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Oy Tannenbaum, Oy Tannenbaum! The Role of a Christmas Tree in a Jewish Museum

Yaniv Feller

Introduction

The ubiquitous Christmas scene of a decorated fir tree in the living room surrounded by gifts is so iconic that it has travelled to climates without evergreens and homes without Christians. Christmas is a fest of scholarly interest precisely because of its many iconic and ironic juxtapositions, including that of "Jesus and Father Christmas," who "are opposed in ways to make a structuralist's mouth water."[1] There are also the broader themes of secularization and religion, private and public, local traditions and globalization, family and society, intimacy and alienation in the modern world, and also, as many of the chapters in this volume show, the breakdown of these dichotomies.[2] My interest is in what the Christmas tree, not just the icon or idea of the Christmas tree, but a very specific plastic tree placed at a strategic point in the Jewish Museum Berlin (hereafter JMB), can tell us about the construction of history and the work of the museum.

Christmas tree, Jewish Museum, Berlin. These do not seem to fit together. Why would a Christmas tree be in a museum at all, and a Jewish museum in particular? Why Berlin? What is the Christmas tree doing there? An examination of this tree, I contend, offers insights into the larger narrative told by the JMB. Its placement in the museum, however, already signifies the collapse of the very story it was meant to illustrate. What at first appears as a story of German-Jewish acculturation and assimilation emerges upon a closer look as the breakdown of this linear narrative. Furthermore, when this historiography and its breakdown are understood, the Christmas

tree at the JMB invites reflection about the museum as a space in which public memory is produced through objects, things, and storytelling.

The Museum

The Jewish Museum Berlin is a national institution in Germany and one of the most important Jewish museums in Europe. The story the JMB tells to the German public and to hundreds of thousands of tourists a year is therefore a prism to contemporary German society. First, there is the historical aspect. The JMB is important because the history of Jews in Germany is considered central for the understanding not only of Jewish life in Europe, but also of the Holocaust. Although the JMB is not a Holocaust museum, the Holocaust plays an important role there and is the reason many visitors come to this museum.

Second, the Jewish Museum is in Berlin, reunified Germany's capital city. It signifies and is an agent in Germany's coming to terms with its past. In other words, it is as much about "the Germans" and their needs for a usable past as it is about "the Jews." This process is also evident in the museum's institutional organization. Unlike Jewish museums in North America, it is not a community museum but a federal institution that receives its budget from the German government.[3] Michael Steinberg notes that the JMB's role in German society results in uneasy tension that ends up re-ascribing national separateness. The museum, he writes, places "the history of the Jews on a field separate from the history of other Germans. Here the museological quandary duplicates the historiographical one: giving the Jews 'their' history adopts a functionally nationalist paradigm for the organization of historical patterns and groups which may do violence to the subject positions of precisely those whom the gesture seeks to redress."[4]

Finally, there is the building itself. Designed by Daniel Libeskind, originally as an addition to the Berlin-Museum, it is a monumental and intentionally disorientating structure, alluding to German-Jewish historical experience itself. Putting aside the debate about Libeskind's architectural choices, the building is considered an architectonic milestone and attracts many visitors who might not have been interested in Jewish history otherwise.[5] In order to get to the permanent exhibition, one needs to go through an underground passage, where the visitor is confronted with three axes: the axis of exile, the axis of the Holocaust, and the axis of continuity. It is after visiting the other axes, with their disorientating effect and focus on traumatic experience, that the visitor usually goes up the stairs to the "axis of continuity," which is the permanent exhibition space proper. It is there that she will later find the Christmas tree. But before moving to the tree of the permanent exhibition, it is worth taking a short detour into a territory of controversy – the idea of Chrismukkah.

Excursus: An (Un)happy Chrismukkah

The notion of "Chrismukkah," a compound holiday combining Christmas and Hanukkah, became a popular term in North America at least since its appearance in an episode of the successful television show *The O.C.* in 2003. In the German context it was not as common. The Jewish Museum Berlin's exhibition *Weihnukka: Geschichten von Weihnachten und Chanukka* (October 2005–January 2006) (*Chrismukkah: Stories of Christmas and Hanukkah*) caused considerable uproar. Maybe it was the provocative title that led Stephan Kramer, the general secretary of the *Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland* at the time, to claim that the exhibition does not present a picture of a living Judaism, but of one that is thoroughly assimilated. The Orthodox rabbi Yitshak Ehrenberg noted that one of the core messages of Hanukkah is that Jews should protect their cultural and religious tradition. This exhibition, he protested, goes against this central message. The exhibition, it was further argued, is a "feel good" for non-Jewish Germans, who can consume a lovely and easy-to-digest version of a mixed holiday, disregarding in the process both the tragic past and what is seen by some as an uncertain future. On the other hand, one can argue – as does Cilly Kugelmann, the program director at the JMB at the time – that the fact that the exhibition provoked an intra-Jewish discussion is yet another sign of its success.[6]

