



Figure 1. Sigmund Freud's cap (left) in the waiting room of his Viennese home; on the right is the visitors' wardrobe, c. 1975 [Photo: Fred Prager]

FORT, DA: THE CAP IN THE MUSEUM^{1,2}

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Simple headgear can hardly be seen as an enticement to commit a crime. In order to awaken criminal energy, a cap must go through a series of transformations: only so ennobled can it become the object of a crime. There is a short story by Thomas Bernhard that relates the disturbing development of a mundane found item into the object of a crime. In his text 'Die Mütze' [The Cap], a scientist plagued by head troubles searches for the rightful owner of a cap he finds. Being unable to track down its owner, he increasingly begins to worry that he is nothing better than a common hat thief. The tale ends with the scientist, martyred by terrible feelings of guilt, finally putting on the cap, which in the future will warm him at his writing desk.³

Shortly after the publication of this tale of compulsive thoughts emanating from an article of headwear, a cap was packed up in a box and shipped to Vienna. At the end of the 1960s, a small group had come together in Austria in order to react to criticism, which from the American side in particular was getting louder, by reactivating memories of a scientist who had been forced into exile. While in the USA his work had also achieved widespread recognition among the general public through Hollywood's translation of it into popular culture, in post-war Austria there was little talk of him save among specialists. The cap, which was packed up so carefully, belonged to Sigmund Freud; with its help he was to be returned to his place in the 'gallery of great minds' in Vienna. His daughter Anna had selected it carefully: it was the tweed cap which her father had worn as he embarked on his journey into exile in London. It can also be seen in the home movies that were made before this departure. Thus its 'genuineness' was doubly guaranteed, through memory and through filmic and photographic documentation. In addition to the original furnishings of the waiting room, it was part of the meagre catalogue of items with which the future Sigmund Freud Museum would have to begin its endeavour. Anna Freud kept all the

1. Translated from German by Christopher Barber.

2. See Figure 1.

3. Thomas Bernhard, 'Die Mütze' [1967], in *Erzählungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001), pp. 52–69.

other objects in London, seeing no reason for presenting Vienna – which lived on in her mind as the city of the perpetrators – with the great emblems of her father's life and work, such as the couch.

To this day, the cap is part of a small scene in the psychoanalyst's entrance hall that the museum founders thought would evoke both the presence and the enforced absence of the office's former occupant. On the coat rack, which had remained unchanged, they displayed the cap together with a walking stick, clothes-hangers, a hat and items from the baggage with which Freud had emigrated. Made into museum exhibits, they bear witness to the dilemma that arises when mundane objects without artistic or material value are to be put on show. Such civilizational remains must perpetually be brought into relationship with a certain person or event, since without this connection they lose all value beyond that of the flea market.

As the cap took its place on Freud's coat rack, the transformation from an everyday item into a museum object with an insurable value had apparently not been fully completed. It took an unusual event to confirm this transformation. Initially, as a photo shows (see Figure 1), the tweed cap was not separated from museum visitors by a glass case. It hung there fully unprotected next to the visitors' coats. Fear of theft was hardly an issue, and the objects seemed so valueless that any special security measures seemed unnecessary. The museum's founders had expected that they would have to deal with a lack of support and with various forms of obstruction; what they didn't see coming were the hordes of visitors. By the mid-1970s the museum was already attracting a stream of visitors – most of them from English-speaking countries – so large that an incident that took place in the midst of the daily confusion went unnoticed: on 31 July 1977 the museum's attendant made the sad discovery that the cap was missing. He reported the theft to the police and to the insurance company, which in December notified the museum that it would receive '12,000 [Austrian] shillings in view of the special nature of the stolen museum piece (cloth travel cap from the estate of Sigmund Freud)'.⁴

The theft was a reminder to the historic site's operators that the symbolic value of the memorabilia exhibited had in the meantime risen so much that it could become an object of crime. The museum had already been fulfilling its function as a site of knowledge by successfully awakening interest in Sigmund Freud, using nothing more than a few insignificant articles. And yet the museum space oscillates in museological debates between a transmitter of knowledge, a site of collective memory and an institution of cultural preservation. The latter, slightly bureaucratic definition leads to a function that hardly arises at all in such discussions – that of a place of safekeeping for

4. Archive of the Sigmund Freud Museum, letter from the Wiener Städtische Wechselseitige Versicherung to the Sigmund Freud Society, 1 December 1977. [The sum was equivalent to UK£417.40 or US\$758.40 on that day.]

objects. Things are shown, but in a setting inspired by the penal institution: they are secured by a host of measures ranging from surveillance systems to human attendants. The hat thief reminded the Sigmund Freud Museum that in view of the symbolic value of its objects it should also fulfil this function. The corner of the entrance hall was equipped with a vitrine in order to avoid any further confusion of visitors' articles of clothing with the devotional objects of Sigmund Freud. Later an alarm system was also installed.

Today the cap again hangs in its place. While the museum was putting its treasures behind glass and under increasing supervision, Freud's tweed cap went through a programme of resocialization. In Vienna, prison-like security was to keep the items of the collection from being transformed into stolen property, objects of everyday use or cult objects for private veneration. Museum objects, according to Krzysztof Pomian, belong to that category of objects that have no everyday use-function, visible in signs of wear and tear. Instead they have a function of significance.⁵ In the case of the stolen cap the situation proved to be more complex. Fashioned of timeless, sturdy wool fabric, it still had a certain value as an object of daily use forty years after the death of its former owner. Such a classic tweed cap could, without attracting any attention, certainly be worn on the street, and in the seventies it had even come into style again. Freud's cap regained its functional value for a couple of years. The thief, as was divulged in a later report, even used it now and then, delighting in the fact that only he knew of its significance. In some American city, the cap warmed the onetime museum visitor in the cold of winter. The freeing of the object from its museum status entailed in its coming back into society as an object in use was accompanied by a new charge of meaning, which, however, only a single person was allowed to know about.

One day the thief ended this exciting little game, which might well have caused his head to overheat like that of the cap finder in Bernhard's story. He sent the cap back to the museum in Vienna. He had discussed the feelings of guilt that had been tormenting him—and the disquieting sensations he had been experiencing through getting all too close to Freud in a bodily sense—with a psychoanalyst, who had urgently advised him to send the object back to Vienna. It arrived with an anonymous letter of explanation.⁶ The cap was returned to its place on the coat-rack, but in the meantime its ownership had undergone a fundamental change. The insurance company had paid out the promised sum to the museum, which had immediately used it to plug one of the many holes in its

5. Cf. Krzysztof Pomian, 'Entre l'invisible et le visible: la collection' [1978], in: Pomian, *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux. Paris, Venise XVIe–XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), pp. 15–59.

6. Cf. Archive of the Sigmund Freud Museum, personal recollections of Harald Leupold-Löwenthal.

budget. Since the institution was not able to pay back the money after the museum piece had been returned, the cap remained the property of the insurance company. All these events left no visible trace on the item or its presentation. The name of its new owner was not added to its small identifying card, since this might have given rise to unpleasant questions. The travelling cap had been blemished by a new meaning, the revealing of which would have been highly embarrassing. The case was solved in a very unanalytic manner in that the cap was only accorded a reference function to the life of Sigmund Freud, while associations regarding the freedom of its afterlife were kept quiet.