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Repossessing the Past? Property, Memory and Austrian Jewish Narrative Histories

LISA SILVERMAN*

Yale University

In his memoir *Last Waltz in Vienna* (1981), Austrian émigré George Clare describes his family's apartments and furnishings almost as lovingly as he does his parents and relatives. In explaining his emotional attachment to the Viennese interiors of his youth, Clare notes that his urge to visit his grandmother's apartment the day after the Anschluss 'shows not only that the old lady meant quite a lot to me, but also that I saw in her and her surroundings a permanence more firmly established than that of our own home'.¹ In describing the furnishings, Clare artfully elaborates upon them down to the last detail, including their 'white wood with carved scrolls, flowers and bows' and the 'inlaid wood and ormolu-decorated drawers and corners, as well as a big reproduction of a side-board for the dining room' and 'a soft blue curtain with embroidered gold leaves'.²

After the Anschluss, Clare's parents made considerable efforts to ship their household items to a warehouse in Paris. The couple found refuge in a small village in the south of France, while Clare secured a place in England. Though in immediate danger, his parents focused their energy on ensuring the ability of their son to reclaim the family furniture. In fitful, anguished letters, Clare's mother pleaded with him to remember the warehouse number. In a poignantly recounted scene, Clare describes a note hastily scribbled by his father and thrown from the train as he was being deported, so desperately anxious was he to enable his son to retrieve the furnishings. The last written words Clare possesses from his father are: 'I beg you to pay the depot rental of fr. 215 per month [. . .]. If possible I want to save everything for my son'.³

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¹ George Clare, *Last Waltz in Vienna. The Rise and Destruction of a Family 1842–1942* (New York, 1989), p. 186. The text first appeared in German as *Das waren die Klaars* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1980). The English-language version followed a year later (London: Macmillan, 1981) and in 2001 the German text was reissued under the title *Letzter Walzer in Wien* (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2001).

² Clare, *Last Waltz*, p. 108.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

Clare's parents perished in Auschwitz, and he never recovered his family's household items. While the real tragedy is the murder of his parents, Clare's memoir also illuminates the deeper emotional significance of property to memory. Yet, the property lost to Jewish Nazi victims and their heirs as a result of Aryanizations (the taking over of Jewish property by 'Aryans') is seldom a central topic in either literary or historical explorations of this theme. Indeed, issues of the confiscation of real estate and material household items are not usually discussed in the context of post-war literature, but rather are left to historical investigations, which tend to frame the loss largely in terms of monetary value, without consideration of property's important theoretical components.

This article will argue that a discussion of both the theoretical and historical implications of property, along with its confiscation and restitution, will contribute to a deeper understanding of the construction of Jewish identity in Austria both before and after World War II. Through literary sources and historical evidence, it will explore the function of property over time in sparking both individual and collective memory, and show how memory on both levels influenced the construction of Jewish identity in Austria before and after the war. Difficulties in recovering formerly owned property often paralleled the problems involved in 'recovering' identity for Jews who returned to Austria and for those who remained in exile. Examination of texts by George Clare, Jean Améry, Friedrich Torberg, Karl Farkas, and Wolfgang Georg Fischer will demonstrate how Austrian Jewish narratives reflect this complicated matrix of past ownership and recovered identity.

I

Studies of the Holocaust often focus on the details of the processes leading to the killings, for the loss of property is of minor importance when compared to the murder and exile of millions. However, the elimination of Jews from society was integrally linked with the confiscation of their property. In fact, historians posit that Aryanization was one of the first steps, along with the Nuremberg Laws, in isolating and separating Jews from the community in order to facilitate their eventual elimination from society.⁴ Whether carried out as a result of Nazi directives or on more spontaneous, local levels, Aryanizations also represented the beginning of the process under which Jews were degraded and eventually destroyed.

Property as a concept intertwines cultural and economic capital, and it has long been disputed whether individual ownership of property contributes

⁴ Karl A. Schleunes, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz. Nazi Policy toward German Jews, 1933–1939* (Urbana, IL, 1970), pp. 133–68.

to the construction of communal identity, or whether it acts as an agent in its disintegration. According to the compelling arguments of legal scholar Nomi Stolzenberg, while property and its significance for the market economy have been cited as major factors in the shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, ‘private property rights have also played a significant role in fortifying small subcommunities, cementing their boundaries, and endowing them with effective forms of collective control over both resources and members’.⁵ She argues that, contrary to popular liberal thought, the system of private property does not contribute to the disintegration of communities, but rather enables the survival of cultural groups. In this respect, property reaches far beyond the bounds of the negative, splintering economic effects usually ascribed to it, such as maximizing wealth, promoting competition, or cementing class inequalities.