These critiques focused on the idea of a shared holiday, rather than the exhibition itself, in which the two holidays were mostly presented separately, with only one room dealing with their fusion in the North American context. Cary Nathenson argued nonetheless that the exhibition attempted to create a "universal" Jewish identity that is presumably free from time and space but is in fact Americanized. The exhibition, he complained, is a concession to the German non-Jewish public; it presents a harmonious picture of assimilation where none is to be found. "Ultimately," he writes, "the *Weihnukka* exhibition, and the Jewish Museum itself, can be read as shorthand for the desire for a global identity, an identity that supplants the traditional and conflict-laden conceptions of diaspora and its 'insider-outsider' dichotomy. It is a fantasy of universal appeal, potentially satisfying desires of Jews and non-Jews (as evidenced additionally by the claim in one journalist's report on the exhibit that some Turkish-German families also now have Christmas trees at home)."[7]

Nathenson's critique reflects the tone and message of critiques of the JMB more broadly, namely that it has a "preference for generalizing the Jews out of their own identity" instead of emphasizing their particularity, especially as it is exemplified in religious terms.[8] But Nathenson goes even further in his search for "authentic" Jewish life unperturbed by "syncretism." Some of his most snarky comments are reserved for Russian Jews emigrating to Germany, who "might not even be Jewish, according to the standards of the very same official German-Jewish community."[9] Such claims, however, see "identity" as a stable, perfect, and unchanging one-to-one fit without different and contesting aspects. Nathenson ignores the theoretical insights that warn us against this type of forced inscribing of identity and claims for authenticity. Instead, one could argue, a more productive route is to focus on the contesting, simultaneously present, and multifaceted definitions of the "I" and "we."[10]

The Bourgeois Tree

The Jewish Museum Berlin had a Christmas tree long before the *Weihnukka* exhibition. In fact, a Christmas tree was placed there from the opening of the permanent exhibition in 2001. Given the debate surrounding the Chrismukkah exhibition, it might come as a surprise that the Christmas tree in the permanent exhibition did not provoke the same kind of response. Although it is difficult to reason from absence, there are at least three plausible complementary explanations for this phenomenon. First, unlike the temporary exhibition, which had touched upon contemporary Jewish life and practice, the Christmas tree at the permanent exhibition is located as part of a historical exhibition; firmly rooted in the period 1850–1933, it can be categorized as "historical," as a relic of a phenomenon past, as opposed to being relevant for the present. Another possible reason is that Chrismukkah can be considered an art of "syncretism," an unholy mixture of things that should be kept apart. By contrast, the Christmas tree in the permanent exhibition is an unapologetic Christmas tree, and not a variation on the Hanukkah-bush. Finally, the fact that Chrismukkah is much more a North American phenomenon than a European one might have created anxiety not only of a Jewish-Christian syncretism but also of a German-American one, even though as mentioned this was hardly the focus of the 2005 exhibition.[11] In sum, unlike the Chrismukkah exhibition, the permanent exhibition's Christmas tree could be perceived as a historical object that does more than reflect contemporary anxieties.

The visitor enters the part of the exhibition containing the Christmas tree after having experienced the Jewish emancipation and Enlightenment, followed by a thematic presentation, somewhat disjointed from the chronological discussion, of the Jewish life cycle, from circumcision, marriage, and death to kosher food. It is after this section that the visitor reaches a segment dedicated to family life (*Familienleben*). The description of family life is done in several ways, including an impressive collection of portraits and family scenes (mostly from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), family photos, and a section on and for children. There is a certain feeling of openness and calmness when approaching the Christmas tree.

That the tree and its surroundings should provide a welcoming feeling is a curatorial decision made evident by a text that describes this section as *Die gute Stube* (The Parlour). Unlike Libeskind's use of exposed concrete, the floor here has a warm wooden colour and decorative panels recalling family life. These further evoke a feeling of homeliness (*Heimlichkeit*) that is conveyed in this setting of a bourgeoisie living room.[12] The idea of a museal representation of a home setting has a long tradition. In the context of Jewish museums, this mode of presentation has been popularized following Isidor Kaufmann's "Sabbath Room" in the Jewish Museum in Vienna (1899). This room, remarkable in the context of Jewish museums at the time, was a three-dimensional experience of the home during Sabbath, with silver candlesticks, challahs, and everything else needed. It was not only a representation of a Jewish ceremony at home; it also conveyed the ideas of Sabbath and of home itself as a warm, stable, and harmonious place. The "Sabbath Room" addressed Jews and non-Jews alike, hoping to dispel false antisemitic perceptions that the latter might have regarding Jewish rituals.[13] This basic idea has been mimicked numerous times in other Jewish museums. A century after Kaufmann, the JMB still used a similar mode of presentation in the form of a Sabbath table as part of its life cycle segment. At the same time, by playing on this mode of homely setting and inserting the Christmas tree into the *gute Stube*, one could argue that

