

Interview with provenance researcher Claudia Spring, 25 November 2019 in Vienna

Interviewer: Yaşar Wentz

CS: OK, good, the first question how I became a provenance researcher at the ÖMV – I had previously been a provenance researcher at the Natural History Museum in Vienna and I organized a workshop on museums during the Nazi period. That's where I met Birgit Johler,
5 who had done a lot of preparatory work here [Volkskundemuseum Wien] and organized an FWF [Austrian Science Fund] research project on the museum's history. During her research project she strongly urged the museum to start provenance research because she had indications that the collections contained expropriated property or objects. She spoke with the society [Ethnographic Society – owner of Volkskundemuseum Wien] and it decided to
10 start provenance research. Along with the fixed subsidies, the museum could apply every year for an additional subsidy. It was agreed with the association management that for a year this additional subsidy, which it applied for annually, should be earmarked for provenance research. The Federal Chancellery duly approved it. These are dedicated funds, and the museum then asked me directly if I wanted to come here to conduct provenance
15 research, and I said "yes". #00:01:38-9#

YW: So you were initially to work for a year? #00:01:43-0#

CS: Yes, I was able to decide whether I wanted to work for a full year or for six months each
20 over two years (YW: mm). As it makes sense in provenance research to work over a longer period, because new sources and links are always being discovered, and also for personal reasons, I didn't want to work a full year but agreed to two six-month periods over two years. And that's how I came to the ÖMV. I should point out that everything was already extremely well prepared when I arrived. My first focus was on acquisitions between 1938 and 1945 –
25 anything where money changed hands, how much was involved, and above all the collections. It was extremely well prepared because the archive is fantastically organized by Elisabeth [YW: Elisabeth Egger, online collections and ÖMV archive]. And there were already remarks by the curators about the possible need of provenance research in the M box, the electronic inventory book, with comments on provenance research where
30 applicable. So it was extremely well prepared and I was thus able to get started on the provenance research quickly – within the museum and also with other research, but I'll say more about that later. #00:03:03-7#

YW: Hmm. Does that mean that you were able to produce results relatively quickly as well?
35 #00:03:08-5#

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CS: Yes. The point was – maybe I should say this now – that because the management board had decided to operate as if we were a federal museum and to really implement all of the tasks and requirements of the Art Restitution Act and to produce dossiers and submit
40 them to the Art Restitution Advisory Board, the museum was very interested in official cooperation with the Commission for Provenance Research. This in turn meant that although I was in a private museum I was able to go to the Commission's *jour fixe* and was able to use the digital archive in the same way as if the Volkskundemuseum Wien had been a federal museum. In this way I had a list of acquisitions from 216 persons and institutions
45 between 1938 and 1945. I took this list and immediately compared it with all the dossiers and lists from other federal museums. I quickly wrote the first two dossiers, because there were already dossiers from other museums (YW: I see). This was important so as to show that research was being carried out in the museum but also from outside, because it's always useful to get hold of research by someone else – if possible and if there is a network
50 – so as to add something of your own and then to draw up a dossier. Fuchs and Popper were the first dossiers, and then I carried on with my research. And now I have established “model dossiers”, as you might say. We were the first museum with the Mautner collection, for example. This has all been noted in internal communication, and if someone else carries out research on Mautner and if an object turns up, my dossier is used (YW: yes), so the
55 exchange can also take place in the other direction. #00:05:01-7#

YW: So in your daily work you don't really think about the fact that you're a private museum?
#00:05:11-8#

60 CS: In my daily work I don't think about it at all. I have the same access to all, even a key to the copy room in the State Archive, I'm exactly the same. I notice it – how should I say? – because the objects are not owned by the State so the restitution is a little easier (YW: okay, yes). We don't have these official requirements with State-owned property and notification and the rest. If the Board makes a decision, we receive it by mail. Fortunately, the
65 Commission also asks the Jewish Community – so far we've been dealing only with assets expropriated from Jews – but that's also the same as in federal museums. But then it's a little simpler, not better or worse – OK, perhaps not worse, but just a little different, because we have more leeway (YW: hmm). It's also important to point out that the management decided then to implement the decisions without further discussion. In other words, it didn't
70 leave any room for “well, in that case maybe not”. The Board decisions are implemented without ifs or buts and without the management reviewing it any further, as it could well have done. The decisions are accepted unconditionally, and in fact this is the only way it should