The notion of property as a means of communal integration becomes even more relevant in the case of many Austrian Jews, who could not own real estate until 1859–60. The lifting of these restrictions was followed shortly afterwards by the *Grundgesetz* [Fundamental Law] of 1867 granting Jews civic equality, thus linking the concept of property ownership to the Jews’ new legal status as full citizens.⁶ The benefits of emancipation led to a rapid increase in Jewish immigration, their numbers reached over 175,000, or 8.6 per cent of the Viennese population, by 1910.⁷ By the Anschluss, the number of Jews in Austria was estimated to be nearly 182,000, of whom roughly 167,000 lived in Vienna.⁸ Emancipation remained a central facet of identity for this Austrian Jewish population composed mainly of immigrants, or of children of immigrants, a number of whom had fled pogroms. For many, property, along with language and culture, became an important and tangible facet of Jewish acculturation into Austrian society.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Jewish occupations had expanded from trade to include significant numbers of industrialists, professionals, and white-collar clerks, a fact which, Marsha Rozenblit argues, kept Viennese Jews identifiable as a distinct group despite acculturation.⁹ After the end of World War I and the formation of the new Austrian republic, Viennese Jews found themselves torn from a comfortable tripartite identity of being culturally German, politically loyal to Austria and of the Jewish religious

⁵ Nomi Maya Stolzenberg, ‘The Culture of Property’, *Daedalus*, 129 (Fall 2000), 169–92 (p. 169).

⁶ Robert S. Wistrich, *The Jews of Vienna in the Age of Franz Joseph* (Oxford, 1990), p. 43.

⁷ Marsha L. Rozenblit, *The Jews of Vienna 1867–1914. Assimilation and Identity* (Albany, NY, 1983), p. 18.

⁸ Jonny Moser, *Demographie der jüdischen Bevölkerung Österreichs 1938–1945* (Vienna, 1999), p. 16.

⁹ Rozenblit, *The Jews of Vienna*, p. 69.

faith.¹⁰ These changes and their accompanying anxieties may have prompted many Viennese Jews to cultivate with care the trappings of bourgeois Austrian society, such as home furnishings. Further, since the overwhelming majority of Viennese Jews did not own their apartments, their household furnishings became even more important markers of their identities as acculturated Austrians during this era.¹¹ For many, becoming Austrian meant living in an Austrian home.

Evidence that apartment furnishings carried fundamental significations not only for collective but also for individual identity can be found in Wolfgang Georg Fischer's semi-autobiographical novels *Wohnungen* (1969) and *Möblierte Zimmer* (1972), which contain numerous descriptions of Viennese apartment interiors and their locations.¹² Fischer, who was born in Vienna in 1933 and fled with his parents to Yugoslavia, returned to Vienna in 1940 with his mother, while his Jewish father remained in London. The novels recount his childhood experiences of home and exile through close examination of the interior settings in which he lived. The first novel ends with the loss of the child's surroundings, as he overhears the Aryanizer of the apartment on the telephone to his Nazi superior: '— also kann ich endlich, endlich den Ortsgruppenleiter Wawra sprechen, also, Heil Hitler, Auftrag ausgeführt, Wohnung durchsucht, Zustand tadellos, Fenster frisch gestrichen, neue Parkettfußböden, gartenseitig. Danke — ich behalte sie' [— so can I finally, finally talk to section leader Wawra, okay then, Heil Hitler, mission completed, apartment searched, excellent condition, freshly painted windows, new parquet floor, on the garden side. Thanks — I'll keep it].¹³

The shocking realization of overhearing his home described in the words of its Aryanizer makes it clear that, despite his physical presence in the apartment, the child cannot really 'return'. The continuation of the story in the sequel begins with a description of the next 'room' inhabited by the exile: the train compartment. 'Das eigentliche Zimmer des Emigranten ist das Zugabteil, hier spielt sich alles ab' [The real room of the emigrant is the train compartment, here everything plays itself out].¹⁴ The transitory space of the train compartment is no substitute for the familiarity of one's childhood

¹⁰ Marsha L. Rozenblit, 'The Crisis of Identity in the Austrian Republic', in *In Search of Jewish Community. Jewish Identities in Germany and Austria 1918–1933*, ed. by Michael Brenner and Derek J. Penslar (Bloomington, IN, 1998), pp. 134–53 (p. 135).

¹¹ Jews rented approximately 60,000 of the 63,000 apartments they occupied in Vienna in 1938. See Brigitte Bailer-Galanda, Eva Blimlinger and Susanne Kowarc, *'Arisierung' und Rückstellung von Wohnungen in Wien. Die Vertreibung der jüdischen Mieter und Mieterinnen aus ihren Wohnungen und das verhinderte Wohnungsrückstellungsgesetz* (Vienna, 2000), section 1.5. Report available at <http://www.historikerkommission.gv.at>, published by the Austrian *Historikerkommission*.

¹² I am grateful to Evelyn Adunka for these references.

¹³ Wolfgang Georg Fischer, *Wohnungen* (Munich, 1969), p. 207.

