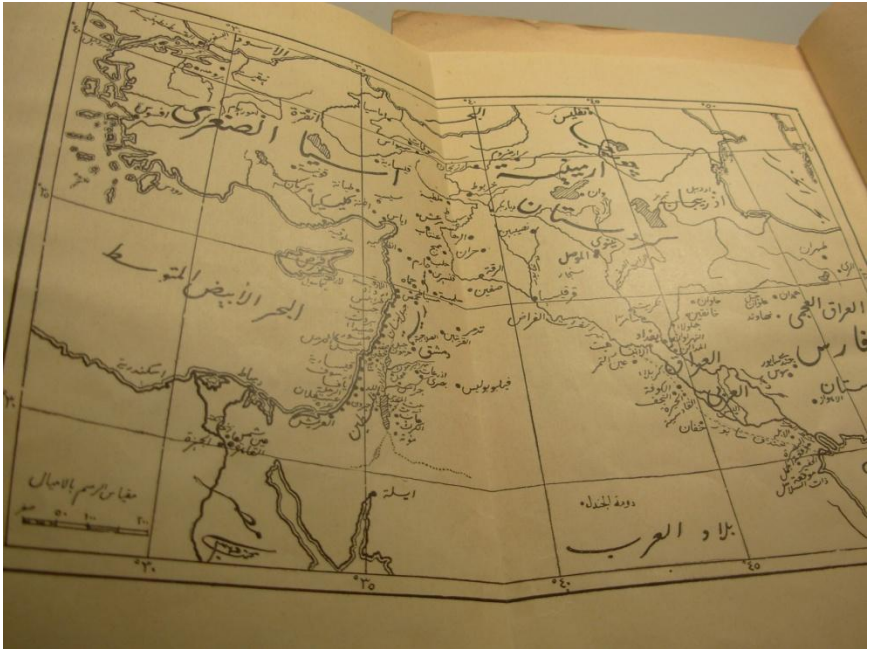


Overdue Books: Returning Palestine's "Abandoned Property" of 1948



Photograph of a map in AP 3908, an Egyptian book about Mamluk history. A signature in the book's opening pages indicates that it belonged to Yusuf Haikel, Yaffa's last mayor before Israel's occupation in 1948.

Hi there!

I'm a school librarian and Palestine solidarity activist based in Brooklyn, NY. I am involved in the Palestinian-led Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions (BDS) movement. I have also led a couple dozen delegations to Palestine, most recently Librarians and Archivists to Palestine. Our group is launching a wider network of information workers in solidarity with Palestine - if this describes you, be in touch!

In a zine concerned with provenance, it seems appropriate to tell you that this started as a thesis for my master's in library science (May 2011), was turned into an academic article for the *Jerusalem Quarterly* (October 2011), became a series of blog posts for The Desk Set (February 2012), and is now a zine. All versions have had the same title (thanks to my mother for coming up with it and to the various publishing institutions for not minding the repetition). Much of what you will read here is taken directly from the blog posts I did for The Desk Set. When you see italicized paragraphs, they're from the *Jerusalem Quarterly* article.

Provenance ['prä-vē-
nän(t)s], noun:
1. origin, source
2. the history of
ownership of a valued
object or work of art
or literature
[Merriam-Webster]

This project started when I read Israeli researcher Gish Amit's article, "Ownerless Objects? The story of the books Palestinians left behind in 1948," published by the *Jerusalem Quarterly* in 2008. I decided to construct my thesis project around the case of thousands of Palestinian-owned books that ended up under Israeli control, and whether we can trace them to their owners. Call it preservation or call it looting, the story of these books is one of many examples of the appropriation of Palestinian cultural heritage into Israel's conception of itself.

At the same time, Benny Brunner was working on his film *The Great Book Robbery*. The film is now complete and has shown on Al Jazeera throughout the world, bringing this story into the public realm. While many Palestinians have family memories of book looting, only now are people uncovering the extent of its systematic nature.

