

Nine Lessons Learned from Working in Washington DC

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How did I end up working there, if only for a year? By accident. My mother heard a talk in California she told me about; I lived on the East Coast. I contacted the wrong person about the job. Somehow, the right person heard, and over lunch in a Philadelphia-area restaurant, the Executive Director interviewed me. He hadn't been able to locate enough qualified candidates, and I didn't quite fit the bill either, but my skill set was close enough. Besides, I was casting about for paid work.

Qualifications and Titles

As far as subject expertise went, the other Ph.Ds hired at about the same time – as Senior Researchers – were as unqualified as I was. One had written his Ph.D. on Weimar theatre in the interwar era. Another had delved into German involvement in railroad-building in Turkey and the Middle East in the early 20th century. A third was still working on Bohemian and Moravian identity issues. My own thesis had been on foreign worker policies in Germany and the U.S. after the Second World War. In common was our academic certification that we knew how to delve into – and extract useful information from – archives, our competence in reading (if not speaking) German, and an ability to write (hopefully clearly) about complex historical topics.

The hierarchy we walked into was utterly confusing. There were other Senior Researchers, some with subject area competence much greater than our own, but theirs were administrative posts. Then there were Senior Researchers who had had or now held temporary research assignments. There were also Researchers engaged in administrative duties, or listed as doing temporary research, but the title of Researcher was also accorded to those seconded from federal departments or agencies. Their function, in turn, was to act as liaisons facilitating access to internal material which might not have made it into the National Archives. Those National Archives had been consulted, and many copies made, by still others who were also Researchers. Over time, we learned that a number of these staff, closest to the material we were to work on, did not actually hold relevant academic degrees (say, in history or in library science) or had even had archival research experience before being hired. Then there were Consultants, Interns, and Administrators, none of whom were formally counted as part of the Research Staff to which we belonged.

Lesson 1: Academic degrees, in Washington, may be more related to which pay grade you qualify for than to what your job actually entails – and job titles may tell you nothing about how the work is, or was, organized before you arrived.

Lesson 2: What you devoted much time learning, in academic contexts, may be irrelevant to your specific tasks. You were hired because it was thought you had some general skills that might be useful.

Ignorance

When we were hired, we new Senior Researchers had no idea how the Commission we were to work for was organized; we weren't given much explanation of it nor of what we were to now do. Still, a meeting was held early on in which some researchers presented their progress reports, and efforts were made by those in executive positions to articulate which questions were still unresolved. It helped a bit.

We did later learn we were working under a political and legal mandate established by Congress through the U.S. Holocaust Assets Commission Act of 1998 (PL 105-186). Its scope was to conduct original research into the fate of assets taken from victims of the Holocaust that came into the possession or control of the U.S. federal government. The Commission was also to review research done by others regarding assets that came to private collections and non-federal government organizations (especially state governments and financial institutions). The political purpose was to advise the President – at that time Clinton – on policies that should be adopted to make restitution to the rightful owners of stolen property or their heirs. Unclaimed or 'heirless' assets were specifically included.

Our primary task was “to develop an historical account of those valuables that came into the hands of the federal government” that had been obtained from victims of the Holocaust at any time after January 30, 1933 by the Nazi government of Germany, and in any government occupied or established by, or an ally of, that government. By law, the types of assets to be included were:

- “(A) gold, including gold bullion, monetary gold, or similar assets
- (B) gems, jewelry, and non-gold precious metals
- (C) accounts in banks in the United States
- (D) domestic financial instruments purchased, before May 8, 1945, by individual victims
- (E) insurance policies and proceeds thereof
- (F) real estate situated in the United States

(G) works of art, and

(H) books, manuscripts, and religious objects.”

It was an enormous mandate, temporally (any time after 1933), politically (the wording made clear that both acts by and failures to act by governments vis-à-vis such assets were to be included), and in scope (victims could be from virtually anywhere in Western or Eastern Europe – with who counted as a ‘victim’ left undefined). The Commission was in the third of its four years: we had a year to finish our work.