¹⁴ Wolfgang Georg Fischer, *Möblierte Zimmer* (Munich, 1972), p. 7.

surroundings, and both novels convey the deep loss not only of *Heimat* but also of the intimate nature of the interiors of one's youth and their function in the construction of identity.

II

With their detailed references to their homes, both Clare's and Fischer's narratives link memory to property, indicating that it has the ability to spark the recollection of past events and emotions. However, as Clare's memoir demonstrates in particular, ownership of property also entails a belief in its transgenerational qualities, i.e., its ability to be passed on to one's heirs. The transgenerational aspects of property and the relationship between property and law raised by legal theorist Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) in the early nineteenth century help clarify why the loss and reclamation of Jewish property after the Holocaust are so closely intertwined with issues of memory and identity in many Austrian Jewish narratives.

For Bentham, who was first to address property's important emotional components in his theories, property represented not merely the object or item possessed, but indicated a more intangible relationship between the owner and what was owned. In his *Theory of Legislation* (1802), Bentham reminds us that it is law alone that enables property to exist, and that from this law the owner draws a certain expectation: 'Property is nothing but a basis of expectation; the expectation of deriving certain advantages from a thing which we are said to possess [. . .]. It is not material, it is metaphysical; it is a mere conception of the mind.' Thus, he argues that the meaning of property has more to do with the relationship between owner and what is owned than an inherent value in the object. Further, law allows the relationship between object and owner to be carried into the future: 'It is only through the protection of law that I am able to inclose a field, and to give myself up to its cultivation with the sure though distant hope of harvest.'¹⁵

Bentham claims that inherent in the meaning of property is an assurance of future ownership, which is why the loss of property can be so hurtful. '*Expectation* is a chain which unites our present existence to our future existence, and which passes beyond us to the generation which is to follow. [. . .] Every attack upon this sentiment produces a distinct and special evil, which may be called a *pain of disappointment*.'¹⁶ Considered in this light, one can more clearly understand the similar pain of disappointment related to the loss of this future access that drove Clare's father to throw his desperate

¹⁵ Jeremy Bentham, *The Theory of Legislation*, trans. from the French of Étienne Dumont by R. Hildreth, 2nd edn (London, 1871), p. 112.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

message from the train. Though his own life was at stake, he could at least try to resist by ensuring that his legacy be retained through the family furnishings. Bentham's ideas help us identify the component of temporal meaning in property that is required for its consideration in conjunction with memory. While Proust's madeleine triggered a nostalgic memory dealing only with the past, confiscated Jewish property also refers to those linkages to the future that have now been broken. And, unlike other triggers of nostalgic memory, these objects also invoke elements of the traumatic and violent history that destroyed the relationship between the property and its Jewish owner.

Already in 1802, Bentham hinted at the dangers of what could happen if laws establishing property ownership and their 'established expectation' were disrupted, foreshadowing the evil that took place under Nazi rule. The failure of law to protect their property was one of the first steps toward the erasure of both the present and future identities of Austrian Jews. By illuminating the links between property and memory through the component of temporality, Bentham's ideas help uncover why the confiscation of Jewish property affected the relationship between Jews and their identities as Austrians on such a fundamental level. However, the urgency of this temporality and the links between property and memory as represented in Austrian Jewish narrative histories are best understood alongside a historical examination of the confiscation and restitution of Jewish property in Austria.

III

Even if most Austrians were not directly involved in the extermination of the country's Jewish population, many were nonetheless eager to strip Jewish citizens of their property. While, in Germany, the elimination of the civil rights and liberties of German Jews that began in 1933 led gradually to systematic Aryanizations, the confiscation of Jewish property in Austria began immediately following the Anschluss on 12 March 1938.¹⁷ Already during the first weeks after this date, eager Viennese began ransacking and plundering Jewish property, despite explicit Nazi regulations against uncontrolled looting. During these so-called 'wilde' [unsanctioned] Aryanizations, Jews were publicly degraded and humiliated, another indication that the property confiscations were closely tied to the stripping of their identity not only as Austrians, but also as human beings.¹⁸ During the course of these events, thousands were arrested, and other Jews forced to wash the streets

¹⁷ *Und keiner war dabei. Dokumente des alltäglichen Antisemitismus in Wien 1938*, ed. by Hans Witek and Hans Safrian (Vienna, 1988), p. 39.

¹⁸ Bailer-Galanda et al., *'Arisierung' und Rückstellung von Wohnungen in Wien*, section 2.2.

with brushes alongside cheering onlookers. Many Jews also took their own lives at this time.