I am not interested in ranking the harm caused by various manifestations of colonization and ethnic cleansing. The disappearance of cultural heritage - including vast numbers of books from the urban Palestinian elite - is not intrinsically more or less devastating than the destruction of rural villages and the theft of farm land. It is, however, less widely known, which is one reason I am interested in exploring it further (also, I'm a librarian!).

In *The Great Book Robbery*, novelist Ala Hlehel and social historian Mahmoud Yazbak describe the process by which Palestine was severed from its roots - before 1948, a train line ran from Damascus through Beirut, Haifa, Yaffa, and eventually to Cairo. There is a connection between land and culture, and the dispossession of the Palestinian people includes displacement, destruction, and appropriation of all kinds. I hope this zine can contribute to the process of decolonization through memory and return.

-Hannah Mermelstein, March 2014

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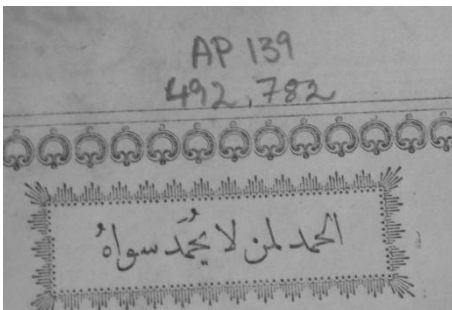
Background

In 1948, much of the wealthy and formally educated Palestinian population was concentrated in Jerusalem and other urban centers. When Zionist militias swept through these neighborhoods, they physically pushed thousands of people from their homes and caused tens of thousands more to flee in fear. Many Palestinians left in haste, grabbing only what they could carry as they ran. Others thought they would return a few weeks later, once the fighting died down. In many cases, members of the educated class left behind some of their most prized possessions: books.

The soldiers raiding these West Jerusalem neighborhoods were closely followed by teams of librarians from the Jewish National and University Library at Hebrew University. They gathered approximately 30,000 books from private Palestinian libraries and, according to testimonies from those involved in the project, began to catalog books by subject and often by owners' names. In the early 1960s, however, close to 6,000 of the books were revisited and labeled with the letters "AP" for "abandoned property". The library catalog shows no information on provenance, or former ownership. If that information had formerly been recorded, it seems to have been erased or at least carefully concealed.

To this day, the books' call numbers begin with the letters "AP." The National Library has thus maintained a likely unintentional collection of looted Palestinian books, easily identifiable to those who understand what "AP" means. It remains unclear why certain books were labeled "AP" and others were not.

Indeed, the remainder of the 30,000 plundered books, which were embedded into the library's general catalog and are also still housed there, are much more difficult to identify.



Mohammad Batrawi



In January 2011, I sat in on Benny Brunner's interview with author and editor Mohammad Batrawi for *The Great Book Robbery*. Batrawi told us about his political involvement in the 1940s, and recounted his months as a POW in 1948. As POWs, he and his fellow prisoners were forced to loot Palestinian homes after the inhabitants

were kicked out. He described the process of going to Ramleh and other cities and towns in central Palestine and removing furniture and other materials from houses to load into trucks. The books were loaded into separate pickup trucks and taken to an undisclosed location.

One day, Mohammad's group of prisoners was taken to loot materials from his own village of Isdud. When he came to his house, he dug in the yard for something he had buried there before his family fled. He found it and as he held it, the Israeli commander approached him to see why he'd stopped working. When the commander got closer, he realized that this must be Mohammad's home, and told him to take the rest of the day off. So Mohammad sat in the sun watching other Palestinian prisoners loot his house.

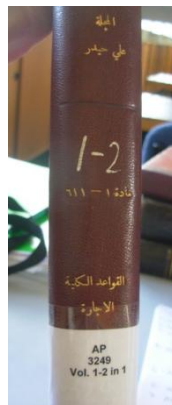
Batrawi quietly described all of this to us in such detail and with such emotion; I only wish Benny had brought a translator so the interview could have been in Batrawi's native Arabic, instead of in English.