Lesson 3: DC decision-makers want to know everything, reports preferably completed before yesterday...

The Commission

By law, the Presidential Advisory Commission had 21 appointed members. Of those, 8 were elected politicians serving in Senate or House, and 4 held senior positions in the executive branch:

4 were Senators, 2 each appointed by the Majority and Minority leaders of the Senate
[Barbara Boxer – CA; Christopher Dodd – CT; Gordon Smith – OR; Arlen Specter – PA]

4 were Representatives, appointed by the Speaker and Minority Leaders of the House
[Benjamin Gilman – NY; Rick Lazio – NY; James Malony – CT; Brad Sherman – CA]

4 represented the federal administration
[Patrick Henry – Assistant Secretary (Army); James Robinson – Assistant Attorney General (Justice);
Stuart Eizenstat – Deputy Secretary (Treasury); Neal Wolin – General Counsel (Treasury)]

The United States Holocaust Memorial Council, an ‘independent establishment’ of the U.S. government whose council members are appointed by the President, was also represented by its chair [Miles Lerman until, and Irving Greenberg after, March 2000]

The remaining nine were private citizens, the Commission law stipulating they “shall be an individual who has a record of demonstrated leadership on issues relating to the Holocaust or in the fields of commerce, culture or education that would assist the Commission in analyzing the disposition of the assets of Holocaust victims.” Those appointed were thus an interesting cross-section that included lawyers [Ira Leesfield – Miami; William Singer – Chicago; Margaret Milner Richardson, a former Commissioner of the IRS – Washington DC], a former Congresswoman [Pat Schroeder – Association of American Publishers], a prominent clergyman [Cecil Williams – Glide Memorial United Methodist Church in San Francisco], and a university president [Jehuda Reinharz – Brandeis].

We had no direct contact with the Commission, nor much knowledge of its members, and our job was in any case to ‘work up’ the history of assets.¹ We knew some Commissioners – particularly Eizenstat, but Senator Specter as well – had been quite outspoken about the issues. I was more than a little disturbed to learn that the Chairman was Edgar Bronfman, prominent as President of the World Jewish Congress (WJC) and of the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO). The mandate of the latter was to return communal Jewish property stolen by the Nazis, and WJC press releases at the time seemed far more about publicity than historical accuracy. I feared we would be under pressure to reach ‘findings’ that would serve only the WJC’s or the WJRO’s interests.

Lesson 4: Inform yourself about the players before you start working in DC

Who did the work?

The work of producing “an historical account” was coordinated by an Executive and a Deputy Executive Director, both of whom had worked in other capacities in the Clinton administration; their work was supported by a General Counsel. By the end of the life of the Commission, a total of:

22 longer-term researchers

13 temporary researchers and consultants

8 administrators, executive directors, and counsel

18 interns

had worked for it, a total of 61 people. Combined with the 21 Commission members, the production of this one government report involved a total of 82 people working for 4 years.

The initial appropriation of \$3.5 million was increased by another million in 2000. On average, each person involved in this Commission thus cost the taxpayer \$54,216 – or \$72,580 if one only counts those who directly crafted the text. The 312 pages of printed text cost the taxpayer \$14,423 per page.

Lesson 5: It’s expensive to find out what happened with assets in the past

¹ During our time working on the staff, no Commissioner directly “assisted” us, though some likely expressed their concerns to the Executive Directors of the Commission, and research staff may have met with Commissioners before we were hired. The final report makes it clear that Commissioners did want to hear various perspectives, but perspectives historians might bring did not seem to figure particularly prominently among them...

Organizing(?) the Research

Perhaps due to the order assets were listed in the establishing law, or because assets of such different types called for quite differing disciplinary competencies, we arrived to find research organized into three teams: gold and precious metals; art and cultural property; and financial assets [bank accounts, investments, real estate, but eventually patents and copyrights as well]. On its face, this made sense. In practice, there were problems.