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be. If you're going to do something, you should do it properly. And that's something else that makes things easier. I worked before in the Natural History Museum, where it was
75 completely different, not least because it's a huge museum. I think this museum has lots of advantages because it's small. But the point is that if a private museum goes through this decision-making process and with all the positive discussions about provenance research, the individual initiatives taken by curators and employees and the additional research to improve the documentation, these are things that the management and director actively
80 encourage. And this also provides a foundation for provenance research. This is perhaps not always so evidently the case in some federal museums. Often the objects are very valuable (YW: hmm) and that's almost certainly a factor as well. There's also a difference between implementing a law and agreeing with it but deciding for yourself how you implement it (YW: yes). I don't mean to criticize federal museums, but the attitude here is certainly very
85 positive, in the museum's own interests and on its own initiative – and that's not always the case in federal museums (YW: yes). There are specific examples, of course, otherwise I wouldn't mention it, but I think there is a structural difference that cannot be ignored. There's a federal law and that's it (YW: yes). It has to be put into practice. OK, that was a bit of a long answer (YW laughs). #00:09:40-9#

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CS: "What has changed since the museum's decision to conduct proactive provenance research?" That's something we talk about again and again. The basic decision was taken but first there was a joint process with me and the curators. I hadn't been able to work like that in the Natural History Museum. We didn't just say "we'll do it for a year and that's the
95 end of it". That was not even the idea. The first thing we said was "let's make the most of it" or at least for six months in the year. But how multifaceted it was and how much additional work was involved – when I prepared a dossier, for example, the curators had really to look through the objects again, compile and fill out lists for me – what it meant to come face-to-face with the subject of Nazi persecution and the Holocaust, that was not so evident at first,
100 but became more concrete when they read a dossier from me about people or the owners' parents who were murdered in Auschwitz or escaped or were expelled. I think that changed things a bit. Another thing that was particularly clear with the Mautner collection was the sudden confrontation with the descendants, when the heirs are actually there. There were two grandchildren of Anna Mautner, whose assets were completely expropriated. They
105 visited and talked to us for two days. This was a completely new approach to the people behind the large Mautner collection. There were emotions but also curatorial questions. Now there's a special display. The curators had to decide how to deal with the expropriated objects and how to present them. Should we remove the objects and replace them? Which

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objects should we try to purchase from the heirs? There was lots of additional discussion.

110 “Let’s see where the objects came from and what has to be returned.” I hadn’t anticipated that. I had never had discussions like that and have never had to consider how to present objects in a display (YW: yes). This aspect was fascinating and still is and it’s still going on. I don’t know what it will be like in a year – or the discussions with Hermann [YW: Hermann Hummer, ÖMV librarian] about the “myth library”. And what about loan agreements? None of
115 this could have been foreseen. So there have been lots of developments, and what I find positive in the massive number of discussions and the search for a good solution is the idea “what have we learned?” It’s a completely open process. I also believe – and I’ve had lots of feedback – that it is enriching and fascinating as well for the curators. (YW: yes) I think a greater change was to start provenance research where there had been none, and that was
120 also difficult at first. There is also a new generation in the museum (YW: yes) but that was the major step. There were lots more steps but they were somehow logical, smaller and procedural (YW: yes). I think that’s the best way of putting it. #00:12:08-7#

CS: “What’s the difference between provenance research in a private museum and a federal
125 museum?” I can only speak for this museum and it’s a bit ambivalent. There are lots of federal employees (YW: yes), there are subsidies, and I think it’s quite different from a small museum which might also have expropriated objects but is only open one day a week. I can’t answer this question well because we are a special case. And I doubt that the Art Restitution Advisory Board – this is pure speculation on my part – would really accept a dossier from
130 every museum in some small locality. It takes historical expertise to write good dossiers, and small private museums can’t always afford that. It’s possible here because we are already a research institution. I think a small museum, maybe run by an association, would have much greater difficulty. At the same time – and this is something that is often mentioned as well within the Commission – the Volkskundemuseum Wien is a kind of role model for other
135 private museums. Although I think another museum would be better,

YW: So, you’re saying that to extend provenance research, expert positions would first have to be established in the smallest museums? #00:14:01-0#