Mohammad Batrawi died in March 2011, two months after I met him. Rest in peace, Mr. Batrawi.

Exploring the AP Books

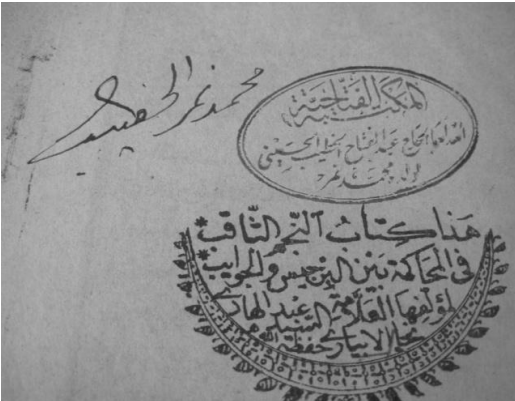
We are only just cracking the surface of this episode, and there are so many questions to explore. For the purpose of my research, I focused on just a handful of books from the 6,000 labeled "AP." I wanted to see if there was a way to trace specific books to specific owners by looking for names, stamps, and other identifying information inside the books themselves.

Since I was not scheduled to travel to Israel/Palestine during the months I was working on the project, I had to find someone else to gather data. An Israeli friend put me in touch with Kara, an American studying at Hebrew University, and she spent hours requesting and viewing books. The volumes are in closed stacks and their retrieval can take more than an hour. The slow pace and the care required with each volume made it clearer than ever that this study would be more qualitative than quantitative. However, it was also clear that the books provided a wealth of information, more than I had imagined (I had had a brief moment of fearing that we wouldn't find anything at all). When all was said and done, Kara had examined (and photographed) thirty-four books, looking for stamps, signatures, and other markings that might indicate prior ownership. I looked through the photos she sent me and, with help from friends, translated the Arabic (likely from former owners) and Hebrew (mostly from librarians and researchers) into English.



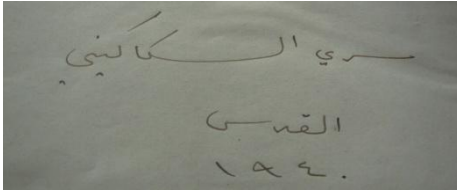
Of the thirty-four books we examined, only three books contained no markings. More than half contained request slips and check-out cards, at least some of which indicate that the books were once cataloged differently. Almost half contained librarians' notes that provided more information than what was in the online catalog, further indicating a previous organizational system. A similar number contained marginalia, including everything from grammatical notes to guesses about the meaning of poetry to what appear to be simple doodles.

More telling were the books that had owners' names written in them (about a quarter of the books). Several belonged to Mohammad Nimr Al-Khatib, who a quick Google search will show you was a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood and Arab Higher Committee in Haifa in the 1940s. He survived a 1948 assassination attempt by the Haganah, the paramilitary organization that would later become the Israeli army. You may ask, how do we know that this is the same Mohammad Nimr Al-Khatib? Well, the timing is right, many of the books are religious in nature, and most of all, we found a dedication in one book (below), from father Haj Abdel Fattah Al-Khatib Husseini to son Mohammad Nimer. The Khatib of Haifa indeed had a father named Abdel Fattah.



On a page inside *The Piercing Star* by Abdel Hadi Naja Al-Abyari (AP 28), published in 1862, is the name Mohammad Nimr Al-Khatib (top left corner). The stamp to its right reads, "Open Library: Haj Abdel Fattah Al-Khatib Husseini for his son Mohammad Nimer." The text below includes the title and author.

It had been reported that the books of the influential Palestinian educator Khalil Sakakini were in the AP collection. Indeed, we found several books with either Khalil Sakakini's name or that of his eldest son, Sari. In two books we also found the name of Dr. Yusuf Haikel, Yaffa's last mayor before Israel's occupation of the city in 1948. A smattering of lesser known people (at least to me and Google) also showed up in our study of these few dozen books. I can only imagine how many more names we would find if we were to examine all 6,000 books.



