We Don't Want to Know: Suppressed Narratives of the White City

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In Search of the Spirit of a Place

In November 2015 I had my first meeting with the founding staff of the «Liebling Haus», which back then was still called «The White City Center». It was supposed to be a new urban center in the midst of Tel Aviv that would investigate the modern heritage of the city: its unique urban planning and more than 4,000 modernist buildings, «the main influences [...] came from the teachings of the Bauhaus, and from examples of Le Corbusier and Erich Mendelsohn», as the ICOMOS statement notes. 1 UNESCO declared Tel Aviv a World Heritage site in 2003, thanks to the personal efforts of architect Nitza Smok, who was the head and the founder of the TLV Municipal Conservation Department during those years. Despite her considerable efforts, until 2015 no broad research or systematic effort was made by the municipality to investigate and understand the conditions in which the city that «rose from the sands» was created, apart from instructions on strict conservation, which led to an extreme rise in prices for White City buildings while accelerating the gentrification process. The myth around the resurrection of the city was that it was built due to the booming local construction industry.

The Center's team had an empty building they had received from the municipality in order to accommodate the future institution. It was the «Liebling Haus» (1936-37), a typical modernist apartment building designed by architect Dov Karmi at the initiative of realtor Max Liebling and constructed in the 1930s modernist building boom in Tel Aviv. What brought this «building boom», and how come a beautiful residential building is in the hands of the municipality? These were questions that had not yet occurred to me. Later I learned that in the 1960s, after the deaths of Toni and Max Liebling (the building's owners) the building was donated to the city of Tel Aviv-Jaffa. According to Toni Liebling's will, «the house at 29 Idelson St. will go to the Tel Aviv Municipality as a gift under the instruction that it should, once the inhabitants can be evacuated, function as an orphanage, a children's residence, a home for the aged, or a dormitory for needy students, or also as a museum.» For many years, the building served the municipality as an office space. One can imagine how bureaucratic lifestyle can change a space.

In order to establish the Center, and to finally execute Toni Liebling's will, extremely complicated rigorous conservation was planned. The Center's team had a year and a half until the

tel aviv as bauhaus' world capital «bauhaus» white city

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beginning of the renovation process was supposed to physically kick-off. Trying to adapt contemporary approaches to place-making, Shira Levy Benyemini, the Center's Director, offered me a chance to curate a process of «temporal use» in the building, suggesting it could maybe be some kind of artistic residency that would create beautiful art works between those walls. Sharon Golan Yaron, the Center's initiator and content manager, spoke about the tangible and intangible quality of conservation process, and about the ability to capture «the spirit of the place». Both Golan Yaron and Levy Benyemini used to be part of the conservation department. The Center was a conceptual extension of the department and aimed to raise and discuss conservation questions with the broader public using various means.

Artists, I believe, do not just reflect the spirit of a place; they create it. The «spirit of the place» is not given, it is a construct. Suddenly it occurred to me that the staff working in the conservation department of Tel Aviv-Jaffa—and in practically any such department, at least in Israel—are mainly architects. However, conservation is a broad cultural concept, and urban preservation is certainly not just about buildings. In the end, the role of the Conservation Department is to preserve the spirit of a place, and who creates that if not artists and people involved with culture? So why would they not be among those who also preserve it? It was clear to me that the artists of the future «Liebling Program» should assist the department to re-think the term «conservation» and demonstrate new methods and practices for conserving the intangible. Nevertheless, the «Liebling Haus» was about to become a heritage center, in other words—a place that would have the responsibility and the power to write and tell the narrative of Tel Aviv, to establish the current ethos of the White City. Therefore, the artists invited to the residency engage in their independent artistic practice with questions of «story-telling» in multi-disciplinary mediums: Visual art, theater, writing, music, design, typography and more. I searched for artists that have devoted themself to «Archival Fever», who are interested in forgotten histories and who ask questions through their practice, to shed new light on lost knowledge.

politics of memory artistic inspiration

[D] How can we discover the social and political processes behind buildings and objects, planning and building activities as well as reception processes?