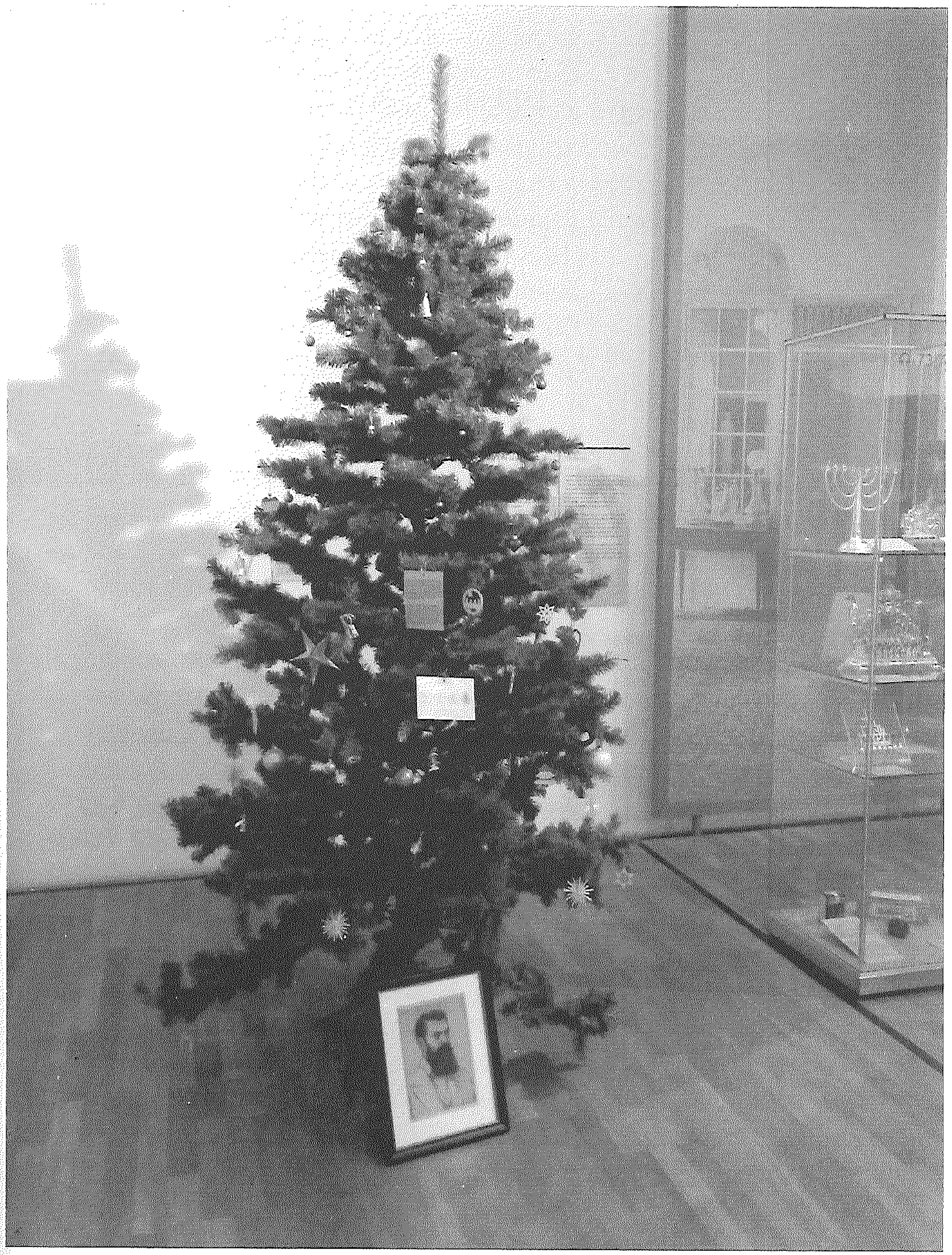
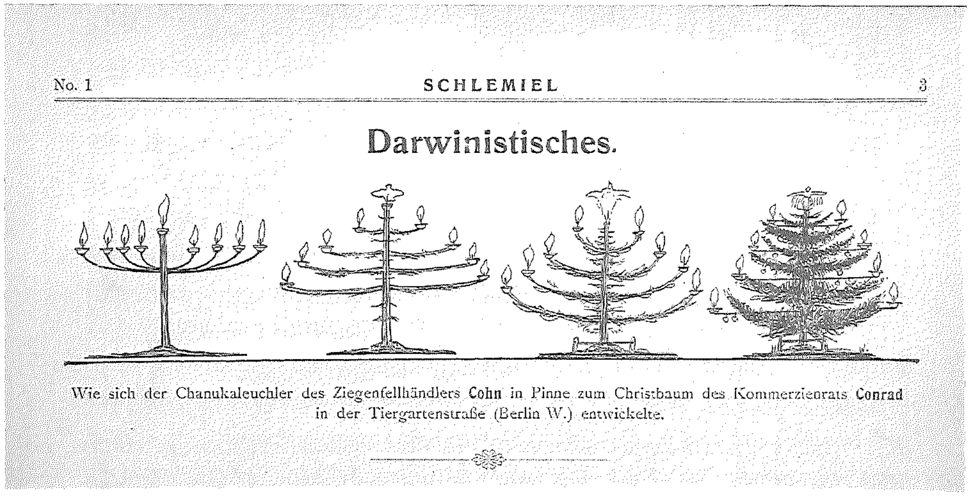