In the opening pages of a 1925 book about Turkish law (AP 3249), published in Haifa: "Sari Sakakini, Jerusalem, 1940."

The summer after my research was technically over (2011), I went to the library and looked at a handful of books, some that Kara had viewed before and some that she hadn't. It was incredible (if also both heartbreaking and infuriating) to touch these books, and quite tempting to leave the library with a page or two. Would the owners appreciate a page of their book back? Or would they rather the book remain intact in the hands of the occupier? This was not my decision to make, not now. I returned the books to the librarian who likely had no idea of their significance, and went on my way.

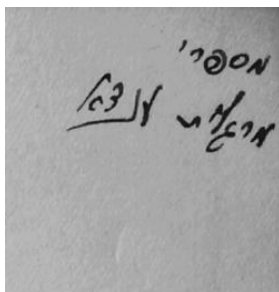
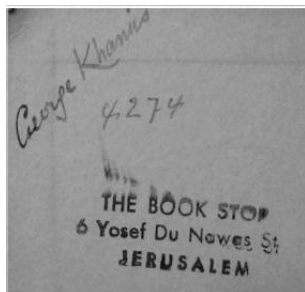
I returned to the library once again, this time with a Palestinian American woman who had contacted me to say, "I heard about your research. My grandfather was best friends with Khalil Sakakini and I think my grandfather's books are also at Hebrew U. Will you help me find them?" We sat down together to look through the catalog, trying to request books somewhat strategically. Her grandfather read French, liked art, etc. Still, knowing no specific titles, we did not come across a book with her grandfather's name in it. However, the very first book we opened together had the name "George Khamis," to which my comrade said, "George! Let me tell you about George! He also drank tea every morning with my grandfather and Khalil Sakakini."

A Book Returned

A few months after I posted my blog entry with the story from the previous page, it received a comment from someone named Larry Stillman:

"Please contact me about George Khamis. I am positive that I have one of his books. Are you in contact with any of his family?"

Larry, who lives in Australia, had bought a copy of *Fowler's Modern English Usage* in Jerusalem in 1978. As the years went on, Larry started to wonder about the people whose names were in the front of the book, particularly George Khamis, who was presumably the original owner of the volume.

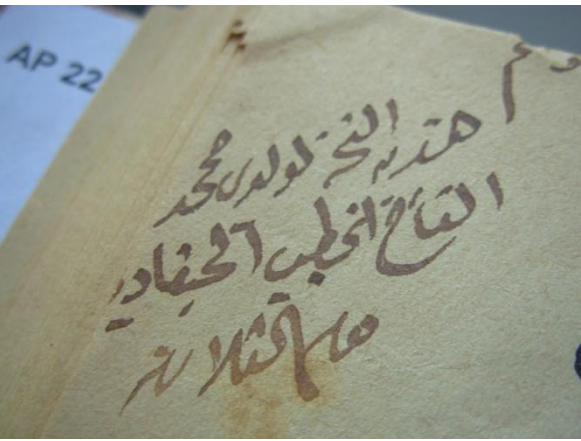
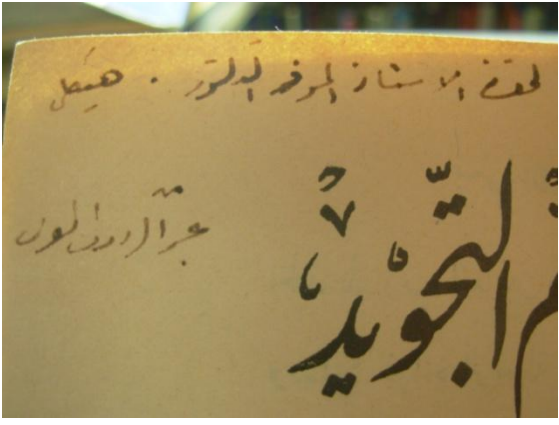


