

# Were Jews forced to sell medieval treasure to Hermann Goering?

***\$250m. collection at center of restitution dispute.***

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In November 1933, the mayor of Frankfurt – a devoted anti-Semite who sought the elimination of Jewish influence from the city – wrote a letter to Adolf Hitler asking him to acquire a treasure.

The treasure was a collection of stunning medieval artwork called the Guelph collection, known in German as Welfenschatz.

Four years earlier, a group of Jewish art dealers bought the collection.

“To restore this honor in the area of the arts, I would regard the retrieval and final purchase of these irreplaceable medieval treasures... as a decisive step,” the mayor, Friedrich Krebs, wrote to Hitler.



Hitler’s office responded that it did not have enough money, but just over a month later, negotiations began between the Jewish art dealers and representatives of the Prussian government over purchasing the collection. Within 18 months, the Jewish dealers sold it.

The nearly 80-year-old transaction between four Jewish art dealers and the Prussian government is now at the center of one of the most dramatic art restitution cases in Germany.

On Wednesday, Germany’s commission that handles such cases will begin a hearing to decide whether the Guelph collection, now worth approximately \$250m., should be returned to its previous Jewish owners or kept by the government.

The central question is whether the Jewish dealers – Zacharias Max Hackenbroch, Isaac Rosenbaum, Saemy Rosenberg and Julius Falk Goldschmidt –were forced to make the sale. The heirs of the dealers and their attorneys argue they had no

choice but to sell the pieces at a cut rate to representatives of the Prussian government, led by Hermann Goering.

The Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation – known by its German acronym, SPK – insists the transaction was fair and that it was the dealers, not the government, who initiated the sale.

But documents obtained by The Jerusalem Post from the time period cast doubt on the SPK's arguments that the art dealers initiated the sale and did so without coercion.

SPK officials said on Thursday the letter from the Frankfurt mayor to Hitler shows that the Jewish dealers were essentially shopping around the collection, trying to find a buyer. The SPK provided the letters to the Post, and the heirs' attorneys confirmed their authenticity and translation.

The SPK argued that Krebs approached Hitler because a colleague of the art dealers wrote to Krebs explaining that the collection was on the market. The SPK described the colleague, a man named Georg Swarzenski, as a close ally of the Jewish art dealers who was acting on their behalf.

The problem, according to the heirs' attorneys, is that Swarzenski was not a colleague or even a fellow art dealer.

They said he was merely commenting about the availability of the treasure, not speaking for the dealers.

Markus Stoetzel, a Berlin-based attorney representing the heirs, said it was absurd that the SPK would use a letter sent from a devoted Nazi to Hitler to justify their claims.

"Frankly, I'm shocked. I'm upset. I cannot think in the least that... they are defending their position on such a basis. That's simply ridiculous," he said.

Stoetzel and his colleague, Mel Urbach of New York, also rejected the Prussian government's assertion that the art dealers approached the Prussian government in 1934.

The SPK's argument that the dealers initiated the sale is further called into question by the account of one of the lead negotiators on the Prussian side, according to a document obtained by the Post from the archives of the US government's Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives team, known as the "Monuments Men."

The two-page document, written in 1946, is the first person testimony of Robert Schmidt, the director of a German art museum who said he was a lead negotiator with the Jewish dealers.

Schmidt explains that the Prussian government initiated the case, which apparently contradicts the present-day Prussian authorities.

“I proposed to the Prussian Finance Minister Prof. Dr. Popitz to include the Welfenschatz in this transaction, as it was the most important art object for Germany being at the market,” Schmidt wrote in German. He was referencing Johannes Popitz, who would become a major figure in the Nazi resistance and was later executed by Heinrich Himmler.

“Immediately Prof. Dr. Popitz looked over the great importance of such an acquisition for the State Museums and by intervention of the Dresdner Bank he formed necessary discussions with the party,” he wrote, referencing the Jewish art dealers. The Dresdner Bank was used by the Nazis and helped finance the construction of Auschwitz.

Schmidt continued that the Prussian government was essentially doing the Jewish dealers a favor by getting the collection off their hands.

“The party was given a great and unique chance to get out of its financial situation which had become very difficult,” he added.

The heirs’ attorneys confirmed the authenticity of the document and said it bolsters their case; the SPK did not respond to a request for comment on the document.

The selling price, 4.25m. reichsmark, is another key point of contention between the heirs and the SPK. The heirs said that the price was very low, while the SPK said that it was a fair transaction, given the tough economic times.

The dealers initially purchased the collection for 7.5m. reichsmark. After touring the treasure around the US and Europe, the dealers were able to sell about half of the collection for 2.5m. reichsmark to museums and private collections.

Therefore, the SPK argues, the dealers got 6.75m. reichsmark in total for the artwork, 90% of the original purchase price.

“Even if the sellers would not have been Jewish, they could not have reached a better price,” said Dr. Hermann Parzinger, the president of the SPK.

But Urbach said the sale price represented only 35% of the true value of the collection. The Nazis knew they were paying a low price, he added, because in a subsequent press announcement, they told the public they paid a higher price.

And, he said, the reason for the sale was not based on finances but on fear.

To support the assertion that the dealers were intimidated into selling the collection, the heirs' attorneys filed an "expert opinion" by Dr. Andreas Nachama.

Nachama is an academic and the director of the Topography of Terror foundation, which studies the Nazi regime's repression tactics.

In a document prepared for the German arbitration committee, Nachama wrote that "our knowledge about the life and suffering of Jews in the Nazi state does not allow the assumption of an uninfluenced, unforced and still freely chosen course of action for the Jewish participants."

In essence, he wrote, the case involved "persecuted Jews on the one side and the persecutors on the other."

"In the year 1935, if a German Jew, particularly considering that the real purchaser was clearly intended to be concealed from him initially, suddenly had to become [aware] that he was in the process of concluding a transaction with the regime itself, all of whose actions and intentions were designed [with the aim] to destroy him, then it is not hard to imagine what impression this left on the affected parties and what influence it had on their actions," Nachama wrote.

Parzinger said "the situation of the Jewish citizens at the time in Germany is well known.... We are not ignoring or neglecting that it was extremely difficult for everybody who was Jewish in Germany."

However, he said, issues of Jewish persecution were beside the point, because the sale was fairly consummated.

He also rejected the idea that this was a case of Jewish dealers selling to Goering himself.

"It was claimed by the other side that Hermann Goering was interfering in the negotiation. That he himself was somehow heading the negotiation. There's not one [piece of] proof," he said.

But he acknowledged that Goering "somehow had to be informed" of the sale, given its magnitude.

Goering's name does not appear on the documents, and there is no documentary evidence that he was personally involved in the sale, according to Kenneth Alford, an American author whose recent book, *Sacking Aladdin's Cave: Plundering Goering's Nazi War Trophies*, details Goering's efforts to loot artwork.

"Goering's fingerprints [are] not on it," Alford said last week. "But you can damn well believe he was involved in it, because he would want the glory."

Indeed, in October 1935, Goering personally presented Hitler with the Guelph treasure as a “surprise gift.”

Link: <http://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-Features/Were-Jews-forced-to-sell-medieval-treasure-to-Hermann-Goering-337941>