By May 1938, Nazi functionaries systematized the confiscation of property in Austria through an agency called the *Vermögensverkehrsstelle*, and the Austrian system became a model for a functioning, efficient mechanism designed to strip property from Jews in other occupied countries.¹⁹ Under Nazi laws, Jews were required to register assets of more than RM 5000, and then forced to pay heavy taxes. Many Austrians aided the Nazis in forcing Jews to compose detailed property declarations of all assets, and some denounced their Jewish neighbours and terminated their leases. Thereafter, roughly 65,000 Austrian Jews were murdered in concentration camps, ghettos and other locations, and 120,000 were forced to leave Austria. By 1945, only roughly 5000 remained or returned, and their early attempts to obtain compensation and restitution were largely unsuccessful.²⁰

Austria, cultivating the myth set forth in the Moscow Declaration of 1943 and supported by many other countries, considered itself the first victim of Nazi Germany. As such, the government felt no obligation to compensate claimants or restitute Jewish property, despite the fact that most Austrians had welcomed the Anschluss and many had participated eagerly in lootings and Aryanizations.²¹ The dismal post-war economic situation in Austria, including the shortage of apartments, food and material, exacerbated the situation, and Jews were not welcomed back by the local Viennese. In fact, according to a poll in 1946, nearly fifty per cent of the Austrian population were against a return of the Austrian Jews, indicating that anti-Semitism was still prevalent after the war.²² All of these factors contributed to the Austrian government's reluctance to return the property taken from its Jewish population.

Despite a smattering of post-war treaties and restitution laws, many original owners and rightful heirs still encountered difficulties in reclaiming their property. For example, in order to retrieve works of art, one had to pay the Austrian government a fee in order to take possession, as well as to prove that the 'Deutsches Reich' had not been the intended customer. The fact that so many Jews did not own their apartments before the war also remained an obstacle to restitution; only in 2001 did the Austrian government agree to provide a measure of compensation to settle claims for rented apartments.²³ Since so many Jews died in the Holocaust without leaving identifiable heirs, the concept of the 'temporal' aspect of property, or

¹⁹ *Und keiner war dabei*, ed. by Witek and Safrian, p. 11.

²⁰ Bailer-Galanda et al., 'Arisierung' und Rückstellung von Wohnungen in Wien, section 3.

²¹ Simon Wiesenthal, *Recht, nicht Rache. Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt a.M., 1989), p. 336.

²² *Der neue Weg*, 29/30, 15 August 1946.

²³ The Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany, Inc., *Annual Report 2000* (New York, 2001), p. 13.

its inheritability, also became even more crucial during post-war restitution efforts. Under normal circumstances, heirless property reverts to the state. But the crimes of the Holocaust posed extraordinary legal challenges because the state itself had set up the laws under which Jews were murdered and their property expropriated.

The Committee for Jewish Claims on Austria (Claims Committee), the Jewish umbrella organization established in 1953 to negotiate with Austria for compensation on behalf of Nazi victims, faced particular difficulty in reclaiming heirless property in Austria. Reflecting widespread public opinion against compensation in general, the Austrian government refused its return, claiming that to do so would place Jewish interests before the interests of ‘all other Nazi victims’, in effect rendering everybody a victim.²⁴ Yet, the Claims Committee was able to refer to a biblical precedent in its efforts to obtain restitution. In the first Book of Kings, King Ahab murders his neighbour Naboth and expropriates his vineyard. The prophet Elijah, speaking for God, asks Ahab, ‘Hast thou killed and also taken possession?’ (1 Kings 21. 19), an act punishable by death. The use of this example as a moral basis for the return of heirless Jewish property indicates that, even in biblical times, the act of murdering *and* inheriting the spoils of the victim — and thus the deeper significance of property — was recognized as a significant crime.

The Austrian State Treaty of 1955, which ended the Allied occupation and established Austria’s sovereignty, finally included the concept of utilizing heirless and unclaimed property for the benefit of the surviving victims. However, the difficulties connected with the restitution of Jewish property, compounded by the issue of heirless property, continued even thereafter.²⁵ When considered together with the temporal aspects of property, it becomes clear how these issues of property restitution affected those Austrian Jews who had lost their ‘inheritance’, not only in a material sense, but also on a deeper level. For Austrian Jewish *réémigrés*, the fact that property remained largely in the hands of its Aryanizers complicated their relationship to their former identities after their return. Unlike international Jewish groups, which had the privilege of pursuing justice from outside Austria, those who returned were also concerned with recovering their identities, which did not simply involve returning to Austria and reclaiming property or citizenship. The narrative histories of Jean Améry, Friedrich Torberg and Karl Farkas reflect many of these concerns and help illustrate the role of property and restitution in the construction of their post-war identities.