A minor matter was that some of the largest collections of assets found by the U.S. Army – hidden at the Merkers mine in Thuringia, for example, or being carted away on the ‘Hungarian Gold Train’ – contained valuables of all three types, gold, artworks, and financial records. That overlap made it unclear which research team should take the lead, or if all three should work simultaneously on them.

Much more problematic was the lack of guidance, or the agendas, coming from the research directors of each of these teams. The person in charge of the gold team had worked for various claimants seeking restitution for art lost to them before or during the war; that was not a specialization in gold. Tracing artwork provenance involves finding evidence for both private and official malfeasance, whether by unscrupulous dealers, by Nazi and allied governments, or both acting together. But trying to find evidence of malfeasance (had the U.S. government knowingly traded in victim gold?), as this team seemed to keep doing, added a slant at odds with the mandate to first establish what had happened to gold and similar assets that had come into the hands of the U.S. government.

The research director of the art team, by contrast, was eminently qualified: he was a historian whose special competence was in the fate of art during the Third Reich. His issues were more personal. He had recently moved to Los Angeles to launch a new academic career, was in the middle of publishing a new book, and was rarely in Washington. He simply had other priorities than guiding the research of the art team.

Priorities also seemed to drive the research director of the financial assets team, an economist deeply invested in a conviction that justice had been insufficient and delayed, particularly when it came to individual victims. Given the history of German or Austrian post-war restitution, there is plentiful evidence that this was indeed the case, and calling governments to account was certainly part of the Commission’s mandate. The problem was that this stance strongly colored this research director’s views, and was at odds with ‘conducting original research into the fate of assets taken from victims.’ Put more sharply, it was an Alice in Wonderland approach: sentence first, verdict afterwards. Our mandate was to

establish the fate of assets; the assignment of responsibility (or blame) would need, or ought, to come as a second step. That this research director was based in London and rarely in Washington did not help.

So as a result of the nature of the information itself, and the unclear/lacking/slanted guidance, members of all three teams gathered information in the National Archives, Library of Congress, federal departments and abroad, without coordination. It wasn't just a duplication of effort; at times it was a literal duplication of copied archival holdings. And of those hired to do research in the Archives...

- One did a large amount of work on a particular topic and then quit without turning the material he'd found over to the Commission; he had collected it for use in writing a thesis
- Some researchers were more interested in using their positions as stepping-stones to other positions, including at the National Archives
- Without adequate guidance, some researchers copied anything which seemed even remotely relevant, forcing time-consuming sifting later
- Then there were some who, thinking that they recognized the value of what they found, proved very coy about sharing their material; they'd hem and haw, or delay turning over material despite explicit deadlines – and created needless conflicts in the process²

Lesson 6: In an administrative unit grown sluggish, you – as an outsider to DC – may be hired with the assumption you can cut through various Gordian knots and actually get the mandated job done

² I ordinarily care more about performance than degrees, but it soon became clear that that there were differing levels of skill, competence, and knowledge among Researchers, and these skill or competence levels tended to correspond to how much higher education they had.

