

FELICITAS HEIMANN–JELINEK
(Wien)

Exhibiting Murder

‘Masks: An attempt to define the Shoah’,¹ an exhibition held in summer 1997 at the Jewish Museum Vienna, dealt with the influence of the drive toward objectification in the Nazi era and the possible effects of science, as well as the effects of these on a perfectly functioning machinery of killing. At the exhibition’s intended centre were twenty–nine death masks of executed concentration camp prisoners. These people, entirely objectified, were seen only as material objects, not as human beings. This reduction of the individual to a purely material object reached its peak during National Socialism. Investigations carried out by various ‘scientists’ paved the path towards the assumption that it was possible to academically prove that humankind could be divided into ‘worthy life’ and ‘unworthy life’. Discussions around this topic began in the science–focused nineteenth century and were by no means limited to the German–speaking countries. In Germany, however, the discussion received an added dimension when the National Socialists, guided by a ‘biological–medical vision of national healing’, extended the definition of ‘unworthy life’ beyond medical boundaries: soon not only were mentally, psychologically, or physically challenged people and the terminally ill ‘unworthy of life’, but also political dissenters, homosexuals, criminals and the ‘non–Aryan races’ in particular. The theoreticians of National Socialism provided the definition for ‘unworthy life’, and the political and legal apparatus took over from there. Supplementary pseudoscientific studies by hereditary biologists, anthropologists, race hygienists and medical researchers determined who had the right to live and who did not, who was the ‘true human’ and who was its antitype.

Numerous people were humiliated, abused and killed in the service of these pseudoscientific studies. Many of the materials prepared or even removed from these people for this purpose still exist, and the discussion of how to deal with them seems to have been difficult to start. On the one hand, there is the fear to face this cynical aspect of the past, which to some extent reaches into the present; on the

¹ This is the title of an exhibition shown at the Jewish Museum Vienna in summer 1997, curated by the author and Hannes Sulzener with the cooperation of Natalie David.

other hand, there is a sense of stunned helplessness and the feeling that no way of handling this subject seems to be adequate.

The antitypes created by the National Socialists, their accomplices and their followers were meant to be the visual focal point of the ‘Masks’ exhibition. This was not a historical exhibition about National Socialist annihilation policy, nor a documentation of planned and organised mass killings. Instead, it demonstrated how individuals were reduced to material objects that were then used to verify the definitions of antitypes and whatever else could be demonstrated in this area. It put forward the question of human dignity and the relative nature of ethical norms. Here was an attempt to talk about what the Shoah was in the final analysis: outright murder. Beyond this, however, the exhibition also sought to enquire after our own handling of these murders and the objects that resulted from them, ‘objects’ that had previously been human beings.

The exhibition has a long case history. In 1987 Götz Aly published the Poznań diary of the anatomist Hermann Voss,² from which it emerged that under the latter’s directorship, the Anatomical Institute of the Reich University in Posen (Poznań) had conducted a lucrative trade in ‘anatomic preparations’ — the prepared remains of concentration camp prisoners. The trade expanded all the way to Vienna, where the head of the Anthropological Department³ of the Museum of Natural History, Dr Josef Wastl, was tirelessly searching for suitable somatological and osteological ‘research material’ on the ‘Jewish race’. In 1942 he ordered exhibition and research materials from the Poznań institute such as ‘Jew skulls’, pertinent plaster casts and ‘Pole skulls’.⁴ Voss remarked with regret that his institute’s preparator of these materials had contracted typhoid fever through lice while working on the job and had eventually died from it: ‘On 4.VI.[1942], chief preparator von Hirschheyd died of typhoid fever. Some time ago he had received an order from the Anthropological Museum in Vienna [*sic!*] to prepare plaster casts of heads of Jew corpses. These Jew corpses are delivered here from the Jew camps to be cremated in this building. Frequently they are heavily infested with lice and — as it has now turned out — not sufficiently disinfected. Mr v. H. contracted lice from such a corpse on May 16; he fell ill on May 28’.⁵ Hirschheydt had been able to finish his work with the plaster casts, however, with the exception of two for the Museum of Natural History, and Voss took care of the shipping to Vienna. By summer, twenty-nine

² G. Aly, *Das Posener Tagebuch des Hermann Voss*, [in:] *Biedermann und Schreibtischtäter: Materialien zur deutschen Täter-Biographie* (Beiträge zur nationalsozialistischen Gesundheits- und Sozialpolitik, vol. IV), Berlin 1987, pp. 15–66.