²⁴ Gustav Jellinek, ‘Die Geschichte der österreichischen Wiedergutmachung’, in *The Jews of Austria. Essays on their Life, History and Destruction*, ed. by Josef Fränkel (London, 1967), pp. 395–426 (p. 404).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

IV

Austrian-born writer Jean Améry, while living in exile in France, dealt with the full meaning of the loss of *Heimat* through his essays. He saw himself as banished from both individual and collective identities — ‘Ich war kein Ich mehr und lebte nicht in einem Wir’ [I was no longer an I and did not live within a We].²⁶ Améry claimed after the war that what he had always believed were deep bonds to his homeland actually had been based on an ‘existential misunderstanding’: ‘Wir aber hatten nicht das Land verloren, sondern mußten erkennen, daß es niemals unser Besitz gewesen war. Für uns war, was mit diesem Land und seinen Menschen zusammenhing, ein Lebensmißverständnis’ [We, however, had not lost our country, but rather had to recognize that it had never belonged to us. For us, all that was in connection with this country and its people had been an existential misunderstanding].²⁷ Améry, who changed his name from Hans Maier to reflect this loss of identity, did not allow himself a ‘return’ to his past identity in any form. That Améry chose to refer to his and other Jewish Austrians’ relationship to their country as ‘Besitz’ [property] that they never really owned describes pain linked to ownership that runs even deeper than that noted by Bentham. His ‘existential misunderstanding’ is directly linked to the pain not of ownership and loss, but of the recognition that a possession of Austrian identity never really existed. In the end, this may have proved to be too painful a way to continue living: Améry committed suicide in 1978.

Améry’s words and acts indicate that a full recognition of the discrepancy between their pre-war and post-war lives may have been impossible for many. Studies of Austrian reémigrés indicate that their return was already often deeply traumatic, not least because they were not welcomed; their presence in Austria marred the Austrians’ attempts to reconstruct their own seamless past as victims of the Nazis.²⁸ Destitute and hungry, Jewish reémigrés (totalling an estimated 10,000 by 1949) who sought to recover their original residences were often met with anger and frustration on the part of Aryanizers and restitution authorities alike.²⁹ Fear of rousing anti-Semitic sentiments undoubtedly also kept Jews who returned to Vienna from attempting to reclaim what they had owned. Surprisingly, however, some who returned established successful public careers in post-war Austria as writers, entertainers and intellectuals. By continuing their pre-war careers

²⁶ Jean Améry, ‘Wieviel Heimat braucht der Mensch?’, in Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne. Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten* (Stuttgart, 1977), pp. 74–101 (p. 78).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁸ See Jacqueline Vansant, *Reclaiming Heimat. Trauma and Mourning in Memoirs by Jewish Austrian Reémigrés* (Detroit, 2001).

²⁹ Robert Knight, ‘“Neutrality” Not Sympathy. Jews in Post-War Austria’, in *Austrians and Jews in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Robert S. Wistrich (London, 1992), pp. 220–33 (p. 222).

in Vienna and, in some cases, achieving even greater success, these reémigrés reclaimed the ‘cultural property’ that was the literature, art, and music created by Austrian Jews before 1938. Unlike reclaiming the physical property of real estate and material items, a process which required an admission of the rupture in identity that occurred in exile, laying claim to pre-war Austrian Jewish cultural property often could be achieved by continuing one’s career in Vienna. The post-war narrative histories of Friedrich Torberg and Karl Farkas show how recovering cultural property in this sense could be less traumatic than reclaiming material possessions.

Friedrich Torberg, who was born in 1908 in Vienna, belonged to that group of inter-war Austrian writers, many of them Jewish, who longed for the days of the old Monarchy.³⁰ Torberg returned to Vienna in 1951 from exile in the United States and Europe, ostensibly to seek better career chances and to alleviate his poor financial situation. Back in Vienna, Torberg was more interested in focusing on anti-Communist challenges than anti-Nazi ones; in 1954 he founded the cultural political magazine *FORUM*, financed in part by the CIA. His collection of nostalgic vignettes looking back at Jewish life under the Habsburg Monarchy, *Die Tante Jolesch* (1975), became one of his most popular works. In these stories, Torberg did not wish to criticize a world that let its Jews die out, but rather attempted to transform the memory of their loss into a nostalgic one. As he noted, his goal was to affect his audience so that ‘möglichst viele Nichtjuden den Tod des letzten deutsch-jüdischen Schriftstellers als Verlust empfinden’ [as many non-Jews as possible would regard the death of the last German-Jewish writer as a loss].³¹

Thus, the stories of *Tante Jolesch* remain largely uncritical of Austria’s past, for they celebrate Austrian Jewish culture without asking the reader to consider why it no longer exists; indeed, the title figure dies peacefully in 1932.³² The fact that Torberg wrote a laudatory poem in honour of Austrian sports hero Matthias Sindelar, although he knew that Sindelar ran an Aryanized coffeehouse, also indicates the extent to which Torberg was willing to overlook Austria’s post-war silence in his writings.³³ He even extended this willingness to his rather surprising description of fellow reémigré Karl Farkas: ‘Er hat die Emigration nicht nur überlebt, sondern überstanden. Er kam zurück, als ob er niemals fortgewesen wäre. Er war der gleiche wie zuvor. Er war der große Alte und der ewig Junge’ [He didn’t just survive emigration, he overcame it. He returned as if he had never been away. He was the same as before. He was the grand old man and the eternal

³⁰ Frank Tichy, *Friedrich Torberg. Ein Leben in Widersprüchen* (Salzburg and Vienna, 1995), p. 23.

