Georg Steindorff and his Collection

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The Bundesamt für Zentrale Dienste und Offene Vermögensfragen (the federal office, that deals with restitution affairs) decided in 2009, that the collection of Professor Steindorff that was currently held by the Egyptian Museum Georg Steindorff in Leipzig had to be ceded to the Jewish Claims Conference (JCC). The University of Leipzig went to court to argue against this decision as it was illegal and also went against the express wishes of Steindorff’s last surviving relative.

The Background

The starting point of the story is the sale of 400 objects from the private collection of Professor Steindorff (1861-1951). Professor Dr. Georg Steindorff was full professor for Egyptology in Leipzig from 1904 until well after the retirement age in 1934—well into the Nazi period. He initiated several excavations in many sites throughout Egypt between 1903 and 1931. He also legally purchased antiquities in Egypt between 1895 and 1936, and added them to the collection of the university to supplement the objects that were already part of the museum and that had been discovered in his own excavations.

Georg Steindorff reached the age of retirement in 1931 at the age of 70; nonetheless he remained in office and was asked by the university even after the Nazi takeover in May 1933. However, after his retirement in 1934 he was forbidden to teach because of his Jewish ancestry (he had converted to Protestantism in about 1884). Despite the official structures, Professor Steindorff remained a respected and valued member of the academic community (member of academies and institutes like the German Archaeological Institute till 1938). His successor, Professor Wolf, arranged facilities for Steindorff to continue his scientific work in the rooms and offices of the museum. Additionally, until the summer of 1937, he remained editor of the important periodical Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Alterthümer that is published until today.

On August 5th of 1936, Steindorff offered his personal collection of Egyptian antiquities to the University of Leipzig’s museum for the price of 8,000 Reichsmarks (RM). He had, in pencil, calculated a total of 10,259 RM based on individual items; however, he knew that to sell them as a group a lower price was more feasible. Furthermore, Wolf has written that Steindorff said that he wanted to give the objects to the University where he had spent most of his professional life, rather than making a profit. The 8,000 RM would cover his costs. He asked the university to come to a decision by September 15th, 1936, two years before he decided to emigrate. Thus, it does not seem that he was coerced into selling his collection. The University decided to purchase it, but had to search for funds.

The Kestner Museum in Hannover discovered that Steindorff’s collection was for sale and evinced interest in purchasing it, but Steindorff made clear in January 1937, that he would not start negotiations with the Hannover Museum until Leipzig University had made its final bid as it was seeking funds. Clearly his preference was for the objects to remain in his ‘home’ university. In March 1937, Leipzig University agreed to buy the entire collection for the price that Steindorff had asked for, in three installments.
On March 29th, 1939 Steindorff and his wife Elise emigrated, via England, to the United States. After the war, Steindorff was extremely happy to learn, that the objects were safe and in good conditions, on exhibit again to the public, as he had wished. Furthermore, after his death his wife confirmed by letter that Steindorff had been delighted and encouraged to know that students at his University were using his collections to learn about ancient Egypt, a subject to which he had dedicated his life. Currently, 163 of these objects (sadly the other artifacts were destroyed during the bombardments of Leipzig in 1943) are exhibited in the collection of the „Ägyptisches Museum Georg Steindorff“ with another 7000 objects. They are integrated in all parts of the collection, supplementing the finds of Steindorff’s many excavations in Egypt.

**The Legal Point**

The sale of Steindorff’s collection took place after the racist Nuremberg laws (September 1935) were in place, but did not seem to affect Steindorff’s sales. According to current German law, all business activity of Jewish citizens in Germany during that period is potentially suspicious as it might have been involuntary.

In response to a query posed by the university officials as to whether it was worth purchasing the collection or not, Professor Wolf states in 1936 that the price is reasonable, the objects are very interesting and complement the current collection, the chance unique, and mentions the fear that other German Museum collections might snap them up. He had to apply for special funds from within the university to buy the Steindorff collection.

Wolf’s statement and more importantly, its date, Autumn 1936, are considered by the current court as being proof of a forced sale for less than the appropriate price, i.e., an involuntary or forced sale, because of Steindorff’s Jewish ancestry. Even if the price were correct, the university has to prove that the sale was not forced due to Nazi rule. Similar sales in 1935 to other museums (e.g. Hannover’s purchase of the collection of Frederick von Bissing, a non-Jew) show that the prices that were paid by Leipzig to Steindorff were in keeping with the market value of the time. It was general practice for the total not to be the sum of each individual item, but a global total. Furthermore, neither the papers from Wolf, where he praises the collection and his quest for special funds to purchase it, nor the fact that Steindorff took time over the sale and offered it to the university where he worked, as opposed to other museums, such as Hannover, are being taken as evidence by the court.

