

Preface

Some may wonder why a Japanese scholar would choose – of all the important themes of *Zeitgeschichte* – to write about the history of the Jewish successor organizations, and why on earth about the disputes between the successor organizations and the reestablished Jewish communities in Germany over the succession of communal property – a theme which even German historians seem unwilling to deal with. To this question, I would answer, that writing about this particular aspect of postwar German-Jewish history indeed needed an outsider’s point of view.

What aroused my interests in this theme was the seemingly extraordinary nature of the Jewish successor organizations. When an ethnic (or a religious) minority in a country is nearly destroyed through the persecution on the part of a majority, is the entirety of the people – to which the destroyed minority belongs – entitled to the property left by its kin? The argument that the Jewish people as a whole should inherit the property left by the murdered Jews and the destroyed communities as a collective heir, sounded very peculiar.

Trying to understand the logic behind this idea, I thought of the Korean minority in Japan. Currently, there are more than 600,000 people of Korean descent living in Japan. They are the offspring of such Koreans who had voluntarily come to Japan after the colonization of the Korean peninsula by Imperial Japan, or who had been forcibly brought to Japan during the war as a labor force. They have been subjected to discrimination, even to violent persecution, and a massacre – which factually took place when a big earthquake hit Tokyo in 1923 – was indeed instigated by the rumor that they poisoned wells. Yet, many Koreans decided to stay in Japan after the war. A good part of them was naturalized and became Japanese citizens, while others kept their Korean nationality (either that of North or South Korea) since they were no longer “Japanese” nationals when Japan was

defeated.

Let me make a very simplified hypothesis – by making such a hypothesis I am solely responsible to criticism – that a large part of the Korean minority in Japan was murdered by the state or by “quasi-state” authorities during the war. Property of these Koreans was left in Japan, to which there was no heirs. Could this property be claimed by a representative of the Korean people, let’s say, by a “Korean successor organization”? Is it plausible that the liquidated assets be transferred to Korea for the benefit of the Korean people as a whole? In the given political and social context in which the Korean minority found itself in Japan, the idea of a Korean successor organization seems unrealistic.

An analogy to the Kurdish people in the Middle East may be closer to some readers. The Kurds live spread out over the borders of Iran, Iraq and Turkey, and their situation resembles that of Jews before the creation of the state of Israel, in the sense that they do not have a state of their own. As is known, they have been used as the pawns of inter-state conflicts in this region, and the Kurdish population of northern Iraq had been the target of the chemical weapons by Saddam Hussein in the late 1980s. Let us suppose, that the Kurdish minority in Iraq was annihilated by the attacks of the Iraqi government during the Gulf War, and a small number of survivors fled to neighboring countries. By international sanctions, the Iraqi government would be barred from acquiring the heirless and abandoned assets of these victims. In order to retrieve the Kurdish assets left in Iraq and to utilize them for the resettlement and the rehabilitation of the Kurdish refugees, an international Kurdish successor organization would then be established by the representatives of the Kurdish people outside of Iraq. Does this scenario sound convincing?

There is an abundance of such examples in history in which minorities were nearly

wiped out and issues of heirless property arose. The “ethnic cleansing” in former Yugoslavia, the tribal killings in Rwanda should be counted among them, too. Yet, ignoring the complicated international factors and the geopolitical elements in each case, the underlying question remains the same. Does any collectivity, which shares certain traits (race, religion, political creed, or even experience of collective discrimination and persecution) have the right to claim the heirless property of its members, for the reason that they belong to the same group? This is an issue which touches upon the very foundation of individual property rights.

Then, were the Jewish successor organizations exceptional? It is true that no other genocide had so profound an impact on humanity than the Jewish Holocaust. Yet, to answer this question, one needs to have a certain distance from Germany and from the Jewish world, because what may seem unusual in a different place and context is readily accepted by them as a part of their special relationships after the Holocaust. As an outsider, I am neither bound to the moral and political reservations which the German people might have toward the Jewish people, nor do I share the latter’s legitimacy of demanding exceptional treatment. I do not deny, however, that the view I present in this work may be determined by the very factor that I am an outsider, and may not be free from the preconceived notions that I unconsciously carry as Japanese.

This work is dedicated to two extraordinary persons. Benjamin B. Ferencz, the first director general of the JRSO in Germany, and Saul Kagan, the longstanding executive secretary of the JRSO and Executive vice President Emeritus of the Conference on the Jewish Material Claims against Germany. Had it not been for their generosity and inspiration, this work would not have been possible.

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