³¹ Letter from Friedrich Torberg to Max Brod, 15 March 1955, as cited in Tichy, *Friedrich Torberg*, p. 36.

³² Friedrich Torberg, *Die Erben der Tante Jolesch* (Munich, 1981), p. 2.

³³ Tichy, *Friedrich Torberg*, p. 26.

youth].³⁴ Torberg's description, in which he views Farkas as having survived 'emigration' and not exile, posits Farkas's return as a triumphal success, without reference to the pain or trauma of having been forced to leave. Impressed rather than perplexed by Farkas's seemingly unchanged nature, Torberg perhaps ascribed to Farkas his own desire to be a public figure who remained unchanged by the events of the past.

Farkas himself exhibited a complicated range of emotions upon his return and, as with Torberg, his public persona overrode his more complicated feelings. Born in 1893 in Vienna, Farkas managed to escape and settle in the United States after the Anschluss, although his family members did not; one sister and a nephew were killed in Theresienstadt, another sister died in a camp in Poland, and his pre-war cabaret partner, Fritz Grünbaum, was also murdered by the Nazis. Farkas returned to Vienna in 1946 to rejoin his Austrian wife and son, and he quickly rebuilt a successful career as a comedic performer and, eventually, radio and television personality.

However, others took issue with Farkas's lighthearted public appearances and sketches for their lack of engagement with Austria's past, as well as for their blandness in comparison to his pre-war shows. In stark contrast to Torberg's laudatory description of Farkas's post-war career, Georg Clare writes: 'I well remembered the hilarious evenings I had spent at this cabaret [Simpel] as a youth when Farkas and Grünbaum had sprayed us with their bubbling wit. What I saw in the late 1950s was a pathetic, a lifeless copy. No, not even that — a poor imitation rather. How could Farkas be so witless, how could he be so dull?'³⁵ Clare directly attributes Farkas's changed persona to the palpable absence of a Jewish audience in Vienna. Yet another critic referred to Farkas's life story as 'eine Geschichte der Verdrängungen, der Flucht aus der Geschichte [. . .]. Manche Witze sind zum Weinen, weil sie so viel verdrängen' [a story of repression, a flight from history. Some jokes make one cry because they repress so much].³⁶

Notwithstanding this, there is evidence that Farkas was well aware of the impact of his deep personal losses of the war years. The final two stanzas of 'Abschied von New York, 1946' [Leaving New York, 1946], a poem written on the eve of his return to Vienna, hint at an attempt at mourning beneath his later light-hearted veneer:

³⁴ Friedrich Torberg, 'Karl Farkas. Der unwiderrufflich Letzte', in *Die Erben der Tante Jolesch* (Munich, 1981), pp. 230–34, (p. 230).

³⁵ George Clare, 'Last Waltz in Vienna: A Postscript', in *Jews, Antisemitism and Culture in Vienna*, ed. by Ivar Oxaal, Michael Pollak and Gerhard Botz (London, 1897), pp. 234–40 (pp. 238–39).

³⁶ [Richard Reichensperger], 'Erstaunliche Unschuld eines "Blitzdichters"', *Der Standard*, 4 April 2001, p. 13. I am grateful to Elana Shapira for this reference.

[. . .] Und dann — nach Wien . . . hat man dort wohl begriffen,
Was die ‘Gesinnung’ an dem Volk verbrach?
Hofft man vielleicht — trotzdem die Trümmer rauchen —
Noch immer auf ‘Mir wer’n kan Richter brauchen’,
Obzwar der Richter längst sein Urteil sprach?

[. . .] Drum hör ich auf, mein Schicksal zu skandieren
Denn ich erkenne klar das End vom Lied:
Ein Narr ist jeder — (Joe, another bottle!)
Der, ob er Philosoph ist oder Trottel,
In der Vergangenheit die Zukunft sieht. . .

Das ist mein letzter Abend in New York —
Was dann folgt, ist im Nebelgrau verborgen. . .
Drum wend ich nicht nach vorwärts meinen Blick —
Ich kehre lieber um und geh zurück —
Ins Morgen . . .³⁷

[And then — to Vienna . . . did they really understand there,
What the ‘harmless ideology’ brought upon the people?
Do they still hope, perhaps — despite the smoking ruins —
for ‘we will need no judge’,
although the judge spoke his judgment long ago?

Thus I cease to read out my fate
Because I clearly recognize the end of the song:
A fool is one who — (Joe, another bottle!),
be he a philosopher or an idiot,
sees the future in the past . . .

This is my last evening in New York —
what then follows is hidden in foggy grey. . .
For that I do not turn my gaze forward —
I rather turn around and return —
to tomorrow.]