³ In March 1998 the Anthropological Department of the Museum of Natural History was renamed the Department for Archaeological Biology and Anthropology. For reasons of simplification and better understanding, I will use the former name.

⁴ Designation in the inventory of the Museum of Natural History.

⁵ G. Aly, *Das Posener Tagebuch*, p. 55, fn. 5.

‘skulls and plaster casts of Jews’⁶ had arrived, as well as fifteen ‘skulls of Poles’, extracted from the corpses of executed resistance fighters.

The publication of this ghastly fact by Aly was ignored in Vienna for years. It would not have been difficult to follow up on the issue by examining the correspondence of the Anthropological Department of the Museum of Natural History. A letter from Hirschheydt to Wastl dated 4 March 1942 indicates that the latter had apparently approached the anatomical institute in Poznań with a request for relevant preparations, since Hirschheydt replied as follows: ‘As per your letter of 25.2.42, I offer you Pole skulls /m and f/ at RM 25,— a piece [...] Please inform me of your specific requests, which age group you mainly need. For the time being I am unable to deliver Pole skulls of children and young people; I do get a few 20–25-year-old men, and a lot in the 25–50 and 50–80-year ranges; females rather rarely [...] Jew skulls /m/ 20–50 years old I can also offer you at RM 25,—, their exact age and place of birth can be supplied. The latter, however, means little in the case of Jews’.⁷ The acquisition of death masks and cranial busts was apparently prompted by Hirschheydt’s suggestion; he continues in the same letter: ‘Together with these Jew skulls I am able to supply plaster death masks of the individuals concerned at RM 15,—. Of especially typical Eastern Jews I can also prepare for you plaster busts so that one can see the shape of the head [...] and frequently rather odd ears. The price of these busts would be 30–35 RM’. Two days later Wastl sent an order for ‘Pole skulls’ and ‘Jew skulls’ as well as plaster casts of ‘typical Eastern Jews’ to Hirschheydt, requesting ‘as many as you are able to deliver’.⁸ As requested, the Anthropological Department was billed for the order in two invoices prior to the delivery, one for RM 504.50, the other for RM 813.50, dated 10 March.⁹ The museum booked it under the ‘Maintenance and Enlargement of Collections’ account. On 17 June, Wastl contacted Voss, having heard that his preparator had passed away. Wastl was worried about whether his prepaid ‘skulls and plaster casts yet to be delivered [...] [could be] expected in the near future’.¹⁰ On 19 June, Voss sent confirmation of Hirschheydt’s death to Wastl, but assured him that ‘the shipment will be ready within the next few days’.¹¹ In the same letter he asked Wastl to let him know ‘whether you wish to have the lower jaws of the skulls fastened with spirals or whether they can remain loose’. Wastl replied on 23 June ‘that it is not necessary to fasten the lower jaws with spirals’.¹² On 1 August, Wastl sent confirmation to Voss of the arrival of ‘my order of 29 Jew

⁶ Museum of Natural History Vienna, Anthropological Department, inv. no. 20522–20595.

⁷ Museum of Natural History Vienna, Anthropological Department, correspondence 1939, fo. 307.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*.

skulls with the corresponding 25 death masks and 4 plaster casts, and the 4 Pole skulls'¹³ and that 'all objects have arrived in perfect condition'. He expressed his regret 'that because of the death of your chief preparator there are currently no further deliveries of objects' possible, and he let Voss know that the objects would be 'jointly shown in a special exhibition with credit given to the maker'. Due to the advanced stage of the war, this planned special exhibition never took place. Wastl had promised Hirschheydt's widow, who had informed him as early as 2 June of her husband's death 'following a bite by a typhoid Jew louse', that he would honour the preparator of the 'objects' in the exhibition.¹⁴ Apparently she had turned to him privately with the intention of obtaining payment for her husband's work — the same payment that the Anatomical Institute had already received. For documentation purposes, she included a photograph of her husband in the letter to Wastl, with the request that it be exhibited in the planned exhibition. She had diligently identified the photograph by writing on the back: 'Gustav Adolf von Hirschheydt / Chief preparator at the Reich University of Posen, resettler from Riga / b. 11.3.83., d. 4.6.42 in Posen from typhoid fever / which he contracted through his job at the university. / He was a researcher and scientist / and anti-Semite'.

Only four years after Aly's publication of the diary, attention in Vienna was directed to this situation. In 1991, researcher Patricia Steines visited the Anthropological Department of the Museum of Natural History for her research on the Jewish cemetery in Währing. Exhumations had been carried out at the cemetery between 1942 and 1943, and at the time Wastl had enjoyed an increase of 220 Jewish skeletons for his 'research purposes'.¹⁵ During the investigation of the exhumations, the crania and death masks of the executed Jewish victims purchased by Wastl from Poznań were discovered. Yet no public discourse ensued about what had happened, despite efforts to publicise the terrible facts. The crania of the Jewish concentration camp prisoners and their death masks were handed over to the Jewish Community.

