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Shannon L. Fogg, *Stealing Home: Looting, Restitution, and Reconstructing Jewish Lives in France, 1942-1947*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xvi + 197 pp., £66 (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-878712-9.

Review by Gary D. Mole, Bar-Ilan University

Between 1942 and 1944, the German-instituted *Möbel Aktion* (Furniture Operation) emptied around 38,000 Jewish “abandoned” apartments in Paris of all their furnishings and household items, most of which was shipped in some 674 trainloads to Germany before the Liberation of Paris in August 1944. In early 1945, the French provisional government created a Service de restitution des biens des victimes des lois et mesures de spoliation whose first ordinance on April 11, 1945 enacted the explicit initial intent of returning confiscated goods to their rightful owners. Restitution and restoration, however, would prove to be not so simple. As the secular nature of French republicanism reasserted itself, the Restitution Service made no difference between Jews and non-Jews and their political, racial and ideological status as victims both of Nazism and of the collaborationist Vichy government. Many Jews felt themselves, once more, abandoned.

This is the starting point for Shannon L. Fogg’s new meticulously researched study *Stealing Home*, a nicely ambiguous title playing both on the home literally stolen by the German occupational force and the Vichy government, and on the metaphorical usage of stealing, implying the implicit and sometimes explicit desire for Jews to be as surreptitious as possible after the war in attempting to reclaim, if they must, their property. Extending her previous work on wartime France [1] beyond the Vichy years to embrace the post-Liberation and immediate postwar predicament of Jews in the aftermath of systematic racial discrimination, marginalization, exclusion, persecution, expropriation and deportation (though this time focusing solely on Paris), Fogg still modestly describes herself as a “social historian” (p. viii). Yet *Stealing Home* goes far beyond the social to encompass the political, institutional, economic, cultural and even the emotional. Indeed, Fogg reveals the personal testimonies she cites at length as fully belonging to the ever-growing discipline of the history of emotions: Jewish emotional attachment was not just to loved ones executed, deported and murdered but to home and hearth in a frequently hostile, bureaucratic, and persistently antisemitic postwar environment.

Fogg’s deep familiarity with a wealth of secondary material and recent historiographical trends (to which, I might add, her own *The Politics of Everyday Life* has contributed) is constantly in evidence in her text and notes.[2] And while she openly acknowledges “borrowing ideas” from

the “microhistories” of scholars such as Jean-Marc Dreyfus, Sarah Gensburger, and Leora Auslander in relation to the Furniture Operation (pp. 6-7),<sup>[3]</sup> she clearly takes her own study of spoliation and restitution further “by engaging with these issues across the divide of war and peace, examining the tension between republic universalism and Jewish particularism, and the process of postwar reconstruction from an individual perspective” (p. 7). While Fogg draws on some well-known published testimony and memoirs (Hélène Beer, Simone Veil, Gilbert Michlin for example are frequently cited), the originality of her study stems mainly from its extensive and judicious use of archival resources: unpublished oral histories from the University of Southern California's Shoah Foundation Visual History Archives (around forty of these testimonies are mobilized in the course of Fogg's book); documentation from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC; and above all restitution claims, social workers' reports, newspapers, government documents, and the papers of Jewish organizations from the Archives nationales (AN), the Centre de documentation juive contemporaine (CDJC), and the Comité juif d'action sociale et de reconstruction (COJASOR), all in Paris.

Other than an introduction briefly setting out the main themes of the study and a conclusion neatly summarizing her findings, Fogg divides her book into three parts and seven chapters, all of which are written in such a way that Fogg's narrative deliberately and deftly moves between the personal and the institutional. Part one, consisting of one single chapter, introduces the main issues stemming from the Furniture Operation, drawing on stories of survivors of the Shoah to highlight their daily lives during the Occupation and the lengthy and painful process after the Liberation of restoring citizenship and property rights. As Fogg richly documents and contrary to what was often contended, Jews returning to Paris from hiding or deportation were far from silent after the war,<sup>[4]</sup> as they set about negotiating restitution and restoration within the spaces available to them by French republicanism.<sup>[5]</sup> Through memoirs, interviews and diaries, Fogg explores the notion that abstract associations with the idea of home were disrupted by officially sanctioned looting and pillage, with all the emotional and psychological consequences of the meanings previously attached to material objects, from the mundane such as beds, wardrobes and kitchen utensils to pianos and more personal items such as photos. No institutional restoration process could possibly have tackled such scars of dispossession.