The last living heir of Steindorff, his grandson Mr. Hemer, lives in Nevada. He was born in Leipzig on April 20th 1923 and emigrated with his mother and brother to the United States in 1938. There was no restitution in the former German Democratic Republic. After unification, there was a period of two years (1990-1992) during which time Jewish former citizens of Eastern Germany could apply for restitution. After this brief period a law was passed stating that the Jewish Claims Conference (JCC) was to act as the general representative of all heirs and former owners of land, buildings, and objects that had not yet claimed for restitution. The claim of individuals was thenceforth considered to have expired.

The JCC’s claim of 1995 is based on publications, such as *Altes Ägypten in Leipzig (1981)*, on the history of the University of Leipzig. It should be noted that these books were the product of the German Democratic Republic, and the author, Frau Elke Blumenthal, had no access to the archives.
Thus, her analysis of the situation was without a substantial factual basis (as she wanted to tell the current court on May 26th).

The JCC then proceeded with its claim, never contacting Mr. Hemer, Steindorff’s heir who was living in Nevada, till 2006. In 2006, Mr. Thomas refused to be represented by JCC. In 2007 when Steindorff’s heir applied for the collection in order to donate it to the University, Thomas Hemer had no rights as he had not been contacted in a timely fashion, his claim was considered to have expired in 2007 and he was refused by the Bundesamt für Zentrale Dienste und Offene Vermögensfragen. Additionally, his right to the collection was not accepted by the Bundesamt, because the collection was sold before the death of Georg Steindorff, thus it was not part of the inheritance.

Two Sets of Problems

A) The university has proven, by a number of archival findings, that Steindorff was an exceptional figure in his period as he was a well-respected member of the academic and social community well into the first years of Nazi era. The court considered these points as interesting, but not proof against the suspicion of an involuntary sale, based on the collections’ low price.

The proofs against a forced sale that have been gathered by the university are as follows:

a. His grandson Hemer declared that his grandfather was not afraid until 1938 “They do not mean me!” was Steindorff’s opinion and illusion about the political developments. Hemer stated that his grandfather had offered the objects to the museum for free, but that when, in the non-Jewish part of the family money was needed, he probably changed his mind and asked the university for compensation for the objects that were partially in the exhibition, partially at home. The university paid for the collection in three parts, the last one being in March 1940, a year after the emigration of Steindorff and his wife.

b. Georg Steindorff received his pension as an emeritus of Leipzig University at full rank till the end of 1938, and at a reduced amount till summer 1940, long after any Jewish scholars had been thus recompensed. Thus, Professor Steindorff continued to travel a lot and maintained his life style, including buying more antiquities in 1936.

c. Many months after Steindorff offered the collection to the university, he continued to be Editor-in-Chief of the most important Egyptological periodical, Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde until the summer of 1937, as well as the well known series Urkunden des Ägyptischen Altertums in 1938.

d. Georg Steindorff was congratulated and praised in many German newspapers in November 1936, on the occasion of his 75th birthday. Notices appeared in many newspapers throughout the country, including Danzig, Munich, Heidelberg, Berlin, and, of course, Leipzig. This occurred three months after his offer of the collection—clearly he was not threatened.

e. The eminent publication Aniba II was published with him as the main author in 1937, e.g. the year after Steindorff’s offer.

f. Steindorff’s relationship with his successor and former assistant, Walther Wolf, is considered exceptionally cordial by both men till 1938; indeed Steindorff describes it as bestens and chivalrous.
g. 5 months after the offer, in 1937 the museum donated 12 pieces to Professor Steindorff from the inventory of the museum as a sign of their appreciation for his completion of the volume, *Aniba I*. Clearly relations were cordial.

h. Steindorff’s emigration is in all aspects exceptional: he was allowed to take antiquities in large numbers to the USA in 1939 and he continued to sell these antiquities in the US till his death in 1951. He also took his other precious possession, like the Bechstein piano and all of his antique furniture with him. He continued to receive free publications from Leipzig till summer 1941 and the start of war with the US. Administratively he was considered as a German citizen with residence in the United States as is attested by letters in the possession of the Leipzig State Archives. German authorities extended this status till March 1942, after which war intervenes.

i. Professor Steindorff was clearly eager to sell the collection to Leipzig. Even though he might have got a higher price in Hannover or elsewhere, he did not want to start negotiations with another university before Leipzig definitely refused to pay him 8,000 RM. No doubt he felt a loyalty to and an affection for the university that had been his home for so long. Furthermore, because he was very familiar with the financial situation of Leipzig University, he allowed that the payment be made in three installments. He could have easily sold his entire collection for a lump sum to another museum, or even divided it up amongst the highest bidders, yet he chose to sell the collection to Leipzig where it would form part of his legacy.

