

Why did you become an archivist? What led you to start archiving at the Jewish Museum in Berlin?

I am the director of an archive, but I am not a trained archivist. I am a trained Jewish studies scholar and historian. As a matter of fact, I started in a different field of study, namely philosophy in Vancouver, Canada. I went to Europe to travel and changed my course of studies at the Free University of Berlin, from philosophy to Jewish studies and Eastern European history, then broader history in general. After that, I was working as a research assistant at the Institute for Jewish Studies at the Free University in Berlin. Then, one of my professors became the director of an institute for the history of German Jewish culture, I worked there for almost five years. In 2000, I saw an advertisement in a national newspaper weekly, which was announcing a position for someone to establish a branch of the Leo Baeck Institute archives at the Jewish Museum in Berlin. It seemed to me a very intriguing prospect, so I came to Berlin and got the position. Very quickly thereafter, I was given responsibility for the archive collection of the Jewish Museum in Berlin as well. I have not only been archiving, as my main tasks have been acquisition and collecting. My collection efforts are focused primarily on reaching out to German Jewish emigrants, refugees, survivors and their descendants. I've been at the Jewish Museum for 18 years. I have had the good fortune of meeting with literally hundreds of first generation survivors. In the broadest sense, survivors meaning individuals who got out of Germany sometime between 1933 and 1945, be it emigrating, be it fleeing, literally escaping, or be it also people who were camp survivors. I've established a Holocaust education program, where I have invited many of our donors, who experienced their childhood and youth in Germany to contribute. We've had over 100 individuals participate in our program, which is ongoing. This year, we hope to have 13-14 individuals meet with school groups, high school students, university students, and teacher trainees. It's been a very rewarding program for all involved. At the moment, I am also one of the curators for the new permanent exhibition that will be opening in the spring of next year.

What will the new permanent exhibition be?

Our permanent exhibition, which was open in 2001, has been closed since December 2017. We are completely redoing the two floors of the Daniel Libeskind building. It's a permanent exhibition, which is devoted to the history and culture of Jews in Germany from the middle ages up until the present day. The difference to the old exhibition is that it's going to be a chronological narrative interspaced with thematic spaces. It will go beyond the borders of Germany and look at aspects of Jewish religion, culture, and history in a broader sense.

Does the educational programming take place at the museum?

Yes. The program I am doing is an archival education program. We are working with documents and photographs from the archival collection. We have a very large education department, which does the museums guided tours and workshops. That is a pedagogical program, which is more museum and exhibition based than ours is.

How did you meet Gert Berliner? How and when did you find out about the toy monkey?

This is actually a very interesting story. I met Gert Berliner in Berlin, long before I was at the Jewish Museum in Berlin. There was a meeting of the Jewish Group, it was an independent group that met monthly to talk about current Jewish affairs. In 1985, on one Sunday, Gert Berliner was there with his wife. We talked a lot during that meeting, but if my memory serves right, we didn't stay in touch. It was a one off. You can imagine my surprise and delight when I came to the museum and learnt that there was a donor who I knew. He was the only person who I knew who was a donor to the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Gert had donated some things in the year 2000. So, we reconnected.

At that time Gert was coming once a year to Berlin. We rekindled our friendship in 2002. Then in 2003, I visited Gert in New York and we had dinner together at his apartment. We got to talking about his history, his biography, and his life in Berlin. I had known that Gert had left Berlin in the spring of 1939 on a *Kindertransport* to Sweden. That evening, I asked him if he still had anything that he had taken with him. He said, "no I don't have anything, I just had a little tiny suitcase," and then he said, "wait a second, I still have my little toy monkey." He said, "I have a toy monkey that I tied to the handlebars of my bike. It was my talisman." He asked me if I wanted to see it, to which I replied yes. He showed me the monkey and I said to him, "that is an amazing object." He said to me with a gleam in his eye, "you'd like to have it for the museum, wouldn't you?" I said to him, "Gert, it would be an absolutely unique and most welcome significant object, but I know the personal connection you must have with it, so I am not even going to ask." He replied, "you know what, I'll think about it." When he came to Berlin the next spring, he brought the monkey with him and he said, "I'd like the museum to have it." That's the beginning of the story of the monkey coming to Berlin and a short story of my getting to know Gert. We have remained close and good friends ever since. I last saw Gert in October of last year in New York and visited him in the same apartment where he first showed me the monkey.