What we actually did: a more personal account

- I. In January, those of us entrusted with writing – and with only a sketchy idea of what the report was to look like – crafted a scene-setting introductory chapter. Each of us took on individual sub-topics, holding several meetings to iron out the details as well as revise. That first chapter would be worked over by more staff and administrators than anything else we did. For those of us doing the writing, our early meetings set an agreeable tone: our own cooperation proved to be quite good – unlike the squabbles among and between researchers, and between researchers and directors or administrators.
- II. Over the next several months, however, there was no follow-up on this first chapter. We tried, with varying degrees of success, to get information or drafts from researchers, or receive more guidance from the Executive and Deputy Directors. We cultivated those who would help us, or tried to get around those who didn't or wouldn't, but we were working and gathering information without a plan. In my own frustration, I brought my 7-year-old's copy of the Sesame Street book "Big Bird Can Share" with me at one point. Though he was part of the problem, the Deputy Executive Director was charmed – or exasperated – enough to mention the book several times in subsequent meetings.
- III. At one point we also met with the Executive Director to express our frustration at not receiving instructions about what we were supposed to do. His response? "You are all big boys. Your job is to write the history, our job is to write the recommendations." That was exactly how it turned out: the final product had two parts unrelated to one another, policy recommendations to begin with followed by a largely unrelated history-based report we'd written.
- IV. Perhaps because they realized time was running out, the Executive and Deputy Directors cobbled together an outline for the report, and finally began to decide who would be responsible for which chapters. Some suggestions I made about revising that outline were adopted, but there was no real discussion about it, certainly not with us. There were indications that some of what needed to be in the report was dictated by politics, such as to ensure concerns raised by the Army or the Treasury Department were addressed.
 - a. After this point, chapters were largely set. My own responsibility was to deal with assets in the U.S. (Chapter 3 in the staff report); the other historians worked on assets in Europe (Chapter 4) and on restitution issues (Chapter 5). Bits and pieces were added – case studies, summaries (such as about precious metals) – by others, but there was only one chapter we did not craft, on heirless assets. That was to satisfy demands from outside the Commission that it be included; at the very end of my employment, I had the task of rewriting (and re-researching) this chapter.
 - b. Our own stance was: let's simply try to write a narrative based on the evidence we can find. Others can worry over what it means, or add their particular interpretations. We *knew* this was not what certain Commissioners (and, as noted above, some of the research directors) wanted, but it seemed the only way to avoid writing a history we felt would read as though its conclusions were pre-determined or followed an agenda.
 - c. I may have ended up with my assignment because, as the only social scientist on board, I seemed the most likely to be able to address what would inevitably be a history of administration (e.g., what had Treasury actually done with German assets in the U.S. during the war? how had the U.S. Army dealt with all those assets that they brought to the Offenbach depot near Frankfurt?). I was also the only one who looked into the secondary literature; my historian colleagues were all much more oriented to focusing on primary sources. I discovered that a great deal had been published

both during and immediately after the war, including by those government administrators most directly involved in asset questions at the time.

- d. From March to June, I spent considerable time in the Penn Law Library, digging out information, and only occasionally coming to Washington. When I did go, I often gathered information surreptitiously: going through, after researchers had left, what had been collected and deposited in the filing drawers of the Commission at the National Archives, copying useful-looking government reports from the 1940s, or closely examining declassified material. I wasn't receiving guidance as to what might be, or prove, relevant. It was like working on a dissertation: isolated and with only very occasional feedback...
- e. Eventually, I produced a draft which ran 150 pages or so, nearly every part of which would end up being used either in "my own" Chapter 3, or be mined for use in other chapters. Somewhere between one-third and half of the published staff report was hence my own writing, and when edited, then often only lightly. Only a small part of saying this is pride: it's noted here to point out that even in a project involving as many people as this one did, a single individual can have a substantial impact on the final product.³ It wasn't what I had expected at all. My assumption was that I would contribute material that would be substantially worked over by others, the end product unrecognizable as my own writing or research.

Lesson 7: Being hired by the U.S. government to complete a legal mandate doesn't necessarily mean you will be told what to do, much less how. You may have to figure this out yourself – and for yourself.

An insider reflects

When it was all over and the report printed, I contacted the Deputy Executive Director, a historian who seemed to know Washington well. In keeping with my political science interests, I wanted to know who he thought the main actors had been, and what their motivations were. I wanted to hear his take on the political environment at the time – one we were either largely shielded from or moderately oblivious to. Why this history-oriented Commission at this particular point in time?