Figure 7.1 The Christmas tree at the Jewish Museum Berlin.

the result of the curation is a question about what homeliness meant for Jews in Germany in the nineteenth century.

Other objects in the *gute Stube* besides the Christmas tree include a glass cabinet containing various decorative items such as a porcelain candelabra, beautiful coffee silverware, a large oil portrait of the then high-society family Plesch, and another painting on the other wall. Across from the tree stands a concert grand piano. The place is inviting for a group to sit, quite a rarity in Libeskind's building. Near the tree there is a glass vitrine with Hanukkah menorahs.[14] The tree dominates the setting – as it would in a typical living room – for several reasons. First, it is more colourful than the other objects in the room. Second, it is not displayed inside a glass vitrine and is therefore more inviting. Finally, the tree functions as one large object as opposed to several small ones. In short, the tree overshadows, quite literally, the menorahs and other objects and captures the centre of attention.

The museum as a site of public memory places Christmas firmly within the domestic sphere. The Christmas tree stands in the family segment because it was considered a familial event for many German families around that time.[15] In fact, the emergence of the German-Jewish bourgeois family can be dated to about the same time as the emergence within broader German culture of the Christmas tree as a place of gathering and gift-giving.[16] The intersection between Jews and the Christmas tree occurs at this point, because the tree is a symbol of acculturation and the transformation of bourgeois society. In this process, it is important to note, Jews were not passive actors, entering into a fully formed society. Rather, they were active agents in the shaping of this modern society, both within the Jewish community, e.g. through the changing of religious customs, and outside of it, by entering certain professions that can be seen as catalysts of this type of society.[17] Just like in the bourgeois culture in general, so in Christmas: Jews were not only mimicking their neighbours; they might have been also actively propagating the Christmas tree. An early-nineteenth-century police report in Vienna notes that Fanny Arnstein, a Jewish *salonnière* originally from Berlin, had a big, decorated tree in her living room. This was done, writes the report, "according to a Berlin custom." This implies that the Christmas tree was not an integral part of the Viennese traditions of the time.[18] Thus, the first person to import this custom to Vienna might have been a Jew.



No. 1 SCHLEMIEL 3

Darwinistisches.

Wie sich der Chanukaleuchter des Ziegenfellhändlers **Cohn** in Pinne zum Christbaum des Kommerzienrats **Conrad** in der Tiergartenstraße (Berlin W.) entwickelte.

Figure 7.2 Schlemiel caricature hanging on the Christmas tree at the Jewish Museum Berlin.

The Christmas tree in the JMB is presented as part of the "Family Life" segment that deals with the construction of the family in the nineteenth century. Jewish families often celebrated Christmas in conjunction with Hanukkah, as a national holiday and not a religious one, according to the explanation attached to the Christmas tree in the Jewish Museum. The way the tree is located in the exhibition, however, suggests a broader context. The Christmas tree continues the story of the Enlightenment told earlier. It is a narrative, perhaps hidden but triumphal nonetheless, that leads from the German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn to a happy family life and a merry Christmas, which is followed by Jewish choices in modern German society, Jewish religious reform, and then Jewish successes in financial, artistic, and scientific enterprises.[19]

Many of the visitors to the Jewish Museum Berlin take it for granted that the Christmas tree is placed in the domestic context. German guided school groups do not ask "Why is there a Christmas tree in a Jewish Museum?" but rather "Why is it here at this time of the year?" It makes no sense for some to have a Christmas tree in April or June, but the fact that it is placed in a Jewish museum poses no cognitive dissonance for them. Israeli and Jewish tourists, by contrast, are often puzzled by the presence of the tree. In both cases, the effect is one of alienation – the tree does not seem to belong: neither in a museum nor at most times of the year.

