

Conscience 3

I called Herr Schelenz, the press officer at the Mayor's Department for Art and Culture, about an appointment to visit the so-called First Aid Centre in Cologne-Porz, not far from the airport, where articles recovered from the ruins of the collapsed Cologne's Historical Archives are being temporarily stored. Schelenz didn't give me an address to go to as such, but I received an email shortly after our conversation with written instructions as to how to get there by car, not to be revealed to anyone; I am one of the unfortunate persons who had donated their family effects to these Archives.

In early June, all depositors were invited to visit the storage halls, for the first time, to get an impression of how documents were being salvaged, after the deluge. I made the long way out to the secret address twice recently, but as a press representative with a special interest - the press may document, but no clues as to the location or exact details pertaining to the owners of found objects may be made public.

And so it seems the authorities involved are at last betraying a sense of insecurity – after this catastrophe that might surely have been avoided, they fear further inauspicious incidents, if depositors were to sue, should exposure of personal effects be made public, or even worse, should something at this stage be stolen.

But how would one establish that objects had been stolen? If these were books, magazines or letters, not clearly addressed or labelled - how would one know to whom the things had originally belonged? My grandfather Alfred Unger, for instance, had, over the years, put a large collection of carnival medals together, which were however, not tagged.

I personally, never made a list of contents of the many cartons that made up our family effects - the letters, books, photographs, films, sound recordings etc., and in the ten years after I donated these to the city of Cologne, there had been nothing officially undertaken regarding sorting and cataloguing - in reply to enquiries over the years, Archive employees admitted they were underemployed. At the time of making the gift however, the custodian of depositaries did inform us, that a student of history would be allocated the task of making a case-study of the family history, for her or his dissertation, were we to agree to this; we were delighted but no-one got in touch. With little credibility, Frau Kaiser made the same suggestion, ten years later, when I was in Porz again, this time to film, on the 15th June. Now at last, the sorting and cataloguing has become a thing of necessity, being accomplished alongside the process of restoration-

Having photographed at the First Aid Centre in Porz on the 3rd June, I had an uncanny sensation while making a "before and after" comparison with photos that Eberhard Illner had taken in London ten years ago, of not yet packed articles and the cartons in my mother's flat, after she died (before he drove them back to Cologne, and the Archive). Amongst these objects were tape recordings that had also not been labelled.

Following the publication of my 2 articles, a TV journalist from Berlin got in touch about an interview. Before Achim Zeilmann came to visit me at home with his film team, we coincidentally met earlier on the same day, the 15th June, at the Archive's temporary warehouse, when we both had appointments to shoot. With 2 cameras, we separately filmed restorers and archivists, called upon from distantly located museums to assist - also volunteers at work, as they gave documents first aid, a revivication of sorts: dust was very carefully removed with brushes and limitless

amounts of damp documents were laid out to air, on endless shelves.

As I was filming the rows of various shelving units, my eyes fell upon a small pile of tape recordings, labelled in ink. It was the handwriting of my father, Peter Ury, who died in 1976. The likelihood that on this day I should chance upon these was highly improbable. His name was not to be seen on the jackets - only I could have identified them. I have great misgivings regarding future efforts by archivists to catalogue objects of the former Archive.

In his capacity as journalist Peter, had made these recordings (which were still in good condition), from the BBC Radio Third Programme, probably in the fifties or sixties: there was a Busoni piece and Richard Strauss' "Der Rosenkavalier" - most probably with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf in the title role, whom he had interviewed at the time (this taped interview was also part of our Archive material); and also an early recording of "The Cenci" by Berthold Goldschmidt, who had been conductor of the BBC Symphony orchestra; BG, as we called him, had been a close friend of the family and, like my parents, a Jewish refugee from Germany - we knew him in the years before his opera finally achieved great success, with a little help from his friend, the conductor Simon Rattle.

On this day, I discovered quite unofficially from Frau Kaiser, who works in the photographic department of the Archive that some of our photos have been recognised and saved. I heard the same, from another colleague, as I attended the opening on June 4th, of the exhibition "Fighting Right Wing Extremism", at the Nazi Documentation Centre. Kölsch glass in hand, I chatted with other beer-drinking officials, as a colleague, who had also previously worked at the Historical Archives, asked if I was the depositor of the families' Ury and Unger effects - he seemed to remember me from a meeting in the Archive at Severin Strasse, with Eberhard Illner ten years ago (this archivist, like other fellow workers, had only got out of the building on the 3rd of March this year, by a hair's breadth).

He assured me that many of our things have been saved, photos, he said. From the 60's, or 50's. I hoped these might also be photographs from before the war and asked if might interview him.

"I have to stay stum," he explained "that's what my supervisors have instructed me to do".

But whose purposes will this secrecy serve? If it is to take so many years to sort through and catalogue all the material, shouldn't the depositors receive some sort of official statement when something has already been found? I have not yet been invited to view our found objects but have been warned that full documentation of all the Historical Archives lost and hopefully re-found treasures could take up to 30 years.

In the Porz Storage spaces Dr. Max Plassmann, Archive official and Tanja Kaiser explained the various first stages of restoration: they have not yet discovered a way to successfully dry out very wet documents that had landed in ground water. In the rooms where documents were being dusted or dried, we had to wear facemasks to protect our lungs from hazardous substances released when the building crumbled. In fact in all rooms entered, we had to protect our entire bodies with synthetic, white suits. Later, Achim Zeilmann told me that all found documents have been covered in a layer of fine alkali dust that will inevitably cause them to decay. Zeilmann had also interviewed Heinrich Böll's son for the TV report, who spoke of the irony behind the fate of the Böll papers, which had survived bomb attacks and high water, only to go down with the Archive.

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2009 (18.7) Television interview (recorded 15.6) with Achim Zeilmann of Aspekte ZDF
"Hilfeschreie aus Papier" (Paper Cries for Help), 3 pm (repeated on days following): report on
the collapse of the Historisches Archiv (Historical Archives) Cologne (D)