The fact that Gert was 80 years old, and he'd had this monkey for so many years, I'm fascinated that he decided to give it to you. Was there any hesitation in that decision or transfer? How was the exchange?

There was an initial hesitation. His wife asked what it would mean for him to no longer have the object. It was emotional, but I don't think it was painful. Gert was 15 years old when he left and he completely put the German language away; he will not speak German even though he understands it. He is an individual who is very emotional about his past and losing his parents and one would say that of course he is. I've asked him, on a couple of occasions, whether or not he would like to come and participate in our education program, which means talking about ones past. Gert is one of those individuals who is unable to do that. I have the utmost absolute understanding for that. It is very important for me not to create an atmosphere which is emotionally challenging and painful for the participants, both the survivors telling their stories and the students who are listening. I am not a proponent of having a situation that is emotionally highly charged, it is not a positive thing. I never want to put a witness, who's

participating in a workshop, to break down. I don't see that as an effective learning tool. I don't think we learn from that.

Could you describe the toy monkey for us?

It's a very small monkey figure in a seated non-flexible position. It's about 11.5 cm high, 4 cm wide, with a depth of 5.5 cm. He's got a lot of years behind him; he's a little bit worse for wear. He's missing both hands, but on one of them, you can still see a part of the white felt extension of the hand. The other hand looks as though it's been amputated. It's kind of brutal because it's really cut off and you don't see any of the felt anymore. As a matter of fact, there is a metal rod that is holding the hands and the legs of the monkey. One of the feet below is shortened. The other foot, on his left leg, is completely intact. The shape of the hands and feet are almost like ping-pong rackets. The toy is made up of five materials: plush, felt, glass for the eyes, metal rods that keep it stiff, and under the plush it is filled with straw. The plush is worn down in many places. The remarkable thing is that the face is intact and clean; neither of the eyes are missing. We did no restoration whatsoever of it, we did not stitch anything up. What we did was to ensure that its state will be preserved. It was on display for many years in the museum in this condition.

In which exhibits has the monkey been displayed? Are they permanent or rotating?

The monkey went into the showcase in 2005 or 2006 where it stayed for almost 4 years. This showcase was in the lower floor of the museum. When you descended into the Libeskind building there is a passageway that is called the axis of the Holocaust. Along the right-hand side of that passageway are a series of glass permanent showcases. All of the material that is on display, in those showcases, relate to individual and family biographies of whom members were deported and murdered in the Shoah. That doesn't mean that every object there belonged to someone that was murdered. Let's take our case with the monkey of Gert Berliner, his parents were deported and murdered in 1943. This is one of those objects that tells the story of refuge and loss. It is symbolic of Gert's survival, but it also tells the story of the deportation and murder of his parents.

At one point, the toy monkey was accompanied by a censored letter that Gert's parents had written in November of 1941 to him in Sweden. It is visually an incredibly powerful object, letter, because it was so heavily censored and marked out with a type of black ink that it is absolutely impossible to read what is underneath. Nonetheless, in the text that you are able to read, you can completely contextualize the letter. It was written just a few days after the beginning of the mass deportations of Jews from Berlin. Gert's parents are telling him that they are for the time being safe and not affected by the deportations. You do not read the word deportation or whatever term was used, that was censored out. It is stunning that this letter was able to be sent. Because Gert had gone to Sweden, which was a neutral country, his parents were able to communicate with him via lengthy letters almost up until their deportation. There wasn't a mail ban to neutral countries. There was absolutely no way to send letters from Germany to any country that was at war with Germany. The only way to

communicate was to send letters to neutral countries, that would then be forwarded on, or there were the ominous Red Cross letters. On these, you were only allowed to write 25 words and they took months to go back and forth. For conservation reasons, the monkey had to be taken out. As the monkey is made of textiles, it can only be exposed to light for a certain amount of time. In that passageway, we were changing things all the time because we have a very rich collection.

In 2011, the monkey was included in a new installation, a segment devoted to Jewish life and Jewish reactions during the period of National Socialism. This was very close to showcases which thematized Jewish schools and Jewish pupils during the Nazi period. This installation featured the question, "what would you take along if you had to leave your country?" On lids which you could open, there were reproductions of five passport photographs of children and youth. Gert's photo and name was on one of these lids. Under the lid was a picture of the monkey and a text telling its story.