Unlike Farkas’s later comedic sketches for television and radio, the rhyming verses of this poem are filled with his speculations and doubts about the post-war Viennese and their continued ties to Nazi ideology. Yet, despite his apprehensions, he returns to Vienna — though facing backwards, emphasizing his difficulty in imagining the future in the city *without* his past, and yet berating himself as a fool for doing so. In one sense, ‘returning to tomorrow’ echoes the function of property as outlined by Bentham, with its simultaneous references to both the past and the future. Property’s unique temporal condition as a mediating element between past and future thus

³⁷ Karl Farkas, ‘Abschied von New York, 1946’, in *Geschichte im Gedicht. Das politische Gedicht der Austro-Amerikanischen Exilautoren des Schicksalsjahres 1938*, ed. by Mimi Grossberg (New York, 1982), pp. 85–86.

underscores Farkas's recognition of the impossibility of his return. Though he realizes the futility of trying to recover the past, or a past identity, he also cannot help going back, though his return is anything but triumphant.

Similarly, Friedrich Torberg's poem dealing with his own return to Austria, entitled 'Die Rückkehr' [The Return], reveals a keen awareness of and desire to write about the impossibility of his return to a world he had never left:

War ich denn jemals fort?
War es denn jemals anders?
[. . .] Und jetzt erst,
Jetzt, da die Zeit sich wieder in eins fügt,
da dem Ablauf ich eingefügt bin,
löst sich die Starre,
löst sich der Schritt.
Aber wo ich auch gehe,
Flattern die dunklen Gewänder der Toten um mich.³⁸
[Was I ever gone?
Was it ever different?
And only now,
Now, that time fits together again,
that I fit into its passing,
the stiffness loosens
the step loosens
But wherever I go,
the dark robes of the dead flutter around me.]

Torberg's poem, like the stories of *Tante Jolesch*, displays a longing for a return to an uninterrupted past. However, here Torberg indicates the depths to which the memory of the past continues to haunt his daily life. The poem begins with an intense questioning of the meaning of his return and ends with an acknowledgement that only as time goes on does it become easier for him to stay. Time will 'fit together' again, and Torberg will find a place for himself in it, but he does not believe that his will be an easy return. He remains haunted by the dead through the image of their ghost-like dark robes — their clothing, their possessions — which represent their simultaneous absence and presence in his mind. Just as objects of confiscated property serve as triggers of past lives and past trauma, here the dark robes similarly evoke the memory of the dead and function to bring them back into the present: often what remains of those who died is their possessions.³⁹

³⁸ Friedrich Torberg, 'Die Rückkehr', in *Lebenslied. Gedichte* (Munich, 1958), p. 57. Many thanks to Christoph Meinrenken for his assistance in the translation of both poems.

³⁹ That everyday objects such as clothing, glasses and other personal effects can evoke such strong emotions is also evident from the display of massive piles of such items at various Holocaust museums and memorial sites.

Their poems also show that both Torberg and Farkas, though unable or unwilling to see their identities as 'existential misunderstandings', do recognize that they cannot escape the past, even for the sake of the future. In this sense the parallel between the physical property formerly owned by Austrian Jews and the 'cultural property' they produced before 1938 proves helpful in accounting for the discrepancies between the content of the poems above and their authors' post-war public personalities. For Torberg and Farkas, suppressing any negative reflections on the past may have been the price of achieving post-war success. Instead of demanding the return of physical property, they, and many others, attempted to 'reclaim' the lost cultural property of pre-war Jewish writers, artists, and entertainers by becoming active again in Austrian cultural life, albeit one without a flourishing Jewish component.

The narratives of Clare and Fischer, as well as those of Farkas and Torberg, indicate that property, whether physical or cultural, as well as the attempts for its restitution, figured largely for many Jews in the reconstruction of their post-war lives in Austria. Relying upon a biblical principle, Jewish organizations were armed with a moral argument for the return of physical property. For many *réémigrés*, however, actively reclaiming lost physical property would have meant an admission of the break which occurred in the years 1938–1945 and recognition that the promise of inheritability, the promise of the future and their own lives as Austrians, had been forever shattered. Demanding the restitution of physical property was too difficult for many precisely because of the deep temporal significance beyond its material value. Insisting upon its return would have forced a painful rethinking of fundamental questions of identity and would have reopened a past that was easier to leave behind. Reclaiming cultural property, on the other hand, was perhaps less painful as it involved the continuation of a cultural tradition, albeit under very different conditions, rather than the recognition of its absence.

V

That the restitution of Aryanized property has remained an issue throughout the past decade, fifty years after the end of World War II, attests to property's importance in the construction of both individual and collective memory. Such issues have particular resonance in present-day Europe, as restitution leads to an uncovering of a past that had been glazed over during the years of the Cold War, when property was taken over by the state. Indeed, property originally owned by Jews in the former Communist-bloc countries would have been returned to its Aryanizers in many cases, had Jewish organizations not pressed for its return to its pre-Nazi era Jewish owners.