Hebrew:
"From
the
Library
of
Margalit
Anda"

I contacted the Palestinian American woman whose grandfather knew George Khamis, and she contacted his California-based relatives. What followed was a moving exchange of emails that George's nephew called a "journey down memory lane," as he and another relative sent us old pictures and stories. He told us that one of his siblings went back to Jerusalem in the 1980s, and visited the maternity hospital that had been built on their property. The director was using the Khamis's dining room table as his desk, and nearby was a grandfather clock that had been theirs.

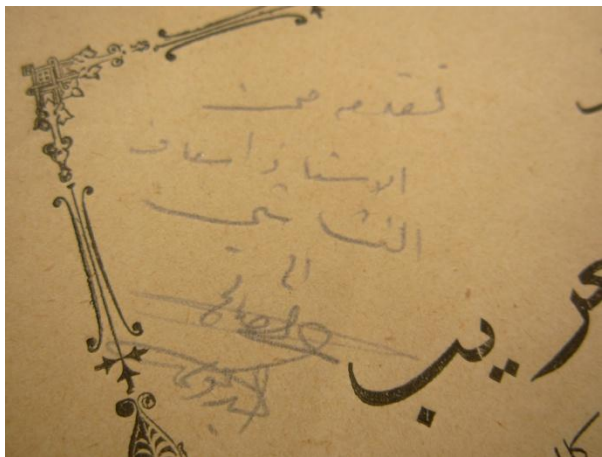
We do not know who Margalit Anda is, or the full story of how the book has changed hands over time. But we do know the most recent change of hands: from an Australian Jew back to the family of its original Palestinian owner.

AP 14
 "To be kept by respected professor Dr. Haikel" [Yusuf Haikel, mayor of Yaffa]

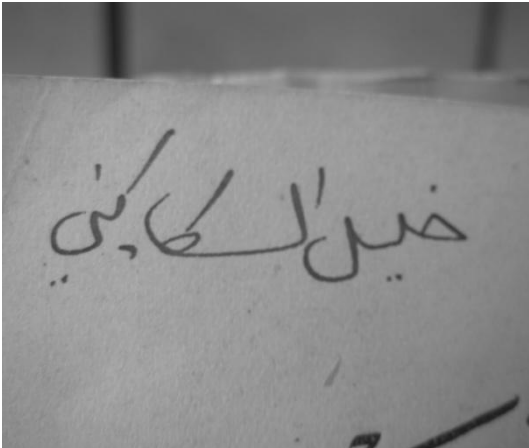


AP 22
 "I dedicate this version to my son Mohammad Al-Fattah Al-Khatib"

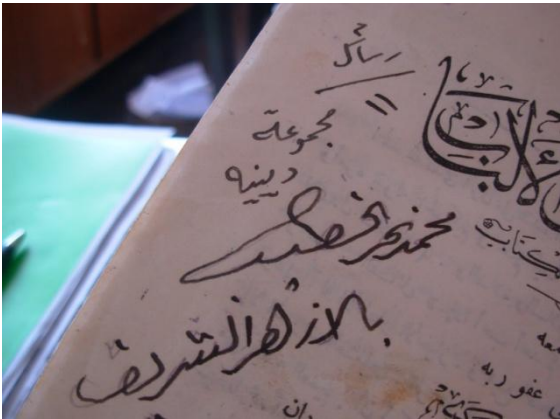
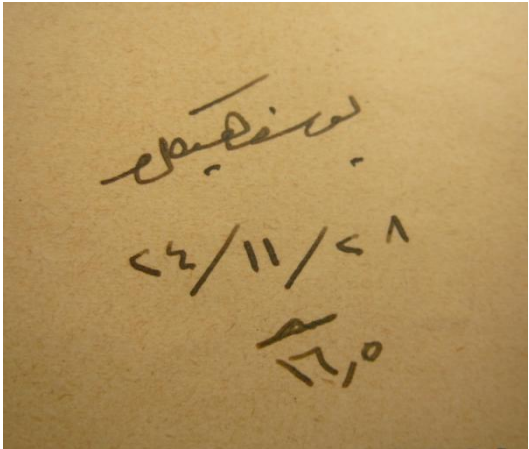
AP 23
 "Gift given from Isaf Nashashibi to Saleh Nammari"