The director-general of the Museum of Natural History spoke of 'giving back', a term also used by the media. This suggested that the crania of the Jewish concentration camp inmates and their death masks had been 'Aryanised' and were now being 'restituted', which seemed to imply that all dead Jews belong to someone, without question, and that as a matter of correctness they therefore had to be returned to someone.

Then victims' identities were unknown; nothing was known about them except for the fact that they were Jews. The use of the term 'giving back' was a factual allegation that any Jews belonged to any other Jews — and rightfully, as it were.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ P. Steines, *Hunderttausend Steine: Grabstellen großer Österreicher jüdischer Konfession*, Vienna 1993, p. 28.

The crania of the Jewish victims were buried. Their death masks were entrusted to the then newly founded Jewish Museum Vienna. The issue had not been discussed with the museum's employees in advance, precluding any public or private debate about the question of who the heirs of the 'remains' of these victims murdered by the Nazis really were.

In 1995 Bernhard Purin, then a curator at the Jewish Museum Vienna, organised an exhibition entitled 'Confiscated: The Collection of the Vienna Jewish Museum After 1938'.¹⁶ He was interested in reconstructing the post-1938 history of the holdings of the old Vienna Jewish Museum, which had been founded in 1896. Purin's investigations led him to the Anthropological Department of the Museum of Natural History because its former head, Josef Wastl, had pushed for the confiscated holdings of the Jewish Museum to be acquired by the Museum of Ethnology Vienna, where he had privileges to borrow materials at will.¹⁷ For Wastl this access was essential, since he was expected to open an exhibition entitled 'The Physical and Mental Appearance of the Jews' in May 1939. Once he hit upon Wastl's story, Purin endeavoured to find out more about Wastl's exhibition at the time and his acquisition of crania and death masks of Jewish concentration camp inmates. He received assistance from Margit Berner, who was responsible for the Anthropological Department's collection. Together they found photo documentation of Wastl's exhibition demonstrating that Wastl had also received portrait photos of Jews from the criminal records office of the Viennese police, to be used in the exhibition.¹⁸ Because following their confiscation the holdings of the old Vienna Jewish Museum had been divided among the Museum of Natural History, the Museum of Ethnology, the Austrian National Library and the University Library, the 'Confiscated' exhibition took place at all of these sites, with each venue featuring some of the objects that had been allocated to it. Purin decided to place the portrait photos from the criminal records office and one of the death masks in the part of the exhibition shown at the Museum of Natural History,¹⁹ but this did not elicit any particular reactions.

Following 'Confiscated', the death mask Purin had selected was returned to the box, the same one in which it had been handed over in 1991, and placed back at the Jewish Museum. The other masks had not even been unpacked by the museum's employees; it seems that no one wished to handle these items. Not until early 1997 did museum staff muster the courage to decide that forty-five years after the preparation of the masks, forty-five years after the murder of those who

¹⁶ *Beschlagnahmt: Die Sammlung des Wiener Jüdischen Museums nach 1938*, ed. by B. Purin et al., Vienna 1995.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 8ff.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 45, no. 1/16, Museum of Natural History Vienna, inv. nos. 27.713–27.762.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, no. 1/17, Jewish Museum Vienna, inv. no. 2701.

had been their human models, it was high time to present them to the public and to put on a Shoah exhibition about the murder itself.

