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PRESS RELEASE

**“Seven Crates of Jewish Material”
On Looting and Rediscovery, from 1938 to the Present**

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From the second half of the 19th century onward, a great many Jews in Bavaria moved to the cities or emigrated abroad, and a large number of rural congregations faced the threat of disappearing altogether. What remained were the sometimes splendid synagogues with their exquisite ritual objects. To save these from being lost, the *Verband Bayerischer Israelitischer Gemeinden* (Association of Israelite Congregations in Bavaria) commissioned the art historian Theodor Harburger (1887-1949) to visit these places and document the synagogues' holdings. The objects photographed and described by Harburger at that time have either been scattered around the globe since then or else their whereabouts is unknown. Eighty years after the *Kristallnacht*, when the furnishings of the synagogues were either desecrated or confiscated, little hope exists today of ever finding the ritual objects which disappeared and of returning these to the descendants of the original owners.

Against this background, a spectacular find was made in 2016 in the depot of what is now the Museum für Franken in Würzburg. In the process of cataloguing its holdings for the first time since 1945, the museum came across several crates of Jewish ritual objects, some of which had been burned beyond recognition while others were mere fragments. Bernhard Purin, Director of the Jewish Museum Munich, has been able to complete an appraisal of these items over the past two years and, with the help of the documentation compiled by Theodor Harburger, determine that many of these objects came from seven synagogues in Würzburg and the surrounding area. A research project in collaboration with the Landesstelle für die nichtstaatlichen Museen in Bayern and sponsored by the German Lost Art Foundation has since revealed that around one third of the some 150 objects were confiscated from the synagogues during the *Kristallnacht* in 1938. Sources reveal that “seven crates of Jewish material” had subsequently been handed over to the museum.

The exhibition is the first presentation of these long-forgotten, looted Jewish ritual objects—which include valuable Torah ornaments, Hanukkah lamps, Seder plates, and many others—and their history. It opens on the first exhibition level with four objects which were already in the holdings of what was then the Fränkisches Luitpold Museum (now the Museum für Franken) before 1933. These include a bell-shaped Kiddush cup from 1730/40, acquired in 1917 from the furniture and antique dealer S. Seligsberger of Würzburg. The subject of the museum building itself and the ritual

objects which were stored there after being confiscated during the *Kristallnacht* in 1938 and destroyed during the bombing of Würzburg on March 16, 1945, is also addressed.

The looted ritual objects, some of which are of great art-historical interest, can be viewed in the next section. They are presented in seven tall, fully glazed display cabinets, made to measure individually. Each cabinet stands for one of the seven places in Lower Franconia and their former synagogues, from where the objects originally came: Arnstein, Ebelsbach, Gochsheim, Heidingsfeld, Miltenberg, Schweinfurt, and Würzburg. A freestanding, Baroque, wooden Torah ark, donated for use in the small weekday synagogue opened in 1924 by the Seligsberger family who ran a furniture and antiques business, concludes the exhibition on this level together with a 20-meter-long industrial shelving unit for those objects which have not been identified to date. This gives some idea of how the items were stored up until now in the museum depot.

Thanks to inscriptions, mostly in Hebrew, it was possible to determine the names of a number of donors who gifted these objects to the synagogues at that time. Their biographies, some of which date back to the 18th century, as well as those of their descendants, can also be traced in the exhibition. The path of life of many met a gruesome end during the Shoah. Several, on the other hand, led out of Germany to different places around the world. One such path is that of Ricka Lehmann, née Guggenheim/er (1836-1929), who donated a pair of Torah finials (cat. no. 41) to Schweinfurt Synagogue in 1906. Her son, Norbert, was deported from Nuremberg to Riga-Jungfernhof, a sub-camp to the Riga Ghetto, on November 29, 1941, where he was murdered. Her daughter, Emmy, was deported from Nuremberg on March 24, 1942, to Izbica Ghetto and later declared dead. Her second son, Michael, was the only one who succeeded in emigrating to the USA with his family in March 1938. His son, Robert L. Lehman, was ordained there as rabbi in 1954. In 1991, he visited Schweinfurt on the occasion of the city's 1200 anniversary.

On the second exhibition level, visitors are confronted with a large-format picture taken from the Gestapo's documentary photographs covering the deportation of Jews from Lower Franconia between 1941 and 1943. Related to this space, there is an installation with fragmented contemporary views of the seven respective towns and cities, analog to the footprint of the glass display cabinets. Quotations from Jews from each of these places explain their relationship to the ritual objects. This exhibition commemorates these people and the ancestors—members of former rural congregations in Bavaria—and the objects which were once so precious to them.

An exhibition of the Jewish Museum Munich in collaboration with the Museum für Franken - Staatliches Museum für Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte, Würzburg, sponsored by the German Lost Art Foundation and supported by the Landesstelle für die nichtstaatlichen Museen in Bayern.

Curator: Bernhard Purin, assisted by Kerstin Dembsky
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Torah-finial from the Würzburg synagogue
Berlin after 1887, silver, © Museum für Franken
Photo: Klaus Bauer, Hahn Media, Würzburg

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Museum für Franken
Staatliches Museum für Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte
in Würzburg



Ein Museum der Landeshauptstadt München