It is when we look at the tree more closely that the reading of the museum as conveying a unidirectional, triumphal history is disturbed. I want to highlight two items related to the tree: one of the decorations on the tree and the portrait beneath it. Alongside more traditional decorations, at least one catches the eye: it is from the magazine *Schlemiel*, which, in 1904, published a biting caricature titled "Darwinist."

It shows the transformation of a Hannukah menorah into a decorated Christmas tree. The caption reads: "How the Hanukkah-lights [menorah] of the goatskin merchant Cohn in Pinne developed into the Christ-tree of the councilor of commerce Conrad in Tiergartenstraße (Berlin W.)." The same effect is achieved by the curatorial text that accompanies the Christmas tree. Although the text explains the parallels between Christmas and Hanukkah and states that Jews celebrated Christmas "as a German rather than a religious festival," it also explains the *Schlemiel* caricature, thus drawing the visitor's attention to it in case it was missed. This Christmas tree's decoration incorporates an intra-Jewish debate about the need for celebrating Christmas.

Another object that immediately catches the visitor's attention is the Christmas present under this particular tree – a portrait of Theodor Herzl, widely regarded as the founding father of Zionism. "What is Herzl doing beneath a Christmas tree?" I heard some Israeli visitors wondering among themselves in Hebrew. Isn't Zionism supposed to reject the assimilationist ideology, as exemplified by the *Schlemiel* caricature? This portrait can be read as an example of how Zionism was in disjunction with the prevailing German-Jewish bourgeois culture, yet could still be integrated, or at least tolerated to a certain extent.

Herzl's portrait beneath the Christmas tree is based on a story told by Gershom Scholem, the German-Jewish scholar of Jewish mysticism, who was a Zionist from an early age. In his autobiography *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, he tells the following story, which can be heard in the audio-guide, as well as read on a text attached as a Christmas decoration: "Christmas was celebrated in our family from the time of my grandparents … It was said that this was a German national holiday, which we celebrated not as Jews but as Germans … Of course, that made an impression on me as a child, and in 1911, when I had just begun to learn Hebrew, I took part for the last time. There was a picture of Herzl under the Christmas-tree, in a black frame. My mother said, 'Since you're so interested in Zionism, we chose this picture for you.' From then on, I left the house at Christmas."[20] Scholem instead went to his uncle to celebrate Hanukkah. The gift exposes a generational and cultural shift: Scholem's mother treated his Zionism as a hobby. For Scholem, a young Zionist trying to assert his Jewish identity, the placement of Herzl under the Christmas tree was sacrilegious; it was exactly the opposite of what he was searching for.

The placement of Herzl's portrait under the tree at the museum occasions a Jewish critique of Christmas celebration in a similar way to the *Schlemiel* caricature.[21] Yet this perspective provides just one layer of meaning. The curatorial voice here is by no means an adoption of the Zionist position. Indeed, the decision to put a Christmas tree in the exhibition already implies a rejection of a simple Zionist narrative against assimilation. One can take the implication of the Herzl portrait a step further by thinking about the role that the Christmas tree played for Herzl himself. Rabbi Moritz Güdemann noted after a visit to the Herzls on 24 December 1895, "I was admitted to the big front room and found there – one can imagine my surprise – a big Christ-tree! Shortly after came Herzl accompanied by Oppenheim, who was also an editor of *Neue Freie Presse*. The conversation – in the presence of the Christ-tree – was slow, and I excused myself shortly." Herzl had his own account of that day. He had just lit the Christmas tree with his children when Güdemann came, and "seemed disgruntled because of the Christian custom. Well, I don't let myself be pressured by anyone! Well, as far as I am concerned it should be called the Hanukkah-tree – or the Winter Solstice?"[22] This story is told in the *Weihnukka* exhibition catalogue but not in the permanent exhibition, which is a missed opportunity to have yet another additional layer of interpretation through the important reminder that the father of Zionism had no problem placing a Christmas tree in his living room.

The Christmas tree and *gute Stube* are quite popular among visitors. It is due to their own appearances (warm colours, etc.), but maybe there is another reason at play as well: it is because visitors recognize something familiar while still grasping that their recognition is only partial. It is always at the same time misrecognition. In this, the Christmas tree reflects the museum itself. According to Gottfried Korff, the museum, by presenting things past, is a place of constant interplay between the familiar and the foreign.[23] Through its presence in the exhibition and its decorations, the Christmas tree invites a process of alienation for all visitors: those who come with a preconception that the Christmas tree has no role in Jewish life are confronted by it in a Jewish museum. Those who take the Christmas tree for a cultural given, on the other hand, are confronted by the critiques of it, by both Scholem's story and the *Schlemiel* caricature.