Sometimes a Tile is a Gate—The Language of Material Culture

While starting to investigate the physicality of the building at 29 Idelson St., Golan Yaron had told us that during a visit of the famous conservation architect Wilfried Brenne to the building, a yellow tile fell from the staircase wall into the palm of her hand. Curious and surprised, they read the inscription on the back: «Villeroy & Boch—Mettlach—Made in Germany». Immediately they understood that all the tiles in the building (which came in 3 different colors but had the same shape and style) were in fact imported from Germany. That was in 1936; Hitler's policy towards the Jews was extremely harsh. How could this German product arrive in Palestine? «The Transfer Agreement», Brenne suggested. Fig. 1a, b

When hearing this story, I had a feeling that I had already heard something about it. I remembered a paragraph from my history book in high school that talked about the «Fifth Aliyah»—the fifth wave of Jewish immigrants arriving in Palestine from Europe. This paragraph described in short and dry sentences how, thanks to the «Transfer Agreement» (1933-1939), 50,000 Jews had come from Germany to Palestine during the 30s. Since then I had never heard anything about this Agreement again, and never knew that it was not just German Jews that were «imported» to Palestine through the Agreement, but also German materials and goods. Looking at the yellow-brownish tiles in the wide and beautiful staircase of the building, I wondered whether this modern building was «made in Germany» and—through the ironies of history imported to Palestine during a period in which the Nazi regime eliminated the Bauhaus school and persecuted Jews? Was the White City resurrected only thanks to massive import of German goods? And how far did the influence of this Agreement on Jewish settlement in Palestine extend?

The «Transfer Agreement»—Outset of an Artistic Research

The Transfer Agreement immediately caught the attention of three artists from the residency program—Ilit Azoulay (artist), Lou Moria (designer), Nir Shauloff (theater maker), and the author. Later Jonathan Touitou, a conceptual artist, also joined us, and together we delved into an in-depth research project that led to a book entitled «The Lift» and to two site-specific art exhibitions: The first

language of material culture

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Fig. 1a, b Ceramic tile manufactured by Villeroy & Boch, Germany; retrieved from Liebling Haus, 29 Idelson Street, Tel Aviv, architect: Dov Karmi, constructed 1936–37

was the opening show at the Liebling Haus in September 2019, and the second was at Bauhaus Dessau in October 2019.

As awkward as it may sound, the «Transfer Agreement» was signed on August 28, 1933 between Reich authorities and the Zionist Federation. It remained in effect until the outbreak of World War II in September 1939 and has had a massive influence on the local economy and real estate in Palestine till this day. The Agreement was created with the intention to regulating economic relations in a way that would allow German Jews to leave Germany without losing all their assets, while making this process rather beneficial for Germany's economy.

As is well known, when the Nazis rose to power, a process of anti-Jewish legislation began in Germany, including economic decrees intended to strengthen the German economy and drive the Jews out of the Reich. Due to foreign currency regulations, which were in force even before 1933, German Jews who were compelled to leave their homeland could not liquidate their financial and other assets. Businessman Sam Cohen and the Jewish Agency's political department took steps to regulate the Jews' departure that would make it possible for those leaving to salvage their property and savings. The Zionist activists identified the potential innate to these grim circumstances to establish the Jewish *Yishuv* (settlement) in Palestine, and decisively promoted the Transfer Agreement.

The Agreement allowed German Jews to sell property and real estate, and to deposit the proceeds and their savings in designated bank accounts, which entitled them to immigration certificates—visas for Palestine issued by the British Mandatory administration. The deposited funds were invested in procurement of goods and building materials, which were exported from Germany to Palestine, where they were sold; the proceeds were supposed to return to the depositors minus various fees and commissions. More than 50,000 German Jews arrived in Palestine as part of this Agreement. The accumulated capital—which totaled ca. 150 million Reichsmark—was transferred to the Jewish Yishuv via the Anglo-Palestine Bank Ltd, a trust by the name of Haavara Ltd based in Tel Aviv, and its German branch—the Palestine Trust Company, Paltreu Ltd (Palästina Treuhandstelle zur Beratung deutscher Juden). The Nazi regime, for its part, encouraged the departure of Jews from Germany, thereby increasing the number of available workplaces and ensuring export of goods, which undermined the American trade boycott.

During our research we learned about the immeasurable influence of the Agreement on the local economy in Palestine. Some of the strongest families in the Israeli economy today transferred or build their business through this Agreement. Wertheimer, Strauss, Schocken and many more, thousands of companies were established, and innumerable German goods were sent to Haifa, Jaffa and Tel Aviv ports. The small market in Palestine was flooded with goods, which threatened local manufacturers. The manufacturers' association tried to control the flow of imported goods, and in their struggle, they were able to impose restrictions on the Ha'avara company. The protests and criticism, alongside the merchants' need to sell, led the Jewish agency to open another branch of the Ha'avara company: «NEMICO»—Near and Middle East Commercial Corporation Fig. 2. The goal of the company (that was entirely in Jewish ownership) was to expand the market: It had branches throughout the Middle East—in Alexandria, Cairo, Baghdad, Aleppo and more. The role of the name «Nemico» was to blur the connection to Ha'avara company, for fear of criticism because a Zionist institution was unofficially importing German goods to the Middle East during the time of the Nazi regime.