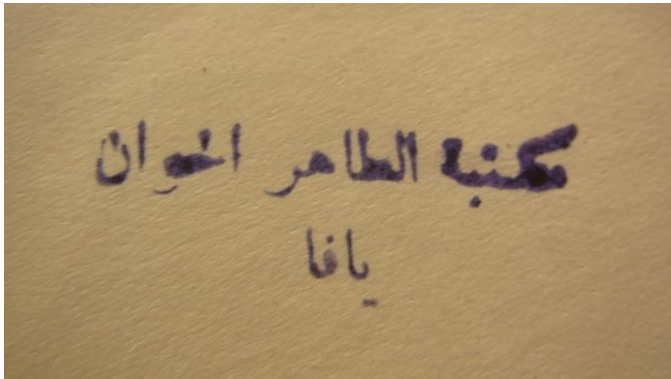
AP 72
"Khalil
Sakakini"



AP 3908
"Yusuf
Haikel,
24/11/28,
16.5"
[possibly a
date and
price]



AP 22
"Religious
collection,
Mohammad
Nimr Al-
Khatib, Al-
Azhar Al-
Sharif"

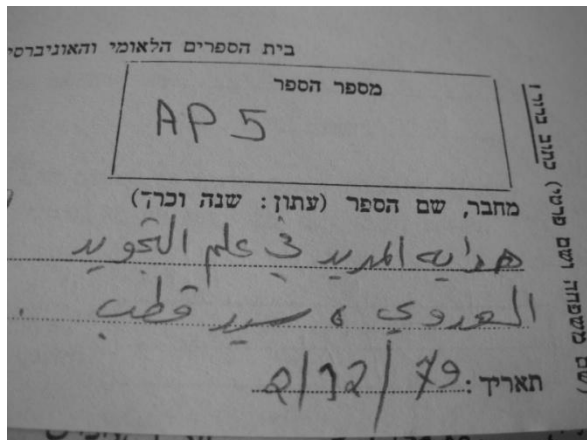


Above: AP 77
[an Astronomy
dictionary] "Al
Taher Brothers
Bookstore,
Yaffa";



Left: AP 163
"Hijab
Bookbinder,
behind Al Azhar
[mosque],
Cairo"

Right: AP 5
request slip
from 1979
with author
and title
[written in
Arabic, so
presumably
from a
Palestinian
researcher]



Nazi Looting: A Historical Parallel

While researching Palestinian books now in Israeli custody, I looked at past examples of cultural property stolen during times of war and occupation. I was planning to use case studies from various times and places, but as I began to research Jewish property stolen by Nazis, I realized that there was a wealth of examples simply within that context.