Scholars such as Dan Diner have begun to explore the theoretical implications of post-Cold War property restitution for history and memory:

Reprivatization — not privatization — reinvokes the transgenerational dimension of memory. Willy-nilly, restitution of private property acts as a means of remembrance. By contrast, the post-war nationalizations and socializations carried out by the communists in Central and East-Central Europe had just the opposite effect — i.e., the effect of neutralizing memory; not just memory concerning the legal rights of private property, bound to mere objects, but memory of times passed away — times, that were connected to *longue-durée* pre-war as well as short *durée* traumatic war events.⁴⁰

As Diner notes, the restitution of private Jewish property now opens up a window to the past that had been locked when that property was taken over by the state after the war. The recent reprivatizations in Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War, with their ripple effect on Western European countries, provide evidence that property can spark collective — as well as individual — memory. Indeed, the memories invoked by the return of former Jewish property in Eastern Europe triggered renewed collective efforts for the restitution of Aryanized property in many Central and Western European countries, including Austria. These events indicate that property is thus transgenerational not only in the sense of its inheritability by individuals, but also in its ability to affect collective national identities.

The timeline of the restitution of Jewish property in Austria confirms Diner's hypothesis about the ability of property to spark transgenerational collective memory. Immediately after the end of the war, Austria attempted — physically — to reconstruct the past as if nothing had happened. Aryanized businesses continued to be run by those who had profited from them, despite the efforts of individual claimants and the Claims Committee. And, in contrast to destroyed cities in Germany that were newly rebuilt, the demolished city of Vienna was carefully reconstructed street by street to resemble its appearance before the war. However, all remnants of the earlier Jewish community were ripped down, including intact synagogues and houses.⁴¹ These attempts to erase physically the traces of past crimes paralleled an overall atmosphere of silence and, as such, represented the final step in the progression of the rupture caused by the disturbance of the expectation of ownership. Property restitution or compensation for the loss of that property, which often occurred only decades later, became a necessary measure to begin to heal that rupture, even if it could never be fully repaired.

⁴⁰ Dan Diner, unpublished paper, 'Restitution and Memory: The Second World War, the Holocaust and the Construction of a Canon of Common Values in a Uniting Europe'.

⁴¹ Tina Walzer and Stephan Templ, *Unser Wien. 'Arisierung' auf österreichisch* (Berlin, 2001), pp. 74–75.

According to George Clare, after emigration his parents 'loved every single stick of furniture, every sheet, every cup and saucer more now than they had ever done. These things were all that remained of their years of happiness, home life and, above all, security, so sadly absent from their lives now'.⁴² While it is not hard to understand the longing for the familiar, material items of one's home, an elaboration of Améry's on the links between *Heimat* and security illuminates the depths of meaning of those interior worlds for the construction of identity:

Heimat ist Sicherheit, sage ich [. . .]. Nur jene Signale, die wir sehr früh aufnahmen, deren Deutung wir zugleich mit der Besitzergreifung der Außenwelt erlernten, werden zu Konstitutionselementen und Konstanten unserer Persönlichkeit: So wie man die Muttersprache erlernt, ohne ihre Grammatik zu kennen, so erfährt man die heimische Umwelt. Muttersprache und Heimatwelt wachsen mit uns, wachsen in uns hinein und werden so zur Vertrautheit, die uns Sicherheit verbürgt.⁴³

[Home is security, I say. Only those signals that we absorbed very early, whose meaning we learned while we learned to gain possession of our external world, become constituent elements and constants of our personality: just as one learns one's mother tongue without knowing its grammar, so does one experience one's native surroundings. Mother tongue and home world grow with us, grow within us and thus become the familiarity that guarantees our security.]

Along with the commonly cited examples of language and landscape, their surroundings were also crucial aspects of identity for many Austrian Jews. As such, their apartments and the furnishings they contained should be acknowledged as an important part of all that was lost after 1938. The collective and individual memories sparked by efforts for their restitution from immediately after the war until today point to property's deep emotional significance. Some Austrian Jews were able to recover their belongings, but many remained shut out of a return in this physical sense. The narratives of authors such as Torberg and Farkas, which focus on recovering cultural 'property' or their heritage as producers of culture in Vienna, as well as those of Améry, underscore *reémigrés'* pain in acknowledging past losses. In no case was a full recovery of past identity possible, but the ability to surround oneself with the objects from one's past surely would have aided those who survived, not only materially, but also spiritually. That most of this property was not returned after the war is now part of another layer of transgenerational memory in post-war Austria.

⁴² Clare, *Last Waltz*, p. 241.

⁴³ Améry, 'Wieviel Heimat braucht der Mensch?', pp. 83–84.