Although the Transfer Agreement indubitably had a positive influence on the Jewish economy and building endeavors in Palestine, over and above the fact that 50,000 Jews were able to leave burning Germany, which, in retrospect, meant saving their lives, the story of this Agreement remains an untold lacuna in Israeli society. The last comprehensive article in Hebrew on this Agreement was published in 1974 by Yoav Gelber, who mainly focused on the political efforts behind the signing of the Agreement, its evolution, and inner conflicts within the Zionist movement regarding it. In 1984 Edwin Black, an American publicist, and the son of two Holocaust survivors, wrote the controversial book The Transfer Agreement: The Untold Story of the Secret Agreement between the Third Reich and Jewish Palestine. The book created a media storm in the United States but was never translated into Hebrew. Israeli society and government, so it seems, did not want to know. Thus, although the story of the Agreement was brought to public light several times, it soon enough returned to darkness and oblivion. Over the years, a few more essays and studies were written about the political forces and circumstances that initiated the Transfer Agreement, but none so far has focused on the raw materials, which traveled in tens of thousands of containers («lifts» or «liftvans») and transformed material culture in the region.

processes of oblivion and repression

חברה מסחרית למזרח הקרוב והתיכון בע"ם THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST COMMERCIAL CORP. LTD. T E L - A V I V Battuchild Boulevard Ze P. O. B. 616, Tel. 1710 מלים בינ שורות רופשילר בש ת. הנה מה שלפן פווו שלפיקו ביקו תליאביב Telegrams : NEMICO, Tel-Anie Herren Dr. Werner Senator Dr. Georg Landsuer Dr. Werner Feilchenfeld — Dr. Richard Ginsberg Registered Office: JERUSALEM OUR RIF. YOUR LETTER 7658/61 2.2.1937 Sehr geehrte Herren, wir erlauben uns hierwit, Sie su der am Donnerstag den 4.2.1937, nachn. um 31 präs. in den Räusen der Hasvara Allenbystr. 56 stattfindenden Boardsitzung höfl. einzuladen. Tagesordnung. 1) Aegyptenbericht 2) Fall Textilfabrik Irak 3) Situation im Irak-Geschäft. Mit vorzüglicher Hochschtung מסתרת התוכון כשים בשרת השרוב ההתיכון כשים



Fig. 2 Official letter from Nemico to Haavara Ltd, 2.2.1937; L57/206

Fig. 3 Porters Complete the Packaging of the Mayer Family Lift in Berlin, October 1933

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- [D] How can we discover the social and political processes behind buildings and objects, planning and building activities as well as reception processes?
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The subject of the Agreement is currently being investigated by Joachim Nicolas Trezib and Ines Sonder, a duo of scholars who were also the academic advisors of our project, and their research mainly concerns RASCO—a company that was established through the Agreement and had a massive role in the construction of Jewish settlement across Palestine.

The tangle of relations was not only between the Zionists and the Germans, for Palestine was under the Mandate during those days and the British had highly protected economic and commercial interests in the region. Throughout the project, we attempted to locate Palestinian scholars who dealt with the effects of the Agreement on the Palestinians' market and society at the time, but none of the historians we have met were aware of the Agreement, let alone its implications. It seems that until comprehensive research is conducted on the impact of the Transfer Agreement, both from the Israeli and Palestinian side, and until the national narrative is able to bear complexity and multi-layered knowledge, the story of the Transfer Agreement will continue to be forgotten.

Our agenda in the artistic research project was to address the Agreement with an «upside down», or rather «bottom-up» approach. We sought to penetrate the hermetic national narrative through a personal and intimate point of view. In the Central Zionist Archives, for instance, we searched for data that revealed personal stories through official letters or for the poetics hidden in the bureaucracy. At the same time, we were in dialogue with people and private archives who shared with us objects, photographs, and memories of their family material culture. We asked to focus on the immigrants themselves, and by that to bind together the «immigrant object» and the «immigrant human-being» Fig. 3.

language of material culture

«Transferumbau: Liebling-Dessau»

«Transferumbau» is a German portmanteau word comprising the terms «transfer» and «reconstruction» in the sense of transforming something and building something new. This peculiar word, that seemed as if someone had invented it specifically for use in this Agreement, was handwritten in black marker on a cardboard folder that was found in the Central Zionist Archives Fig. 4. The folder contains fascinating correspondence and surprising documents that expose the power relations behind the import of building materials. We reflected on this term not only in the

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commercial context (shipment of German goods), but also in relation to the families who packed their most precious possessions into wooden crates in order to set up their «new» home in an unknown country with their «old» and familiar objects. Many of these families never wanted to leave Germany, and suddenly found themselves in the young, sandy Tel Aviv with heavy «Biedermeier» furniture that seemed alien in the modern straight-lined apartments they resided in, and in the warm Mediterranean climate. Often, however, the journey of the objects went awry: «Lifts» were shaken, and their contents broken and damaged; others disappeared or were stolen, and families lost their entire world. We were therefore trying to represent not necessarily what we found, but rather what was still lost. In this manner, these were «art» exhibitions rather than archival exhibitions. We did not want to tell the historical story of the Agreement but to give voice to the multiple repressed narratives through broken bricolages, haunted sounds, and surreal installations.