The alienation provoked by the Christmas tree at the JMB serves as a moment of learning in the museum. Without being schoolbook didactic, the Christmas tree conveys important insights to the visitors about the way Jews celebrated Christmas, and rejected it. This is achieved through the moment of shock or confusion created by the presence of the Christmas tree. This "a-ha!" moment, the metaphorical lightbulb, was considered by Walter Benjamin to be the great achievement of a good exhibition.[24] The Christmas tree functions as a moment of learning – about Jews and their relation to Christmas, about acculturation, and about the meaning of Christmas as a bourgeois celebration – while facilitating a process of unlearning. By encountering a Christmas tree in a Jewish museum, the visitor is confronted with her own conceptions of Judaism, Jewish life, and Christmas, and they all prove to be problematic. The contrasting interpretations of the same moment in the exhibition allows the visitor to gain an insight into the complexities of German-Jewish history, as well as to her own preconceived notions of it.

The Christmas Tree as a Thing

When looked in relation to its immediate context, the JMB Christmas tree further complicates a triumphal historiography of assimilation. The tree as a place of gathering and homeliness is surrounded, as we have seen, by objects that reinforce this feeling of homeliness: family portrait, piano, household objects, and so on. The tree undoes the one-dimensional picture of Jews celebrating Christmas; similarly, so does its placement among historical objects challenge any presumed harmony of German-Jewish life.

The Christmas tree at the JMB is a "thing" and not an object, but in a different, one is tempted to say more mundane, way than is commonly understood in philosophical terms and in the study of material culture.[25] For Kant, the thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*) is a central notion delineating the fact that all our relations to the phenomenal realm are mediated through our categories, such as space and time. This means that the thing-in-itself cannot be sensually experienced.[26] Derrida, for his part, in a not-so-hidden dialogue with Kant, argued for the irreductability of the thing into an object: "I owe to the thing an absolute respect which no general law would mediate: the law of the thing is singularity and difference as well. An infinite debt ties me to it, a duty without funds or foundation. I shall never acquit myself of it. Thus the thing is not an object; it cannot become one."[27] The seeming inaccessibility of the things, not because they are not available in the phenomenal realm but precisely because they are real and therefore resist theorizing, is central to what Bill Brown terms "thing theory."[28] These complex philosophical reflections receive a very different, almost opposite, interpretation in museum praxis. As a quip among museum workers goes, objects have inventory numbers; things do not. Objects are what museums collect, archive, and reposit for the next generations; they are the bread and butter of museums' work.[29] Things, by contrast, are considered mostly decorative. They do not have value for the museum in and of themselves. It sounds as if the meaning ascribed by the museum to the "thing" is the opposite of that used in "thing theory," but I argue that they may lead to similar theoretical results.

The Christmas tree at the JMB is a thing in a museal sense, a decorative item that was bought for the purpose of presentation. Its historical significance is meagre; it is an early-twenty-first-century item that serves the dramaturgy of the museum. The Christmas tree is no more than a means of illustration. Any other Christmas tree would do. If it is of any historical worth, it is only through its presence in the museum for so many years, and even that is questionable. The objects in the *gute Stube* surrounding the tree are objects in the more precise museal sense: they are historical items bought by or donated to the museum for preservation and presentation. As such, they reflect the difficult history of German Jewry. The fact that they are in the museum, as opposed to the homes in which they were used, already calls into question any attempt to idealize a picture of Jewish integration into German society in the long nineteenth century. It is with regard to the other objects in the space that the tree's homeliness becomes uncanny; the *Heimlichkeit* becomes *unheimlich*.

This can be exemplified by every historical object surrounding the tree but is most evident with regard to the piano that stands across from it. As the text accompanying the piano explains, it was donated to the museum in 2004 by Tessa Uys. Uys is the daughter of pianist Helga Bassel, who owned this piano in Berlin in 1930. After the Nazis rose to power, Helga, a gifted musician, was expelled from the Reich's Music Chamber. She emigrated to South Africa in 1936, taking the piano with her. There, she never mentioned her Jewish past. It was only after her death that her daughter discovered the fact of their Jewishness. This story, along with a photo of Helga Bassel playing the piano in Berlin, forces the visitor to rethink the calmness and warmth communicated by the space around the Christmas tree.

The history of the piano qua historical object, when contrasted with the Christmas tree, exposes the tension inherent to the museum as a shaper of public memory. It reminds us that underneath the cultural atmosphere of the museum lurks barbarism and violence that resulted in death and expulsion.[30] Both the object and the museum in which it is placed are situated not only within a picture of German-Jewish harmonious family life, but also within a history of violent destruction of the very same family fabric.

