



The VUGESTA (The Gestapo Office for the Disposal of the Property of Jewish Emigrants)

On September 7, 1940 an organization in Vienna called the Vugesta started operating. It can be considered the main center for the redistribution of stolen private property of Jewish Austrians during the NS rule.[1] The Gestapo Office for the Disposal of the Property of Jewish Emigrants was expressly created as an organization for the aryanization of Jewish property and its utilization for the Aryan population[2]. During the first years after the Anschluss the NS regime concentrated primarily on the removal goods which had been prepared for export of displaced Jewish persons. People forced to escape had provided after having negotiated their way through governmental harassment the packed removal goods – so called lifts – to the freight forwarders before their departure. After the beginning of War World Two these lifts remained, however, in the possession of the freight forwarders. Removal goods still on their way remained at the relevant stop-overs.[3] The later sale of these removal goods by the VUGESTA was intended to cover storage costs and other charges. Most of the so raced money were payed to the regional tax offices in Vienna and Berlin.[4]

The freight forwarders were obliged to notify the VUGESTA of all those removal lifts whose owners appeared racially suspicious. In cooperation with the Gestapo the confiscation of removal goods was officially declared.[5] Originally it was planned to have all confiscated removal goods auctioned off via the Viennese auction house Dorotheum. In view of the large quantity of expropriated property, the VUGESTA reverted as of 1941 back to the possibility of selling the goods on the open market. Distributing locations were located in the 2nd and 3rd district of Vienna.[6] Socially disadvantaged, young couples and those injured in the war were preferred as clients.[7] Representatives of the Gestapo, NSDAP and German Armed Forces received, however, special permissions. The authorities bought furniture at valuation prices.[8]

Goods with a valuation value of more than 1,000 Reichsmark continued to be transferred to the Dorotheum by the VUGESTA.[9] Hans Posse, Hitler's special representative for the Führer Museum in Linz, was convinced that the entire Führer's prerogative would be undermined if a sale on the open market was possible in all these cases.[10] As such these pieces were also subject to the Führer's prerogative. If Posse was not interested in a piece of art held by the VUGESTA, others got a chance; museums had a preemptive right, followed by appraisal officers of the VUGESTA – in particular Bernhard Witke or Anton Grimm, who ran their own antique shops, as well as NS figures, art dealers and other people enjoying preferential status. Once the most popular pieces were distributed, the remainder went to museums, dealers and private persons via public auctions.[11]

At the end of 1943 most of the suitable removal goods were seized and disposed of via a sale on the open market or the Dorotheum. At the Gestapo's insistence the VUGESTA concentrated at this time also on the disposal of residential furnishings of deported people.[12] The furniture disposal point Krummbaumgasse operated by Bernhard Witke and Anton Grimm worked closely with the Central Office for Jewish Emigration initiated by Adolf Eichmann. The appraisal officers received addresses and keys of residences, which were then emptied of furnishings by forced labor.[13] During the course of its nearly five year operation, the VUGESTA generated five million Reichsmark through sales on the open market. In addition, the VUGESTA generated a further ten million Reichsmark through the sale of objects via the Dorotheum. The profit of these sales flowed into the treasury of the German Reich.[14]

[1] Robert Holzbauer, *Einziehung volks- und staatsfeindlichen Vermögens im Lande Österreich – Die VUGESTA – Die Verwertungsstelle für jüdisches Umzugsgut der Gestapo*, (2000) 1-2 Spurensuche 38 (quoted hereafter as: Holzbauer, *Vugesta*).

[2] Quoted in: Anderl G, Blaschitz E, Loitfellner S, *Die Arisierung von Mobilien und die Verwaltungsstelle für jüdisches Umzugsgut*, in: Clemens Jabloner, et al. (publ.), *Arisierung von Mobilien* (= publications of the Austrian Historical Commission, vol. 15), Vienna-Munich, 2004, at 108 (quoted hereafter as: *Arisierung von Mobilien*).

[3] Ibid, at 108.

[4] Holzbauer, *Vugesta*, at 49.

[5] Loitfellner S, *Die Rolle der Verwaltungsstelle für jüdisches Umzugsgut der Geheimen Staatspolizei (Vugesta) im NS-Kunstraub*, in: Gabriele Anderl, Alexandra Caruso (publ.), *NS-Kunstraub in Österreich und die Folgen*, Innsbruck, 2005, at 112 (quoted hereafter as: Loitfellner, *Vugesta*).

[6] Anderl, *Arisierung von Mobilien*, at 123; Holzbauer, *Vugesta*, at 42.

[7] Anderl, *Arisierung von Mobilien*, at 124f.

[8] Ibid, at 125.

[9] Ibid, at 123.

[10] Quoted in: Loitfellner, *Vugesta*, at 114.

[11] Loitfellner S, *NS-Kunstraub und Restitution in Österreich. Institutionen – Akteure – Nutznießer*, in: Verena Pawlowsky, Harald Wendelin (publ.), *Enteignete Kunst. Raub und Rückgabe. Österreich von 1938 bis heute*, Vienna, 2006, at 17f.

[12] Anderl, *Arisierung von Mobilien* (quoted in note 2), at 134f.

[13] Loitfellner, *Vugesta*, at 113; Anderl, *Arisierung von Mobilien*, at 143.

[14] Loitfellner, *Vugesta*, at 112.