Part two, entitled “Public Politics and Private Homes”, contains three chapters all of which adopt a chronological approach to explore the political use of homes and their contents during and after the war. Chapter two examines dispossession further through the implementation of the Furniture Operation in France and contends that the looting of private apartments was an integral part of the genocidal process in which “average French civilians actively participated in the process of the exclusion of Jews” (p. 54). The chapter also gives a statistical and cultural overview of Paris' Jewish population before the war, the anti-Jewish laws and decrees implemented by the Vichy government after France's defeat, and Franco-German relationships revolving around economic considerations. Fogg is rightly careful to point out that the economic Aryanization of businesses was very different from the political manipulation of “home” from a psychological point of view. Fogg also sets out the conflicts between Jews and non-Jews over access to housing after the Liberation which represented what she terms a kind of opportunistic antisemitism that would have long-term consequences.

Chapter three reads as a pivotal chapter in Fogg's narrative, showing how all the archival evidence suggests that the French provisional government's desire, in its plan for postwar reconstruction, to treat everyone equally regardless of racial, political or social background,

inevitably led to disappointment for Jews who had been singled out for all those very same reasons but had no claim according to new legislation to any special status. Deep fissures in French society were still very much present in the postwar period and Jews found themselves continuing to tread a fine line between their Jewish particularism to which antisemitism had inescapably “rivetted” them (to use a Levinasian term) and their sense of belonging, despite their experience of betrayal, to reestablished French republicanism.

Chapter four returns in detail to the creation of the Restitution Service in January 1945 in the context of economic and infrastructural ruin, the political return of republicanism after the Vichy hiatus, and the general social upheaval created by the war. Since political demands were rooted in domestic concerns and the republican ethos refused to recognize the specific nature of Jewish persecution, coupled with a generally slow and ineffective bureaucracy, many Jews felt abandoned once more by the French government. Dealing exclusively with identifiable household items recovered in France, Fogg’s research reveals that of the 38,000 apartments looted in Paris, the Restitution Service (before its dissolution into different organizations in July 1947) managed to return to their rightful owners only 2,000 items. Not a great success story, Fogg notes, but adds that “the less tangible effects of the process” (p. 107) were far from negligible, and it is to these effects that she turns in the three chapters of Part three.

While Fogg explicitly claims in her introduction that Part three marks a shift away from the chronological and official approach employed by previous chapters in order to adopt a more thematic exploration of the postwar period (p. 14), I do not believe that this is borne out by the chapters themselves which continue to weave (impressively, I might add) between the institutional and the emotional impact on Jews’ daily lives of impersonal bureaucratic procedures.

Chapter five explores various individual responses to returning to looted homes and the restitution of furniture, at times inadvertently repeating some of the ground covered in previous chapters but more innovative and challenging in its documented demonstration of the politicization by laws, public debates and society of returning Jews to “normal” life while reinforcing traditional notions of gender roles.[6] While Fogg, I believe, successfully argues the intimate link between restitution and memory on an individual level, chapter six moves to an exploration of Jewish communal responses to material loss. Fogg is particularly deft here at highlighting the paradoxical situation in which Jewish organizations worked: on the one hand, their political engagement emphasized their desire to have Jewish victimhood recognized as a category apart, but on the other they demanded equal treatment from the fledgling republican government and expressed thereby an equal desire to be reintroduced into the national community (*citoyen* before all particularity). The Consistoire Central, the Fédération des Sociétés Juives de France, the Union des Juifs pour la Résistance et l’Entr’aide (UJRE), the Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE), the Comité d’Unité et de Défense des Juifs de France (CUDJF), the Service Central des Déportés Israélites (SCDI) and the Conseil Représentatif des Israélites de France (CRIF), are just some of the myriad of private and public Jewish organizations whose archives Fogg mobilizes in her narrative, highlighting in particular the continued antisemitism in postwar Paris as Jews returned to reclaim their property, at times ceding to disappointment and disillusionment and at others responding with patriotism, discretion and pragmatism.