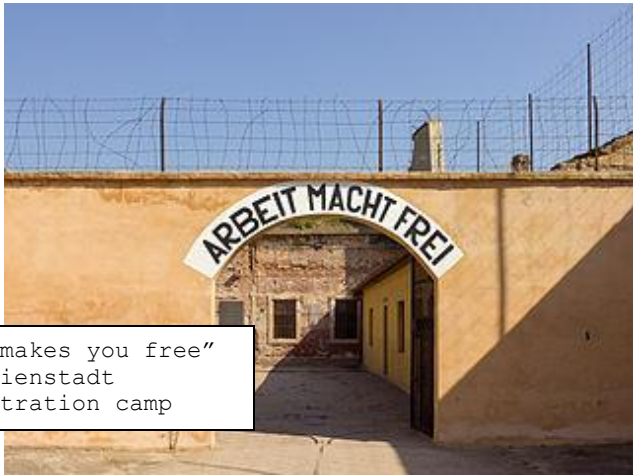
The Nazi Holocaust, which happened only a few years before the Palestinian Nakba (and is not entirely unrelated), is one of the most studied cases of physical and cultural destruction of a people. I did not have to look far for stories of looted cultural property, and books in particular, from Austria to Belarus, from the Czech Republic to Germany. The governments and museums of Austria and Germany, perhaps because they can be seen as the most culpable, have undergone incredible efforts in recent years to research the provenance (former ownership) of cultural property, and to return as much of it as possible. Belarus, on the other hand, has taken the stance that what was won in war is theirs, and only recently has begun to label as "rare books" (and conduct research on) a small fraction of the half million looted books in its national library.

Perhaps the issue most relevant to the AP books that can be found in the cases of Nazi looting is the question of collective return to a community dispersed throughout the globe. The standard that existed before the Nazi Holocaust - that books and other property should be returned to their country of origin after a war - no longer made sense (and was even offensive to many) in places where the community of the former owners was decimated.

The following is one moving story that encompasses both individual and collective return (excerpted from my Jerusalem Quarterly article, hence the italics). All information comes from Miriam Intrator's article published in Library Trends, called "People were literally starving for any kind of reading: The Theresienstadt Ghetto Central Library, 1942-1945," and from the website of the Jewish Museum in Prague.

In 1941, the Nazis established Theresienstadt concentration camp in a town called Terezin on the outskirts of Prague. This camp housed wealthy and prominent Jews from various countries and served as a "model camp" to prove to the world that the Nazis' treatment of Jews was humane. Therefore, those in the camp were, at least at the beginning, permitted many of the amenities not usually provided to concentration camp inhabitants. Two such amenities were a community library and a bookmobile.

Many people arriving in Theresienstadt brought books with them, and a collection was established. Nazi authorities soon supplemented this collection with libraries stolen from Jewish institutions throughout Europe. The books had no common language or subject, and were cataloged by professionals in the library. Eventually, the Nazis' motivation for the operations in the library became much more insidious: Jews were to catalog materials for future inclusion in the "Museum of the Extinct Race."



"Work makes you free"
Theresienstadt
concentration camp

Eventually, the vast majority of Theresienstadt residents were deported and killed. The head librarian and one other staff member survived, and voluntarily remained in the camp for three months after liberation until they could fully organize and catalog the 100,000 volumes in the library. The books found their new home in the Jewish Museum in Prague.

In the years immediately following World War II, the Jewish Museum in Prague underwent a massive process of restoring materials to their prior owners. Of more than 190,000 volumes that the museum acquired during and immediately after the war, 158,000 were returned.

In 2000, the Czech Republic passed a restitution act that required all state institutions to return art obtained illegally between 1938 and 1945. Although not a state institution, the Jewish Museum committed itself to the spirit of the act and began provenance research on many of the items in its collection. Additionally, the museum has a section on its website called "Terms for the filing of claims for the restitution of books from the library collection of the Jewish Museum in Prague which were unlawfully seized from natural persons during the period of Nazi occupation." Explaining that all books "shall be transferred free of charge to the natural person who owned them prior to the seizure," the website lists specific instructions on how to file claims, which descendants and relatives may do so, and the documents required.

Thinking about this story both haunts and inspires me. I am amazed that the few surviving librarians stayed in the camp after they could have left in order to catalog the collection. In this act, as in the act of building the library and providing services to camp inhabitants, the librarians danced the fine line between submission and resistance. On the one hand, the librarians had been ordered to perform their job, both to make the camp look good and to begin work on the insidiously named "Museum of the Extinct Race." On the other hand, the collection and maintenance of a library comprised of people's most prized possessions, the operation of a bookmobile and encouragement to read for pleasure, the insistence on life in the midst of death - these are strongest kinds of resistance I know. I am reminded of Palestinian spoken word artist Rafeef Ziadeh who, in response to people who ask her why Palestinians teach hate, declares, "We teach life, sir. We Palestinians wake up every morning to teach the rest of the world life, sir."