The toy monkey was on display until we closed the permanent exhibition. This is incredibly important, because it was this picture that the daughter of Gert Berliner's cousin stumbled across at the museum and said, "that's interesting, his name was Berliner and that's my mother's maiden name." Not really thinking much about it, she told her mother, who then became curious. Objects like the monkey are very rare and unfortunately can only be shown for a limited amount of time, but realizing how powerful and important it was, we found another way to at least have it displayed. It's remarkable that it was just a photograph of the object which led to this unbelievable story of a family being reunited.

When I visited the museum, I felt that each object could tell us about a whole world. With just a few objects, you tell us the world of the Jews who were persecuted by the Nazis, what happened to them and their families.

Absolutely. Some of our objects on display also tell the story of non-Jews. There are a number of objects that one calls orphan objects. These objects were entrusted to non-Jewish neighbours when people who were deported, obviously with the expectation that when they came back they would be reunited with the objects. In most of the cases, the people were deported and didn't survive. Some of these objects also have incredible stories about where they were handed on to and how they found their way to the Museum. For some of these objects, we don't know who the original owners were.

All of the objects have their own migration stories. Those are stories that accompany, in a large part, the migration stories of the previous owners, but they go beyond that because they all migrated back to Germany. It is really interesting to ask the question of looking at the different phases of the lives of objects.

Gert, I remember quite distinctly, took the toy monkey out of a cupboard. It was a cupboard in a desk. When I saw it, I thought it seemed to be an object that he saw very often, because it was in that top drawer of the desk. It wasn't packed away in a box in a closet that he had to get

down, which also adds meaning to him, his interaction with it. So there are so many different angles and aspects to a very long history. This is an object that through the discovery by the family members, it's been given a completely different kind of utility than its manufacturer and the people who bought could have ever imagined. Biographies of objects, even when they come to their final resting place in the museum, they too continue.

Will the monkey be going back on display in the near future?

It will not be going on display immediately, but I definitely will display it again in a showcase that is devoted to the theme of children's transports. We do have a small number of three-dimensional objects that were taken by children when they went on children's transports and, I think, we will be rotating them.

With all of the work you are doing in the museum, including the displays on the *Kindertransport*, what would you like people to learn about the Holocaust from examining these objects?

The real question is: what stories do objects tell on their own without any text attached to them? There are certain objects which probably as an object themselves tell more than this monkey would. If we just imagined that we didn't know anything about the story and we saw this monkey, we could make up all kinds of stories and the majority, maybe all of them, would be completely false. You would really never know. There's no question about it, that the stories that come with the object that I and my other colleagues are collecting for the Jewish Museum in Berlin are incredibly important. The stories are inseparable from the objects. They are important when it comes to the aspect of education, what can someone learn from them? We have learned to ask questions about the objects beyond that which we are told about. The monkey, for example, is an object where we can ask a little bit about its manufacturing history. We can also ask the question about the popularity, about the time it was created. This is from a very famous company called Steiff. Which objects have a connection to German Jewish history? Which objects have a connection to Jewish history? What does an object tell us about acculturation and integration into a society? With an object like the toy monkey, I'm sure that there were thousands of them manufactured, but how many of them survived into the present day? How many of them have remotely similar stories pertaining to separation and displacement? That's the amazing thing that Uri's feature led to, people were so moved by the story that they are coming forward to share about their own objects. Depending on the object, there is an awful lot that everyone can learn about certain aspects of the Shoah.

What do we not know about the monkey?

This is something you can think about with objects: in whose hands were they held. This was an object that Gert's parents purchased for their son. They were in a store looking at things, they saw all kinds of things. What was it that attracted them to the monkey? What memories of the monkey did Gert's parents have after Gert and the monkey were gone? Gert was a precocious 15-year-old teenager when he left for Sweden, their only child, did the parent's keep anything

as a memory of him? How much of Gert's parents does he project onto the monkey? It was a gift from them to him and it was the only thing that he still had. Obviously the parent's, as all parent's, hoped also to be able to escape Germany and escape the unknown fate they were facing. These are questions we can't answer. The question you can ask about objects are endless, but you're not going to find the answers to most of the questions that I'm asking. Asking questions raises your awareness about those times and the fates of individuals and families. I think we can learn a lot by asking questions that we don't get the answers to.