140 CS: First of all an awareness of where expropriated property might be. This is really a task for experts, for a provenance researcher who has experience. It’s not so easy. And you also need considerable resources, a well-organized archive and a good inventory. This might already exist in some museums, but we have the human resources as well. Maybe I have a wrong impression of these small private museums, but I imagine that they don’t always have

145 this expertise because they don't have the financial means. (YW: yes, yes). But in general it would be useful in all museums. If a museum shows its holdings to the public, it would be if the provenance was properly verified. #00:15:06-8#

CS: "What is the significance for provenance research in the Volkskundemuseum Wien of
150 the voluntary implementation of the Art Restitution Act? Or how important is the statutory framework for provenance research?" These are two separate questions for me. First of all, the Art Restitution Act is the framework. It is a vital framework because although the Washington Principles exist, there also needs to be a structural commitment to the Art Restitution Advisory Board. This entire commitment procedure makes sense – and that
155 includes requests to the Jewish Community to search for the heirs. If the museum were to do this on its own, it would be as much if not more work than establishing a dossier in the first place (YW: yes). To that extent, the Art Restitution Act, despite its shortcomings, is indispensable. And it's essential for provenance research in a museum. It would be good if there was a law like that in Germany. It's quite a problem that there isn't one. (YW: yes). And
160 the second question, "how important is the ..." is connected and also indispensable. It's also about identifying the loopholes in the Art Restitution Act. I say this because it was made clear to me in the case of the Jonas restitution. The Art Restitution Act calls for restitution, you know who the rightful heirs are, but how do the heirs obtain the object? Theoretically they have to come here and collect it themselves, at their expense and time and so on. But
165 there are lots of reasons dating from the history of persecution and expulsion why people have no links anymore to Austria or don't want to come here and so on. (YW: yes). And in my opinion to expect them to arrange for the transport of 300 or 360 objects [e.g. the Mautner-Collection] at their own expense after the persecution and flight is a serious defect of the Art Restitution Act. I think the Austrian State should pay, regardless of where the
170 objects are to be transported to. This would be quite difficult for us [the museum] if we had to pay. I became aware of this recently with the Jonas case, when five heirs didn't want to come to Austria or Vienna for reasons that are none of my business. They just wrote "no". It was very difficult but we finally organized it through the Foreign Ministry and the diplomatic pouch, because that goes back and forth. We packed the objects safely – it was Monika
175 [YW: Monika Maislinger, restorer at the ÖMV] who did it. It went by road, thank goodness, because it would have been much more complicated to pack for air travel (YW: yes), insured at our expense, and was transported to London. I don't think they realized that we are a private museum. We didn't make a point of it, or perhaps they didn't care – I didn't ask (laughs) (YW laughs). But the ambassador in the embassy handed over the objects on
180 behalf of the Republic of Austria to the heirs living there. I think that in the end it worked very

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well. The objects had an insured value of 100 euros, which we were naturally able to pay. But we were lucky. If the objects had been worth more it would have been more difficult. To give you an idea, our annual purchasing budget is 1,000 euros. If it had been flown to the USA in the diplomatic pouch, we would have had to pack it differently, because the objects
185 were fragile. That's just one specific example. #00:19:25-4#

YW: In other words, that isn't a long-term solution. #00:19:31-4#

CS: It was a lucky coincidence and exceptional individual solution. It's not right that the law
190 doesn't provide for it. We've often talked about it, but amendments to the law are difficult. And now we have an interim government. It's all very complicated. But you know that as well from Germany. (YW: yes). #00:19:55-9#

CS: "To what extent could the provenance research model in the ÖMV be applied to other
195 museums and institutions? Has the museum scene changed in the meantime?" I've already answered the first question. (YW: yes). What do you mean by "has the museum scene changed in the meantime?" #00:20:11-1#

YW: I mean whether the pressure to carry out provenance research has increased
200 #00:20:20-3#

CS: Private museums? #00:20:20-3#

YW: I mean can a museum in 2019 say that it doesn't consider provenance research to be
205 important? #00:20:29-7#