The Museum Unwrapped

The images evoked by Christmas are of family gathering around the Christmas tree, the unwrapping of gifts, lights that shine in the dark nights, and of course, a happy, fat, red-cheeked, white-bearded Santa. Happiness is not only a desired condition in Christmas; it is expected and demanded. Maybe this is where the Christmas anxiety comes from: the feeling that one is not as happy as one should be.[31] This is also the reason why the Grinch, a grumpy figure that deviates from the choir of happiness, is so memorable: he breaks the illusion of unity in joy.[32]

The Christmas tree allows us to unwrap the layers of meaning at work at the Jewish Museum Berlin. Upon a cursory glance, it tells the story of Christmas as many would like to imagine it, Christmas as signifier of family and happiness: a German-Jewish family behaves like their non-Jewish compatriots in the celebration of an explicitly Christian holiday, albeit in a bourgeois fashion. This merry Christmas receives a tinge of bitter irony the closer one approaches the tree, whose decorations include a Jewish caricature of assimilation and whose sole associated gift is a portrait of Theodor Herzl. The double alienation achieved by the tree assures that both the acceptance of the celebratory narrative of integration and its Zionist critique cannot be unequivocally asserted.

It is mere decoration, the Christmas tree at the Jewish Museum Berlin. Yet precisely because it is a dramaturgical tool, "empty" of historical content in and of itself, it sheds light on the dark history of the objects surrounding it. The Christmas tree allows us to gain insights not only on how German Jews treated Christmas, but also on how the museum itself functions. In this regard, the Christmas tree is perhaps more like Easter's empty grave than Christmas's manger – it is the empty centre, the thing, that leads us to understand the story the museum tells its visitors.

Notes

Most of the work on this chapter was done during my tenure (2015–17) as an exhibition curator for the upcoming new permanent exhibition at the Jewish Museum Berlin. I thank my colleagues there, Inka Bertz, Maren Krüger, and Tanja Petersen, for many conversations about various aspects of this chapter. Special thanks to Cilly Kugelmann and Michal Friedlander for encouraging me to think about the multiple layers of exhibitions. All opinions and interpretations expressed here are mine and do not represent the Jewish Museum Berlin.

1 Doniger, "Hang Santa," 17.

2 For other attempts to conceptualize Christmas, see Miller, ed., *Unwrapping Christmas*, and Miller, *Weihnachten: Das globale Fest.*

3 On the debates prior to the opening of the museum, see Lackmann, *Jewrassic Park.*

4 Steinberg, *Judaism Musical and Unmusical*, 180.

5 Schneider and Libeskind, *Between the Lines*; Wolf, ed., *Daniel Libeskind and the Contemporary Jewish Museum*; Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 152–83.

6 Kauschke, "Der Rest vom Fest."

7 Nathenson, "Chrismukkah as Happy Ending?" 66. It should be noted, however, that to Americanize is not necessarily to universalize as Nathenson's argument might imply. What gives the Jewish discussions in North America their vitality, and humour, is precisely the tension of being a Jew in a society that celebrates Christmas, a tension that is not harmonized nor resolved, but rather lived. An example on the lighter side of the spectrum might illustrate the point. In Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the episode "Mary, Joseph, and Larry" centres on the Christmas celebration of a mixed couple, Larry and his non-Jewish wife Cheryl. Larry refuses initially to have a Christmas tree in the living room, explaining: "I'm a Jew, to have a tree in the house, it's bad luck. You know, my guy [pointing upwards] might not, may think I'm switching or something, you know, he might not understand." He later explains to his friend Jeff that having a Christmas tree for the first time is "unsettling." A huge tree is nonetheless placed in his house, and Christmas carols are sung late at night, much to Larry's dismay. The entire comic premise of the episode, with all its Christmas-related misfortunes that befall Larry, is predicated on this disharmony, on the "unsettling" feeling, and not on the giving up of Jewish identity. See David, "Mary, Joseph, and Larry."

On the way Turkish-German families celebrate Christmas, see Sophie Reimers's article in this volume.

8 Rothstein, "The Problem with Jewish Museums," 59.

9 Nathenson, "Chrismukkah as Happy Ending?" 59.

10 A classic example is Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, especially 277.

11 Most writing on Chrismukkah as a multicultural celebration, and the problems it raises, is done in the North American context. See for example Plaut, *A Kosher Christmas*, and Mehta, "Chrismukkah: Millennial Multiculturalism."

12 The *Stube* has different regional connotations. Whereas in East Germany it simply refers to the living room, in older households in West Germany it refers to a very specific type of living room, one that maintains the feeling of bourgeoisie almost to a degree of holiness. Children are rarely allowed to enter this type of *gute Stube*, and only if they behave well. I thank Julia Carls for a helpful discussion on this subject.