The «Transferumbau» project led for programmatic reasons to a collaboration between the Liebling Haus and Bauhaus Dessau and the art exhibitions were presented in both venues in parallel. The exhibition «Transferumbau: Liebling» emerged from the body of the building at 29 Idelson St.: from documentation of the families who used to reside in the building, which revealed the gap between the modern architectural style and the residents' bourgeois taste in home decor Fig. 5, and from its materiality, which was gradually exposed as renovation work to adapt the apartment building to its new public function progressed. Gradually, more and more materials, such as black silicate bricks, steel pipes, heating elements, etc., were revealed inside and amidst its walls, all of them made in Nazi Germany.

The exhibition at the Liebling Haus spanned the temporal strata of the building's existence, the various tenants who lived in its apartments until the 1970s, the municipality workers who settled in it and transformed its rooms into offices, and the imported materials which were embedded in its walls and have remained there to the present. One of the main works in the exhibition was the audio-visual installation *Leo Frank's Lost Container, or The Vacuum Cleaner's Demise*, based on an archival document Fig. 6—a list of objects, personal belongings and furniture that transformed the Lieblings' living room into a glass showcase. This list is a heartbreaking testimony and a reflection of the friction between what people imagine that they will need in their new land

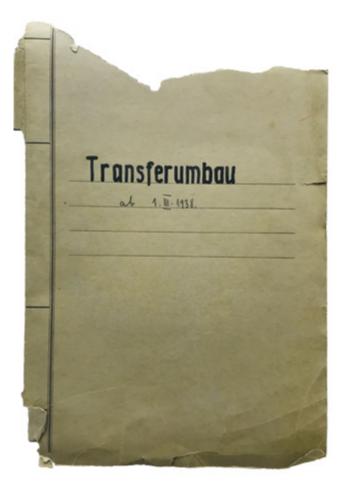






Fig. 4 Cover of the Folder Transferumbau, File L57/340

Fig. 5 The Meyers in their living room, 29 Idelson Street, Tel Aviv, ca. 1948, Photograph: unknown

Fig. 6 Contents of the Leo Frank family list; shipped from Stuttgart to Haifa, 31.5.1936

Fig. 7 From the exhibition «Transferumbau: Liebling-Dessau», Double sided curtain; Design: Lou Moria, 2019



(a German vacuum cleaner, an iron bed, a chair) and what they believed would make them feel at home (violin, chaise longue, a coal bucket). Abstract objects were shrouded Fig. 11, seeming like a cross between furniture and a *kurkar* rock, wrapped and ready to be transported or maybe found after many years near the shore. Behind them was a plant, a hybrid of three different tropical plants grafted together Fig. 8, 9. The sound work Fig. 10 played from time to time, mixed with the suction sound of the small vacuum cleaner produced in Germany in the 1930s.

The exhibition in Dessau addressed the movement of building materials, objects, and ideas, shipped from Germany to Palestine in the 1930s, which now returned to their country of origin. It was trapped in the time-space between the Liebling Haus and Bauhaus Dessau, oscillating between two orders of materials: cement and textile. More specifically, the exhibition unfolded between leftover construction waste sent from Liebling Haus back to Germany in a container, and a 30-meter woven curtain, which transformed into a structure reconstructing the floor plan of one of the Liebling Haus apartments. The exhibition space in Dessau used to be the former school weaving workshop, and the large woven curtain was actually double-sided: One side functioned as homage to modernist textile design à la Anni Albers, while the other featured a floral ornamental pattern inspired by the Biedermeier style, expressing the constant tension between the modern buildings of Tel Aviv, and the ornamental bourgeois style of their residents Fig. 7.