He was kind enough to write a long answer back where he identified the main actors as:

- members of Congress who had interests of a kind, about these assets, that could be turned into law
- the State Department, which housed the Special Envoy on Holocaust Issues

³ The report title is Plunder and Restitution: The U.S. and Holocaust Victims Assets: Findings and Recommendations of the Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets in the United States and Staff Report. Google Books as well as the Internet Archive have scanned it in; copies are available in at least 10 university libraries in the U.S.

- interest groups like the Claims Conference and the WJC which claimed to speak for victims and families
- “those class action attorneys”
- federal courts, especially in New York, which were hearing Holocaust claims
- representatives of various industry groups (non-American insurance companies, the private sector in Germany) involved in slave / forced labor fund negotiations, and
- various foreign governments.

He wrote:

“I’ve always thought that domestically the most important actor was the United States government, and therefore the key question was which actors were best able to shape the U.S. position. The government seems to respond most to the material needs of victims. There seemed to be two kinds of resources, material and moral, but the ability to claim to speak for the victims appears to trump the material. The weakest group, I think, are the lawyers, because they haven’t yet been able to win a case in the courts; that makes their pursuit of fees all the more ironic. It also seems to me that at least some of the other governments and business communities are concerned with their image, have analyzed the Swiss case, and have concluded that the best, quickest solution is to agree to some resolution.”

In a later note, he added that: “it may be naïve, but I believe that the U.S. government interest was genuinely in ‘seeing justice done.’ ... What motivated other actors may have been less noble.” Less noble meant the prospect of money (compensation for losses that could be paid, even so many years later, to victims and their heirs; lawyers’ fees), the promotion of causes (WJC and similar actors, with negative publicity a means to raise more funds), the ticking clock (all survivor-witnesses would soon no longer be with us), political ambitions (those in Congress looking for campaign issues, like Senator d’Amato; the President wanting to take the moral high ground), and the press (looking to identify villains; playing up disputes over art provenance, etc.). Then “of course, another factor was that the Swiss banks did have accounts and foreign insurers had failed to pay out on policies.” There was also a sense this was the last chance to address issues that remained unresolved even 50 years later.

Lesson 8: If you work in Washington, the big picture may well elude you

Conclusion

We were told Commission researchers had photocopied more than 100,000 pages, but the total was far more, as one can see today by going to the Clinton Digital Library.⁴ We were, collectively, quite successful at getting much long-ago material declassified; a good deal of this, we thought on reading it, had not deserved being marked “secret” or “classified” in the first place.

There was almost no echo in the press when our report was released. Some was due to poor timing: Clinton was leaving office, Bush was arriving, there was controversy over nominating Ashcroft – and the issue of assets and victims was in any case seen as something of a hobbyhorse of Democrats. Neither recommendations nor the staff report may have been sensational enough for the press.

But that was also precisely our effort: we deliberately tried to avoid emotionalizing the issues. We were quite prepared to be critical of the actions of the U.S. government during and after the war. But as scholars, we simply couldn’t find much evidence of gross malfeasance. Instead, we found repeated efforts to try to do what was right: return stolen altars to the churches in Europe they had been taken from, find the rightful heirs to book collections, support decisions made by relevant interest groups right after the war about how to deal with heirless assets. Even those who were indirectly victimized, such as the Danish author Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), whose royalties from the sale of her books in the U.S. during the war were frozen through the Trading with the Enemy Act, would be compensated: the U.S. government sent her a check for \$33,558.67 in 1950.⁵

Lesson 9: If you drop a stone down a deep well, you may never hear it splash...

⁴ Presidential Advisory Committee on Holocaust Assets: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/collections/show/20>

⁵ A more specific result of our Commission, part of much wider efforts, was to establish a foundation in Germany to recompense those who had been dragged into the Third Reich and forced to work there. For a discussion of the practical difficulties in carrying this out, see Constantin Goeschler’s *Compensation in Practice: The Foundation ‘Remembrance, Responsibility and Future’ and the Legacy of Forced Labor during the Third Reich* (Berghahn Books, 2017). And in case you wondered, that check to Karen Blixen would be worth nearly \$450,000 in 2025.