmanns kleine Welt," 138-139.
- Anonymous, The Jewish Year, Illustrated by Pictures of Old-Time Jewish Family Life: Customs and Observances: From the Paintings by Professor Moritz Oppenheim, with Explanatory Text by Louis Edward Levy (Philadelphia: The Levytype Company, 1895); Norman L. Kleeblatt, The Paintings of Moritz Oppenheim: Jewish Life in 19th-Century Germany, Exhibition Catalogue (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1981); Erik Riedl, "Moritz Daniel Oppenheim: Ein jüdischer Maler der Emanzipationszeit," in Napoleon und die Romantik: Impulse und Wirkungen, ed. Magistrat der Brüder-Grimm-Stadt Hanau, Fachbereich Kultur, Stadtidentität & Internationale Beziehungen/Städtische Museen Hanau (Marburg: Historische Kommission für Hessen, 2016), 83–99, especially 83, 94–95.
- In this context, see the interesting installation on the "Gute Stube" by the Israeli artist Maya Zack, commissioned by the present-day Jewish Museum of the City of Vienna in 2013. Zack dehistoricized the ensemble by transferring its history and fate after 1938 into an up-to-date 3D artwork. The question of what exactly had been Jewish about "The Parlor" was not addressed here.