In preparation for this new exhibition, further extensive research into the figure of Wastl — who was later deemed an entirely ‘regular’ follower and ‘minor’ offender — was provided by the Anthropological Department of the Museum of Natural History, especially by Margit Berner, who was in charge of its collection. Berner worked her way through the extremely copious correspondence. The investigations carried out by the Anthropological Department and the Jewish Museum showed that Wastl appeared to have acted according to the ‘dictates of his time’. Thus, in June 1938, he applied for regular party membership,²⁰ substantiating his case with the argument that he had already been a particularly dedicated supporter of the Nazi Party during the ‘illegal times’ through his ‘photographing, developing and copying of protocols of Austrian ministerial council meetings, proposals, etc. (liaison to the Office of the Federal Chancellor: NSDAP member Ludwig Moizisch); distributing pamphlets and illegal newspapers from the NSDAP; swastika flag throwing with NSDAP member Florian Groll; establishing a soccer club at the museum to hold cell members together; [circulating] oral propaganda for the party [...]; supporting the illegal district innkeeper Hofmeister [...]; providing cover for the *Obersturmbannführer* of the Helmuth Wolfram Legion [...]; distributing plaques for the Hitler fund; establishing a party cell [...]; training party officials in racial and hereditary theory [...]. As the last legal organisation manager, the undersigned securely maintained the personal files of all district officials and block informers of the four local groups throughout the entire illegal period’.²¹ When Josef Wastl was suspended from office in 1945 as a result of his activities during the Nazi era, he filed a complaint at the designated appeals committee, which was granted. The arguments made in 1948 declare that ‘quite a number of witnesses [...] all unanimously confirm that Dr Josef Wastl has not been a trainer and not an official of a local group in any way’.²² He was classified as a ‘lesser offender’ and merely sent into early retirement. Nevertheless, his positions as vice president of the Anthropological Society in Vienna and chair of the Association of Experts in Anthropology and Hereditary Biology allowed him to continue his work in peace until his death in 1968.

The Anthropological Department’s investigations in preparation for the ‘Masks’ exhibition at the Jewish Museum turned up other elements in addition to the files mentioned above: two more death masks from 1942 were found in the

²⁰ Using the “Personal questionnaire for the application to issue a temporary membership card and for the determination of membership in Austria”, 528/224.

²¹ Vienna, Austrian State Archives, Archives of the Republic, Federal Ministry of Education, PA Wastl, 15925.

²² Vienna, Austrian State Archives, Archives of the Republic, Federal Ministry of Interior Affairs, PA Wastl, BK 5407/48.

cast collection,²³ which were loaned to the Jewish museum for the duration of the exhibition. The Museum of Natural History's offer to let the Jewish Museum have them was refused, with the comment that these materials documented the history of the Museum of Natural History.²⁴

Initially, the anonymity of the people behind the masks at the Jewish Museum (only their genders and ages were known) felt like a burden; the inability to identify the actual persons behind the plaster casts was even more depressing than the masks themselves. But ultimately this anonymity was constructive for the exhibition, since neither the curators nor the visitors had the option of direct identification, thus bringing to the fore the abstract dimension of such brutality. Of course, the 29 individual biographies of the murder victims would have had the power to deeply affect observers, and no one could or should be denied an emotional approach to what occurred. But what is the benefit of being affected 29 times in the face of the actual dimensions of the genocide? When emotional approaches block rational ones, the value of the emotional becomes dubious. What is the use of mourning 29 individual fates when confronted with the bankruptcy of an entire culture that views itself as humanist? To escape into the details of 29 biographies would be to avoid the enormity of the history and the culture that made this history possible — the culture in which, after all, we live.

The presentation of the death masks was received with mixed feelings by many, including museum staff members. Some people did not dare to look at the masks, to stare at the casts of death. Confrontation with death is a repressed issue in society, even more so in a case where the death was caused by outright murder — the murder of six million Jews — for which society must accept its responsibility.

Several workshops took place during the exhibition and featured the discussion of such burning questions²⁵ as whether religious law permits the public display of material testimonies of death like these masks. Jewish law has no objection, since these are not actual human remains, but casts taken from people. Other questions included the ethical permissibility of publicly displaying material testimonies of death such as these, and which and whose ethical norms could provide an absolute answer. One opinion was that the masks should have been destroyed so as to restore peace to the human beings that were behind them. But the destruction of the masks would mean destroying the witnesses of a horrifying history. If these witnesses indeed exist, then why should they not testify in public?

²³ See M. Teschler-Nicola, M. Berner, *Die anthropologische Abteilung des Naturhistorischen Museums in der NS-Zeit: Berichte und Dokumentation von Forschungs- und Sammlungsaktivitäten, 1938–1956*, [in:] *Senatsprojekt der Universität Wien: Untersuchungen zur Anatomischen Wissenschaft in Wien, 1938–1945* [unpublished report], Vienna 1998, pp. 333–358, here p. 338, fn. 20.

²⁴ Jewish Museum Vienna, 'Masks' exhibition correspondence, 4 July 1997; Museum of Natural History Vienna, Anthropological Department, correspondence 1997, p. 196.

²⁵ See, e.g., <http://www.arche.or.at/archiv/workshopsa.htm> [retrieved: 2 December 2015].

