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Weltmuseum Wien

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Provenance research

Provenance researcher

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The aim of provenance research in the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna is to verify the acquisitions during the Nazi era from 1938 to 1945 and those after the war.

The research focuses on ethnographic items from various regions in the world, books, photographs and pictures.

Not all of the dossiers established to date have been submitted to the Advisory Board because many of the cases involve “ownerless” objects (assigned to the museum by various National Socialist departments including the Volkswohlfahrt [NSV] a Nazi welfare organisation), as well as acquisitions from auction houses or loans.

The museum has decided that, once attempts to identify the heirs have been completed – a process that is proving to be very difficult –, it will restitute loans from victims of National Socialism to the legal successors on its own initiative.

One central problem of provenance research at the Museum of Ethnology is the clear identification of objects, which are often described imprecisely in the National Socialist seizure documents, and of which numerous identical or similar objects exist.

This problem is particularly acute in the case of the more than 80 objects acquired after 1938 and still held by the Museum from the Anton and Walter Exner collection, the origins of which partly may be problematic. The Museum has therefore decided to enter these objects in the National Fund Database.

Research is also being carried out to verify (where possible from the existing documents) whether the holdings of the old Jewish Museum in Vienna that were transferred to the Museum of Ethnology for safekeeping by the National Socialists in 1938 were all returned to the Vienna Jewish Community after 1945.

translated by Nick Somers, edited by National Fund