The final chapter, entitled “Social Rebirth,” extends the examination of Jewish public and

private aid in helping individuals and their families to return to “normal” life, but also to rebuild a Jewish community in France after the ravages of the war. However, coordinating the numerous aid organizations, each with its sometimes conflicting social and political interests, as Jews in France (with or without French nationality) became increasingly dependent on aid from the American Joint Distribution Committee (the major relief organization for overseas Jews since its founding in 1914), became impossibly unwieldy, leading to the Joint’s support of the creation of the Comité juif d’action sociale et de reconstruction (COJASOR) in March 1945. This new organization’s goal was made clear at the outset: “to centralize assistance work in France and to transfer it little by little into organized social action” (p. 157), encompassing everything from providing housing and furniture, job training and placement, health care, and rebuilding families. The chapter examines in detail the successes and struggles of postwar charity work in the form of the COJASOR and how it sometimes challenged conventions in its attempt to support destitute survivors, even if “the family remained the preferred structure” (p. 171). Ultimately in any case, as Fogg states, “the new normal failed to recognize the extent of material and psychological loss, and this desire to return to prewar standards had long-term consequences for the memory of the Holocaust in France” (p. 171). But as many historians since Paxton and Marrus have demonstrated, the narrative of this “memory” would be a different story altogether than that which Fogg has undertaken in her study.

As these chapter summaries may well indicate, I believe there is some repetition in Fogg’s work despite its carefully delineated structure.[7] Yet her central argument, neatly put in her final words, is solid: “Jewish daily experiences with restitution are central for understanding social rebirth as part of the reconstruction process and serve as a reminder of the ways that the ordinary holds extraordinary personal, political, and social meaning” (p. 178). Although parts of her study clearly draw and build upon previous recent historical scholarship—all of which she acknowledges and documents—Fogg is to be highly commended for her impressive archival research. Though I write this review as a literary and not an historical scholar—despite familiarity with many of the secondary works cited—I could not help thinking, in reading and engaging with Fogg’s fascinating research, how very chillingly topical certain aspects of it actually are. Many French Jews today continue to be forced to (re-)negotiate their place in republican France. Certainly the France of Emmanuel Macron is incomparable to that of the postwar provisional government or the Fourth Republic, but nevertheless, *mutatis mutandis*, Jews in France today can still be verbally and physically singled out in the streets and at home *qua* Jews. Fogg’s richly documented *Stealing Home* resonates well beyond its time frame.

## NOTES

[1] Shannon L. Fogg, *The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France: Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[2] There are some regrettable omissions of studies which could have reinforced certain of her arguments, for example chapters by David Weinberg, Samuel Ghiles-Meilhac, and Lisa Moses Leff in Seán Hand and Steven T. Katz, eds., *Post-Holocaust France and the Jews, 1945-1955* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2015).

[3] See Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Sarah Gensburger, *Des camps dans Paris: Austerlitz, Lévitane, Bassano juillet 1943-août 1944* (Paris: Fayard, 2003); Sarah Gensburger, *Images d’un pillage: Album de la question des Juifs à Paris, 1940-1944* (Paris: Éditions Textuel, 2010); and Leora

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Auslander, "Coming Home? Jews in Postwar Paris," *Journal of Contemporary History* 40:2 (2005), pp. 237-259.

[4] Fogg builds on François Azouvi, *Le Mythe du Grand Silence: Auschwitz, les Français, la mémoire* (Paris: Fayard, 2012).

[5] Commonly cited statistics indicate that of the 75,000 Jews deported from France, only around 2,500 to 3,000 returned after the war.

[6] This is mainly concerning a woman's place in the home or at work. Widows and unmarried young women were exhorted to adhere to the traditional family model and at the same time encouraged to enter the workplace to become independent of financial and social aid.

[7] Other readers have noted different criticisms. The request from H-France to review Fogg's book may seem belated in relation to previously published reviews since the book first appeared in 2017, of which some I was admittedly aware. Most have been extremely positive, though a few have criticized Fogg for reasons I believe unfair in relation to her stated intentions. Richard D. Sonn, for instance, in *The Journal of Modern History* 90:4 (2019), pp. 956-957, writes that while Fogg "is concerned with the relation of returning Jews to the French state in its changing guises," she is "not very attentive to other aspects of Jewish social and political life. There is no discussion of the role of the Communist Party which during the war actively recruited Jewish immigrants into the resistance. There is nothing about the role of synagogues, and no discussion of how North African Jews as opposed to Ashkenazi Jews fared. One learns nothing about France outside Paris, much less of the situation of Jews elsewhere in Europe" (p. 957). For other reviews of Fogg's study, see notably: Emily Hooke in *European History Quarterly* 48:3 (2018), pp. 558-559; and Ahlrich Meyer, *Historische Zeitschrift* 307:2 (2018), pp. 584-587.

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