Another opinion voiced was that the exhibition involved the aestheticisation of killing. It is remarkable that this criticism was levelled at the extremely simple exhibition design, which architect Martin Kohlbauer had created to be very matter-of-fact, unassuming and unspectacular. The exhibition design was deliberate, but aesthetically it was painfully cold. Some critics argued that the presentation of the masks violated human dignity. On the contrary: the people behind these masks — like millions of other human beings — were deprived in death (and afterwards) of any human dignity, privacy or right to their humanity. They were reduced to pure objects. No one can restore their right to their humanity; one can only try to confer upon the dead some of the honour they deserve, some of their subjective right to dignity. Finally, there were some commentators who rejected the invitation to voyeurism, the display of those killed.

Yet the point of the exhibition was not to display those who had been killed, but to display the observers, the visitors: to display all of us in coming to terms with murder. Cameras were installed behind the masks to record viewers. In the last room of the exhibition, monitors were set up in which viewers would discover themselves, time-delayed, observing the masks. Here individuals saw only themselves and no longer the masks, which must have given them the feeling that the masks were now observing the observer. The classic exhibition situation was turned around: now the visitors were the objects of the exhibition, they themselves examined their behaviour, and the death masks, for the first time in their existence, were assigned the roles of subjects — the only way to grant the human beings behind them a modicum of the dignity that had been denied to them in life and in death. The room where the death masks were lined up in a long row, the display that had shocked so many in both positive and negative ways, was not even the centre of the exhibition! The real centre was this room, with its monitors showing the visitors as they observed the masks. In the end, the focal point was not so much the other, the other person and her history. It was us, and our own history. How did we engage these others — who had been othered by being killed — and the bestiality that enabled their murder? ‘Understanding the Nazis’ brutality as inner brutality does not render it less bestial and unbearable even if it forces us to examine the bestial and unbearable in us. The gaze directed to oneself at precisely the moment when one discovers and observes the exterior of that which is different from us, is the gaze of meditative thinking’.²⁶

The intention of ‘Masks’ was to make people think. Its goal was not to show what was done by ‘the Nazis’ — as past, historic aliens who have nothing to do with us — or to demonstrate that a devil named Hitler was ultimately responsible for the murders. The point was to show that what happened had been possible, to

²⁶ A. Glücksmann, *Das Gute und das Böse: Ein französisch-deutscher Briefwechsel*, Hildesheim 1998, p. 13.

interrogate how it had been possible and to ask whether it could still be possible in the future. To receive answers to these questions, we have to ask ourselves.

We invited Austrian performance artist, photographer and film-maker Valie Export to create a work in the public sphere to raise awareness of the exhibition. She supported us wholeheartedly and designed and realised an extremely thoughtful work of art: five glass stelae that were imprinted on both sides at eye level with the back of a mask as a hollow mould, so that a glance through the stela might evolve into a place of encounter with the corresponding blank space or with a counterpart. Conversely, the signature of the mask was projected outwards, with its numbering protruding as Braille from the surface. The stelae captured the attention of many people passing by, who were then drawn into the museum as a consequence.

Support was also provided by Elfriede Jelinek (winner of the 2004 Nobel Prize for literature), who wrote a disturbing essay that was read at the opening of the exhibition. Other supporters of 'Masks' included the late journalist and writer Amos Elon, who considered it important enough to write a review in the "New York Review of Books", even though the exhibition had no accompanying publication or catalogue.²⁷ Finally, after an article published in the Viennese "Kronen-Zeitung" called a visit to the exhibition 'mandatory educational work', the municipality of Vienna called for the Jewish Museum to give free admission for the duration of the exhibition and covered the museum's financial losses. Once the exhibition ended, Export's design of the exhibition poster (as realised by graphic designer Maria Anna Friedl) was awarded the Gustav Klimt Prize in 1998.

Visitors were invited to talk about their impressions of the exhibition on camera. The majority of those who chose to do so were concentration camp survivors, who appreciated our approach as an attempt to give the vaguest hint of insight into a reality that no one can even imagine unless they were there. These visitors understood the masks as we had interpreted them: as ultimate witnesses of the Holocaust. The most touching visitor to the exhibition was an elderly woman who I accompanied. Her parents had sent her and her sister with the youth *aliyah* to Palestine. Her parents, themselves stateless Jews in Germany, had been expelled to Poland. She had never heard from them again. When she entered the room in which the masks were displayed she took a deep breath and looked at them very calmly: intensely, quizzically. After a while, she approached one mask and whispered, 'He speaks to me'. I left her alone. When we met later, she told me, 'You know, I found something very important here'.

²⁷ A. Elon, *Death for Sale: 'Masks: An Attempt about Shoah': an exhibition at the Jewish Museum, Vienna, July 25–October 26, 1997*, "New York Review of Books", 20 November 1997.