Next Steps

My goal is not primarily to contribute to scholarly research, but to be part of a larger movement for justice. To that end, it is important to reassert that whether or not individual book owners are identified, there should be a collective return of the AP books - as well as tens of thousands of other stolen Palestinian books embedded in the library's general collection and thus harder to identify - to the Palestinian people.

How can the books be "returned" to a Palestinian collective with millions in exile? Who represents the Palestinian people? Should the books be housed in a governmental institution, a cultural NGO, a new library set up for this purpose? Should they be as close to Jerusalem as possible, or as far from occupation as possible? These are not questions I can or should try to answer. Palestinians, particularly refugees most affected by the destruction and theft of their books and other cultural materials, have started to have these conversations. In the summer of 2013, when Librarians and Archivists to Palestine visited, many people mentioned the stolen books to us, probably thanks to Al Jazeera's showing of *The Great Book Robbery*. I just found out about Emily Jacir's *ex libris*, in which she displays photographed inscriptions from AP books and others in the National Library's Oriental Reading Room. I look forward to seeing what comes of these conversations - politically, artistically, legally, culturally - and participating in any way I can.

The list of ideas on the next page includes thoughts of my own as well as those I've heard from Palestinians, Israelis, and others (and those suggested by people interviewed in *The Great Book Robbery*). It is simply a jumping off point, and includes both next steps and imagined solutions.



*Continue to go through the AP collection in search of owners' names and other identifying information

*Further examine the photographs of the 34 books we already viewed to glean more information from them

*Track down owners (and families of owners) of books we have already viewed, and those listed in an Israeli National Library report of March 1949

*Find any still existing booksellers and printers whose stamps are found in the AP books, and see what records they kept

*Find an insider at the library - someone who is sympathetic and might be able to shed light on some of the unanswered questions (how exactly did books end up labeled "AP," why some and not others, what was the original intention, etc.)

*Legal challenges in Israeli courts, perhaps by Palestinian citizens of Israel whose books were taken

*Legal challenges in international courts

*Do further research into other struggles for return of stolen cultural property (including Bosnia, Japanese internment by the US, and indigenous communities throughout the world)

*Start a Museum of the Nakba that would house these books and other materials

*National Library makes copies of books to keep in their collection, and returns originals

*Give the books to Palestinian universities and educational institutions, or cultural institutions

What are your ideas?

*

*

*

Further Resources

URLs are ephemeral, so they're not listed below. I trust your internet searching skills, dear readers.

AP book-related



Overdue Books: Returning Palestine's "Abandoned Property" of 1948 [my article in the *Jerusalem Quarterly*]



Ownerless Objects: The story of the books Palestinians left behind in 1948 [Gish Amit's article in the *Jerusalem Quarterly*]



The Great Book Robbery [film by Benny Brunner and catalog of some AP books]



Robbery of Books and Ownership of Narrative [Susan Abulhawa's article in *The Palestine Chronicle* about *The Great Book Robbery* - its importance and a critique]



Books: A Palestinian Tale [Larry Stillman's article in *Arena* about the story on page 8 of this zine]



ex libris [Emily Jacir's art piece with photographs of stolen Palestinian books]

Organizations & websites with historical and archival information dating back to 1948 and before

Palestine Land Society

Palestineremembered.com

Applied Research Institute - Jerusalem

Institute for Palestine Studies

Things I'm involved in and maybe you want to be too

Librarians and Archivists to Palestine

Adalah-NY: The New York Campaign for the Boycott of Israel [or look up the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, or the BNC in Palestine]



a zine by Hannah Mermelstein
Librarians and Archivists to Palestine
2014