

A LOOMING INDICTMENT SQUEEZES ARIEL SHARON

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COVERING ISRAEL

THE JEWISH WORLD

RUSSIA'S JEWISH TYCOONS: ANGELS & SINNERS

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

**Charges: Tax evasion, fraud
Charity: \$50 million this year**



On the Hunt for Oil at the Dead Sea

A Young Syrian Pitches Reform

U.S.: \$3.50, ISRAEL: NIS14.00
CANADA: \$5.00, U.K.: £2.25



ADAM SACKS

Can I Have That Vase?

Holocaust Memorial Day is observed on April 18.

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE WE SAID TO FRIENDS who were moving: “Could I get that when you leave?” and pointed at some object that we knew they couldn’t take with them? This situation comes to mind when I reflect on the fact that for many millions of Europeans, complicity in the Holocaust was first and foremost a case of taking advantage of Jews who weren’t able to say no — a kind of petty larceny on a vast scale. If only about 150,000 people were directly engaged in killing Jews and running the camps, the number of neighbors of Jews who gained materially extends easily into the multiple millions. Jewish loot became theirs, and it stayed theirs.

With all the publicity in recent years over the large corporations, banks and insurance companies who enriched themselves at the expense of the doomed Jews, we tend to forget about everyday, small-scale goings-on in neighborhoods and communities. What happened to the Jews’ movable belongings? And I don’t mean only gold and jewelry and valuable works of art, which have also had their share of attention.

Apart from the “Can I have that?” situation, ordinary Germans also enjoyed the fruits of the official robbery of Jewish household goods. One of the central documents of the Nazi era in Germany was known as the *Vermoegenserklärung*, the property declaration. At the Jewish Museum in Berlin, a facsimile of the property declaration of Leo Baeck, the so-called “pope of the German Jews” and a father of Progressive Judaism, is on display. Filled out by Baeck on April 2, 1943, before he was deported to Theresienstadt, his name is listed with the obligatory “Israel” as middle name. It was selected from the 55,000 property declarations from Berlin alone that lie perfectly preserved in the city’s archives. Unlike Baeck, most of the other heads of households and their families failed to survive.

Starting in 1941, Jews received this 17-page document in the mail, together with their deportation notice. It included a detailed inventory checklist of furniture and household items, down to the smallest object in each home and apartment — from chairs, carpets and coats to washcloths and even napkins. After a letter citing relevant legislation, came the punch: a blunt statement to the effect that everything now belonged to the German government. This

came attached to a final bank statement, the remaining contents of which now were confiscated by the state.

Also folded into the property declaration were the final gas and electric bills of the person to be deported. Specially printed onto the electric bill in bold type were the words: Form for Evacuated Jews. “Evacuated” — a Nazi code word, a euphemism disguising their crime with a word connoting rescue. The bills, 55,000 of them in Berlin, arrived in the course of a year and a half on the desk of a clerk at the electric company, who most likely was not even a Nazi party member. What did he think “evacuation” meant? The electric company in question, the Bewag, is the same company to which I paid my electric bills during my stay in Berlin.

On the day of the deportee’s departure, vans arrived at their homes and were loaded with the household goods. These were brought to large depots and sorted. Photos of the warehouses show

hundreds of stoves, scores of pianos, thousands of chairs. At first, auctions were held, and the goods were sold off for a fraction of their value. The precious belongings of the Jewish upper-middle class were now within reach of the working class. During the war, when shortages in everything prevailed, housemaids in fur coats were not an uncommon sight. This stolen property was given away at no cost to households who could prove they were dispossessed because of the Allied bombings. In Hamburg alone, 100,000 households profited from such handouts.

There are plenty of dramatic and harrowing accounts of micro-robbery across Europe, such as the German officials who scoured the ancient cemetery in Thessaloniki desecrating

the graves in search of buried gold and jewels. Let us pause instead to remember the countless times, as related in fragments by survivors, when neighbors would approach Jews before deportation and their farewell would be: “Could I have that vase on the mantelpiece, the one I always admired... now that you won’t be needing it anymore?” I ask myself, when that family or its descendants gather for a meal nowadays, is that vase on the table? That small object that was allowed to assimilate and survive, while its owners were not.

Adam Sacks, a New York writer and filmmaker, worked at the Jewish Museum in Berlin from 2001 until 2003. His documentary “Kazimierz 2003: Beyond The List” will premiere at the YIVO Institute in New York on April 18.



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