13 The fame of Kaufmann's "Sabbath Room" was partly the result of its presentation at the Dresden Hygiene Exhibition in 1911. See Purin, "Isidor Kaufmann's Little World," 129–45; cf. Berger, *The Jewish Museum*, 166–70.

14 The constellation around the tree, as well as its decorations, have changed throughout the years. The glass vitrine containing the Hanukkah menorahs was an upgrade from the 2001 original and was created to be the same size as the tree, reflecting feedback the museum received about the prominence of Christmas. Throughout the article, I am referring to the latest iteration, as present in the photo, which was presented until 2017 when the permanent exhibition closed.

15 On the development of Christmas as a family celebration, see Weber-Kellermann, *Das Weihnachtsfest*, and Eberspächer, "Lichtglanz und Kinderglück."

16 Richarz, "Der jüdische Weihnachtsbaum."

17 Lässig, *Jüdische Wege ins Bürgertum*; van Rahden, *Jews and Other Germans*; Jensen, *Gebildete Doppelgänger*; Baader, *Gender, Judaism, and Bourgeois Culture in Germany*.

18 Richarz, "Der jüdische Weihnachtsbaum," 282.

19 Shortly after this segment there is an attempt to problematize this harmonious picture. After taking the stairs down to the first floor, the visitor encounters the segment "German and Jew at the Same Time," which discusses the various ways in which Jews tried to integrate into German society. The options there include conversion and baptism, expressions of patriotism, but also communism and Zionism. Because of the way visitors walk in this space, they are much more likely to encounter Zionism and baptism rather than the other alternatives.

20 Quoted from the English audio-guide text. For the original German, see Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, 41–2.

21 The portrait under the tree is probably not the one Scholem received for Christmas in 1911, because this portrait was made by Hermann Struck and more likely dates to the 1920s.

22 Both quoted in Richarz, "Der jüdische Weihnachtsbaum," 285; cf. Richarz, "Weihnukka," 96.

23 Korff, "Fremde (der, die, das) und das Museum (1997)," 146.

24 Benjamin, "Bekränzter Eingang," 559; cf. Korff, "Omnibusprinzip und Schaufensterqualität," 733–5.

25 For a brief theoretical summary of the thing (*Ding*) in the museum, see Thiemeyer, "Die Sprache der Dinge." The German offers further complications which the English is spared. There is not just the distinction between a thing and an object but also between different things or objects, using the words "Gegenstand" (standing opposed), "Objekt," and "Ding." At least at the JMB, it is more common to use the distinction between "Deko" and "Objekt."

26 This is a central distinction in Kant's philosophy and it is developed in many places throughout the first critique. See, for example, Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, xxvi–xxvii.

27 Derrida, *Signéponge-Signsponge*, 14.

28 Brown, "Thing Theory." See also the subsequent works, among others: Brown, *Things*; Brown, *Other Things*. David Morgan summarizes this theoretical position well, writing that "things resist the epistemic spell of objecthood." Morgan, "Thing," 256.

29 Gottfried Korff does not use the distinction object/thing but he has the former in mind when he talks about collecting and presenting "museum things" (*Museumsdinge*). See Korff, "Zur Eigenart der Museumsdinge (1992)," 140–5.

30 Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," 696.

31 Doniger, "Hang Santa," 18.

32 On the Grinch see Isaac Weiner's chapter in this volume.

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8

"What Exactly Do You Celebrate at Christmas?": Different Perceptions of Christmas among German-Turkish Families in Berlin

Sophie Reimers

Introduction

It was during the second winter of my research among an immigrant family made up of three generations in the neighbourhood of Neukölln in the city of Berlin that Maral, one of my interlocutors, asked me a simple question: "What exactly do you celebrate at Christmas?" At this point I had participated in the family's daily life for almost two years and had gotten to know all of them, especially Maral, quite well.[1] Still, her question turned our conversation in an unexpected direction. The family had come to Berlin from rural Turkey in the 1970s and had lived there ever since, so her inquiry led to a moment of hesitation on my part. I was simply not sure how to classify her question; did she not know the origins of the holiday – the story of Jesus being born in a barn in Bethlehem – or was she just unsure about the details? Or did she want to hear my personal reasons for celebrating Christmas?

At the time, Maral and I had been interacting closely with each other for a while. Up until she posed her startling question, I had almost always experienced our exchanges as being shaped by mutual understanding. This one small question, however, seemed to widen the gap between us. If Maral indeed did not know the story of Christmas, it could have merely been a sign of how secularized Christmas practices had become. But it might have also been the consequence of her limited interaction with members of the kind of bourgeois milieu that shapes the Christmas habitus. I was astonished that the story of Christmas – so natural to me thanks to having