The massive curtain mirrors the complexities of the Transfer Agreement: The curtain was produced at the last textile factory in Israel called Etun. The family owned Gebrueder Horn textile factory was founded in 1868 in Fulda, Germany. In 1934, the Nazis nationalized it, and Dr. Paul Horn and his wife Melanie fled to Palestine, where they founded the new factory, Etun. The first machines were imported as part of the Transfer Agreement and the factory became a leading textile manufacturer and supplier. In February 1970, the Horns were killed in the PFLP-GC's (the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command's) terror attack on a Swissair flight, and the third generation took over. The factory continued to grow highly successfully for many years, until the shift to textile production in China led to the collapse of the textile industry in Israel. In August 2019, the factory ceased operations, and a Palestinian entrepreneur from Jenin bought the machines and transferred them to the West Bank.







Fig. 8, 9 Exhibition view, «Transferumbau: Liebling», 2019

Fig. 10 From the exhibition «Transferumbau: Liebling», I Left the Library, I Burned the Book, Audio Visual Installation, by Nir Shauloff, 2019

Fig. 11 From the exhibition «Transferumbau: Liebling», Leo Frank's Lost Container, or the vacuum cleaner's demise, Installation: Lou Moria; Sound: Nir Shauloff, 2019



- [D] How can we discover the social and political processes behind buildings and objects, planning and building activities as well as reception processes?
- [K] There are many facets of Modernism and modernity as well as many ambivalent aspects. What does that mean for our own concepts and visions?

The fabric featured in the exhibition was the last item ever produced at the factory.

The two exhibitions drew large crowds—thousands of people attended the opening event of the new municipal center in the Liebling Haus, while every week thousands visited Bauhaus Dessau for the centenary celebrations of the Bauhaus school. In Israel, the exhibitions and book attracted media interest to the story of the Agreement, but once again not for long. In the age of populism, challenging taboos has become quite normal and has therefore lost its power to shake public attention in the long run.

And yet, the visitors kept coming. They were interested in hearing an untold episode in the history of their country. What caught their attention was the personal link; they wanted to find out if their family was related to the Agreement or discover whether the building they were living in was also based on German materials. The encrypted art works ignited their imagination, obliged them to pay attention to the different voices that were stifled, and to the politics behind the building materials that we usually take for granted. It was clear that for many of their questions we did not have the answers nor have a reliable source to study from. The number of documents and files in Israeli and German archives that are still untouched is enormous. There is so much to investigate from economical, architectural, social and many more aspects that could provide dozens of postgraduate theses. The public exposure for both exhibitions and their explosive content was beyond our imagination. But was it possible for this project to change the narrative of the White City?

The White City: A Tangle of Power Relations

Going back to the first meeting with the Liebling Haus team, I soon enough learned that the center had a secured budget for 10 years thanks to an agreement between the Municipality of Tel Aviv and the German government—the German Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community to be precise. I asked myself what was the German interest in funding such an endeavor, wondering why they are interested in promoting the White City and realized that this may be an attempt to emphasize the cultural connection between the two nations before the Nazi era and the rupture of the Holocaust. The current agreement, and the new institution allow both nations to empha-

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size their joint cultural heritage—the Bauhaus—and in many ways to continue where they stopped. This is also a way to reclaim the German influence on the White City, while perceiving it as an extension of the Bauhaus school in spirit, and as part of the jubilee celebrations. That was before the artistic research project of the Transfer Agreement had begun, and before it was revealed how the White City is in practice a Nazi-Zionist endeavor in concept and in cement. It seems that any attempt to bypass the Holocaust in Israeli-German relations still leads straight back to it.

When we suggested the artistic research project to the center's team, they immediately understood its importance, accepted and supported it with no hesitation. They also acknowledged that choosing this project as the center's opening exhibition is a radical act. I truly believe that, over and above the public attention that the exhibitions received through the media and visitors, this project's most important achievement lies in the official adoption, by a public municipal center that holds the power and the responsibility to tell the White City's story, of a narrative that recognizes the tremendous impact of the Transfer Agreement on the White City's genesis and acknowledges that it is unclear to what extent the White City could have been built without the Agreement.

I am not in a position to assess how our project has influenced the way people perceive the White City today, or whether they are willing to accept that a Nazi-Zionist instrumental collaboration supported its creation, and the broad influence the Agreement had on the construction of the Jewish settlement in Palestine. Only time will tell if the local Israeli narrative will be able to bear this complexity. What I do know is that I believe in the importance of artistic research projects, and in artists' tendency to listen to suppressed voices, their sensibilities that allow them to find hidden stories and revitalize them through their unique artistic language. I would like to see artists continue to be active participants in unraveling narratives of institutions, cities, communities and spaces, in order to allow suppressed voices to emerge to the surface.

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Notes

 ICOMOS, «Advisory Body Evaluation (ICOMOS)», 2003, https://whc.unesco.org/ document/151735.57 (Consulted on April 7, 2020).