CS: How should I put it? Officially no, of course. It would be said in another way. But I can give you an example from the Kammerhofmuseum [in Bad Aussee]. I wrote about this in my Mautner-text. They are a long way from admitting that many objects in their collection were
210 expropriated I'm sure they'd say that they're doing everything possible. The wording is one thing, but if you don't want to do any provenance research, you can say that you don't have the staff, you can't find the files, the objects have first to be inventoried and so on. I'm not accusing anyone but I'd just like to say that provenance research is not a priority, even in the federal museums (YW: hmm). So, officially a lot has changed and I'm sure there have been
215 changes in many museums, but in general I think that there are still a lot of museums that don't care. And where you need a completely different approach to understand the historical

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situation as it perhaps was. For example, that Anna Mautner was given no help in escaping
by being able to sell the objects and that her accounts were frozen and she couldn't get
away or only under the most risky circumstances. Turning it around, putting cause and effect
220 in the right order, is in fact the first step before provenance research starts. That's how it
should be. And of course I'm in the provenance research bubble where everyone is working
together and we're doing a great job. The reality in many museums is quite different (YW:
yes). #00:22:39-8#

225 CS: "How can provenance research move from museums to private collections?" That's a
good question and I already mentioned that Christian Klösch [YW: provenance researcher,
Vienna Museum of Science and Technology] visited you in Oldenburg and was quite
enthusiastic about the idea. For a time, Monika Löscher [YW: provenance researcher,
Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien], Christian, Albena [YW: Albena Zlatanova, provenance
230 researcher for the National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism]
from the National Fund, and myself got together because we noted that there were so many
household objects in our museums. If there's a Schiele hanging at home, we might be more
inclined to take a look at it (YW: yes). But because we have so many objects in the Museum
of Science and Technology and the Volkskundemuseum Wien that could theoretically have
235 been expropriated, we decided – like in Oldenburg – that it would be good to have a
provenance research evening once a month as a place where people could bring objects
from home that they think might have been expropriated and ask us to investigate them.
Then we were informed by the [then-director of the] Commission, which had a new director,
to continue provenance research in the federal museums but to leave the rest as there
240 weren't enough staff. I think that's a shame, but it's true that I work for 20 hours a week in a
private museum and have more to do than I can handle. But the subject still comes up
repeatedly. We bear it in mind, but unfortunately there's nothing to be done at the moment. If
someone called me tomorrow because they knew that the museum carried out provenance
research, I would of course take the time. But although it would be a good thing, there is no
245 outreach from our museum or the Museum of Science and Technology at the moment,
because we don't have the resources. That's one aspect, which I regret. The other aspect is
of course the tricky history of private ownership. The people have to come of their own
accord, because private property is protected – for better or worse (YW: yes) – but it is
something that is legally anchored in our society and you can't just go up to someone and
250 ask them to give up their property.

YW: You mean it has to be voluntary, and that's where it has to start? #00:25:10-8#

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CS: Precisely. It's starting because people are becoming more aware of provenance
255 research. There are still lots of people who don't know that many museums are carrying out
provenance research because they think it's just about famous paintings. But the
generalized theft of art and of property – mostly from Jews but also from other persecutees –
is not as well known. It's only the spectacular cases that are reported in the media. When my
colleague at an art museum writes a dossier, they wait for the decision by the Art Restitution
260 Advisory Board and then call her up straightaway. If I write a dossier (laughs) no one cares.
But I hope that among the descendants and with the increasing awareness of the Nazi
period and provenance research more and more people will take the initiative on their own.
Those who want to will find us. That also needs to be said. I still think it should be the other
way round though (YW: yes). One day a week we should go at it proactively. We've
265 discussed this quite specifically in the Bureau of the Commission or in the Museum of
Science and Technology. There are lots of ways it could be done and it would be useful to
have someone to deal specifically with it. But it doesn't work like that in practice. #00:26:39-
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270 CS: "What are my hopes for provenance research in the future?" Do you mean in the
museum here? #00:26:43-4#