Steindorff himself considered that the business had been correctly conducted:

a. In a paper of summer 1945, he listed in details his claims against Saxony and Germany. These are: first his annual payments as emeritus (14,000 RM p.a.), second his copyright revenues (50,000 USD), and third the money for work he did for the University library work (1,800 USD). The collection is not mentioned.

b. There is no letter, also after emigration and also to Jewish colleagues, where he claims that the sale of artifacts to the Leipzig University Museum was involuntarily. Rather, he expresses his joy and pleasure at the opening of the museum the public and especially to the students: “Mit Freuden höre ich, daß der Rest der Sammlung der Öffentlichkeit zugänglich gemacht wird” (January 1951).

c. Neither Professor Steindorff, nor his daughter or his grandchildren ever asked for restitutions. On the contrary, the relatives still bring the objects to the museum because they want them to be exhibited in the museum. The archival study would have been (unlike 1981) impossible without the complete archive that was donated by his heir in Nevada to the museum.

The price that Leipzig University paid (8,000 RM) is not necessarily below the value of the objects at that time. Two certificates proved that the sum of the objects values is often not identical with the price for the collection: 20% reduction is not unusual. One cannot deduce an involuntary action from this.

B) The second problem is the impact of the current German law on the only surviving heir in Nevada, Mr. Hemer.
a. He has no right for restitution because he did not make his claims during the brief period that Germany had stipulated. However, he had no idea about this possibility and he was not contacted by anybody about this option.

b. The heir has refused several times (2006-2011) to be represented by the JCC because he believes, based on knowledge of his grandfather and certain papers in his possession, that the sale of Egyptian artefacts was correct and fair, and that the best place for the objects is in the museum that played such an important role in his grandfathers’s life.

c. The Bundesamt für Zentrale Dienste und Offene Vermögensfragen (Federal Office for restitution affairs) was told by the heir in 2007 that the sale was correct and that he does not claim for restitution; but however if restitution is considered obligatory, he should have that right so that he could donate the artefacts to the Leipzig University’s Museum, in full accordance with his uncle’s wishes.

d. The Bundesamt then in summer 2007 asked the JCC whether they would be ready to relinquish their claim because of the existence and will of the legal, direct and only heir of Georg Steindorff. They refused. Then, since summer 2008 the Federal office has started to argue in court that the JCC should have control over the artefacts. Thus, the former property of Georg Steindorff is restituted to the JCC, bypassing the legal heir.

The verdict of the Verwaltungsgericht Berlin

The University’s complaint against the Bundesamt für Zentrale Dienste und Offene Vermögensfragen was overruled on May 26th, 2011 by the Verwaltungsgericht court in Berlin. The result is that 163 objects from the Museum’s collections are to be restituted to the Jewish Claims Conference (JCC), despite the existence of Steindorff’s heir. The University’s case was overruled without any chance for negotiations. According to the courts, even though the price Steindorff was paid is probably a fair amount, in court the university should have proven that the rule of National Socialism was not even partially responsible for the sale of the collection. The facts, including the letters from Steindorff’s wife, seem to support the university’s viewpoint.

The representative of the JCC announced, that after an evaluation of the artefacts "reasonable talks" can start, so that the Egyptian Museum Georg Steindorff can re-purchase the artefacts that had been offered to it in 1936. By Steindorff himself. The JCC will be valuing the collection based on the current market value of the objects, not the value that would have existed in 1936.
Our aim is

1) to try to obtain permission to appeal the court’s decision, paying particular attention to the evidence provided by Mr. Thomas Hemer, Steindorff’s heir, that the sale was legal, fair, and voluntary.

2) for the JCC to relinquish claims to the Steindorff collection in favour of Steindorff’s only legal heir.

It should be noted that Mr. Thomas Hemer, Steindorff’s grandson and heir, has no reason to support the claims of a small German University. Many members of his family were murdered in concentration camps; he lost his home, his cultural setting, his very life, to the Nazi’s. However, at the advanced age of 88 he made the exhausting trip from Nevada to Berlin to fulfill his grandfather’s wishes in maintaining the Steindorff collection of Egyptian Antiquities in the Leipzig University Museum, the Georg Steindorff Museum. What sort of justice denies the heir? Mr. Thomas Hemer left Leipzig on May 29th, saying: “I believe that there will be a good ending”. We hope that he is not disappointed.