You spoke of how the textiles were degraded by light, could you tell us how you care for the toy monkey?

We are a museum that has the highest conservation standards and also the resources available to meet those standards. The monkey is kept in a climate controlled depository at 18 degrees in the basement of the Daniel Libeskind building. That is our textile depository. It has been looked at and packaged by a textile conservator. All the textile objects are viewed and analyzed by the textile conservators who write reports about the condition and what needs to be done if one wants to restore it. The monkey is packaged in tissue paper in a box with other materials as well, which are all acid free. The box itself is stored in mobile shelving.

What meaning does the toy monkey have for you personally?

The materials, this is true for documents, for photographs, and particularly true for three-dimensional objects that had been entrusted to me personally by donors, are not just artefacts. They are very meaningful because they are a bond between myself and the donors. I have developed a relationship with a lot of our donors, some of those relationships have become very close friendships, others don't progress that far. The monkey coming to the museum was a result of my reconnecting with Gert Berliner. The only person who I knew, who had as a donor a relationship to the Jewish Museum in Berlin before I came to the museum. That, in itself, was something very remarkable. We had a very amazing rapport with each other. The monkey and the fact that Gert entrusted the monkey to the museum means he has trust in the institution of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, but also I think, in part, it has something to do with the closeness of our relationship. That really means a lot to me.

I am moved when German Jewish refugees, survivors, and their descendants entrust things at all, but especially things that are very personal. Saying that, what is personal to someone is very subjective. When you entrust things into the public domain and share them with the world at large, it's a tremendously meaningful way to commemorate your family and your ancestors. Now in this case, the monkey is something which is very personal that belonged to Gert; it's something that he's had for 73 years of his life before it came to the museum. The fact that this monkey led to a reunion of family members increased its meaning to everyone involved exponentially. It's a one off story. I've experienced incredibly moving and emotional encounters with visitors with objects on display in the permanent exhibition, but I think this is the only object where the object itself led to the rediscovery of family.

This story created shock waves, almost throughout the whole world. It's really incredible; it's a very moving story. If you go on to the Facebook page of NPR (National Public Radio) and you search for the monkey, the responses that the story got are absolutely overwhelming. I mean there was an outpouring of astonishment, people were writing that they had to pull over on the road to listen to the end of the story, that they were crying. We were all completely overwhelmed by the response of Uri's feature. My talking to you underlines just the effect this story has had.

We discussed this with Uri. The story keeps reverberating. It's not just that Uri and Gert were reunited with their Swedish family, but that Gert and Uri's relationship has been brought closer, and now all these other people sharing their own stories. It keeps going, it's not ending, and that's beautiful.

I absolutely agree. I think the most moving part of this story is that it brought Gert and his son closer together. I was really surprised when Uri contacted me in the spring of last year and then came to Berlin. He had never seen the monkey before; he didn't know about its existence. That was an amazing point in time for him, coming to the Jewish Museum in Berlin, seeing the monkey, and putting this together. The story was broadcast and published in November of last year (2018). I was in California on one of my acquisition trips in the end of December visiting potential donors, and I listening to NPR while driving. I heard the journalist say, "in November, we broadcast the amazing story of this toy monkey," and then there followed a story of an object that was taken by a young boy. It was one of the responses to the toy monkey story. It was the story about a crucifix, that a Cuban boy had taken when he left Havana. It floored me, because I'm not really following and seeing if there are still responses. It's one of these stories that there's just something very special about it. It's connected all of our lives. There's also the fact that I've now met Gert's cousin and her daughter in Berlin.

You now have a relationship with the monkey. You can start thinking about what meaning it has to you. In a way, you are also now participating in disseminating this story through the research that you are doing. This story is going to have a future for you as well, because there will be docents and professors reacting to your work, there will be fellow students talking to you, and you telling them about the toy monkey. You really start to think about just how much objects affect us in our own daily lives, most of which we completely take for granted. You're going to continue to interact with this object because you will remember these conversations, with me, with Uri, and amongst yourselves. This is just one aspect of how the object is taking on new stories and new meaning for a lot of different people.