YW: Yes #00:26:44-1#

275 CS: What do I hope for? First, I hope that for the next ten years there is at least one
permanent post of at least 20 hours for provenance research – in other words that my
position is kept after I retire. There is an incredible number of objects that need to be
investigated. The entire photo collection has not yet been touched, which I find difficult for a
number of reasons. So the photo collection should be investigated, and provenance
280 research there should be possible. And the entire library. A lot of preparatory work has been
done there. You have been doing some. But there is still lots to be investigated and
researched. So I hope that provenance research continues for the next ten or fifteen years.
That's what I hope most of all. Otherwise I'm happy that everything is working so well. I go to
the archive, fetch a file and look at it. I work well with the curators. So I have no special
285 wishes, things that really need to change (YW: yes). We are really making progress – and I
know that from what colleagues tell me and above all from what I experienced before in the
Natural History Museum. The archivist wouldn't even allow me in the archive, despite the Art
Restitution Act. To that extent, the working conditions here couldn't be better. The problem is

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always the fact that the post is for a fixed term and we don't know whether provenance
290 research will still be going on in 2021 (YW: yes) and whether there will be more volunteers
like you (laughs) (YW laughs). I hope so. So that's the last question. Or is there anything
else? #00:28:19-5#

YW: Well, is provenance research not popular in other museums because provenance
295 researchers come from outside – if I understand correctly – and are sent by the ministry? Is
that the case? #00:28:42-9#

CS: Yes, certainly, because they come from outside. They are employed in the museums
and are subject to the employment regulations, with leave slips and the other administrative
300 things that go on in a museum. But they are not subject to instructions. They are answerable
to the Federal Chancellery. This is important because if there's a director who thinks that the
pictures belong to the museum and the provenance researcher writes a dossier showing that
it was clearly expropriated, it's sometimes difficult for the museum director to accept. If the
provenance researcher were employed by the museum and dependent for better or worse
305 on the director, it could be problematic. When I arrived here, for example, I joined the
museum association. After the first general meeting I realized that it wouldn't work. I can't be
in the association and write dossiers although I'm not involved in the decision-making
process (YW: yes). But by being a member of the association there was a danger that I
would be trapped – I mean biased (laughs) – if I compiled a dossier on a collection that I
310 knew to be incredibly important to the museum.

YW: Yes, it's interesting, this relationship between provenance research and the museum
and the fact that provenance researchers are seen as "intruders". #00:31:11-0#

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CS: Yes, I'm sure that was the case at the beginning. A new post had to be created and
incorporated in the organization chart. What is it? Where does the person belong? This had
to be worked out. The second thing is that the dossiers were mostly about restitution. And
there were some museums where the objects concerned were really valuable and part of the
320 museums' identity (YW: yes). There is Vermeer's *The Art of Painting*. It's still in the museum,
but if it had been restituted – and I'm sure director Haag [YW: Sabine Haag, director general
of the Kunsthistorisches Museum] would have done it properly – but there are so many other
things, which the provenance researcher might not at first be aware of. These are things that
I had to learn. So I can well imagine that the newcomer is seen as an intruder. For years at

325 the NHM [National History Museum] people would say “there’s that woman who wants to
take everything away from us.” OK, they have their way of talking (YW: yes), but they were
certainly not too keen on my presence. By contrast, my situation here in the museum is great
(YW: yes). These are the best working conditions I’ve ever had because I don’t have any
arguments about my work but am encouraged to get on with it. And that’s a great situation to
330 be in. And, believe me, it’s not always like that. #00:32:52-0#

YW: Fascinating. #00:32:53-8#

CS: And, of course, there’s the law. With a federal museum, if there’s a law you just have to
335 implement it, end of story. But the directors can still find clever ways of making your life
difficult. “The computer’s not working”, or “we don’t have any at the moment”, or “you want to
visit the archive? Well, let’s see.” The archivist [of the NHM] was never really spoken to, she
never had to take responsibility for the fact that she made it impossible for me to work.
“We’re doing everything possible,” the director [of the NHM] said when I left. Yes, thank you
340 very much. But I think that the longer provenance research is carried out, the more self-
evident it will become. The new generation working in some museums should not be
underestimated, even if a few of them are a bit difficult, too. And the more self-evident it
becomes, the more it will be accepted for what it is. Another huge change is that for many
years, fifteen I think, colleagues worked with fix-term contracts that were continuously
345 renewed. That stinks, to put it mildly, and is also illegal. For the past six or seven years, I’m
not exactly sure, they have had permanent employment contracts in the museums. This has
also brought about structural changes because it’s somehow an improvement, with an e-mail
address, a work description and the rest. That was another step towards the
institutionalization of provenance research (YW: yes). #00:34:39-5#

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[Ende des Interviews]