

Franz Kafka: The unknown mountain of files

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During his time in Berlin, where he moved in September 1923, Kafka wrote more than is handed down in the estate.

(Photo: imago/UIG)

Documents confiscated by the Gestapo after 1933 have been waiting in the Federal Archives for years to be opened up. There could be unknown Kafka manuscripts among them - and a lot more.

Guest contribution by Hans-Gerd Koch

On March 23, 1933, the 29-year-old economist Ludwig Lask was arrested in Berlin "on suspicion of aiding and abetting the production and distribution of the illegal communist newspaper *Die Rote Fahne*". The Gestapo interrogated him for four days, but were unable to extract a confession from him, even under torture. In the days that followed, she searched the house of his parents, the writer Berta Lask-Jacobsohn and the neurologist Luis Jacobsohn, as well as the furnished room that Ludwig Lask and his wife Dora had rented, for incriminating material - also without success.

After his release, Lask continued his work for *Die Rote Fahne*, now at even greater risk because the so-called Enabling Act came into force the day after his

arrest. There were practically no longer any limits to the persecution of opponents of the regime and those declared to be opponents. Regardless of the worsening situation, Lask and his wife continued to produce and distribute leaflets and newspapers for the KPD. To avoid persecution, they kept changing homes.

On the morning of August 8, 1933, life in the underground ended with a search of the house at Pariser Strasse 13 in Berlin-Wilmersdorf, where the couple lived at the time. The Gestapo confiscated all the documents they found and arrested Lask again. He was taken first to the Columbia House on the edge of the Tempelhofer Feld, then to the Brandenburg concentration camp; he spent the last six months of his "protective custody" back in Columbia House, in stricter solitary confinement.

Dora had kept letters from her time with Kafka, but also manuscripts and notes on conversations

Undeterred by threats and violence, he was released at the end of March 1934, but was "under police supervision" and resuming underground activities was out of the question. Lask hesitated for a few weeks, not wanting to leave his wife and daughter, who was born in March, behind alone, then he decided to leave the country and illegally crossed the border into Czechoslovakia on October 28, 1934. In Prague he meets his mother Berta Lask, who has lived there since the summer of 1933 and is about to leave for Moscow. As a prominent KPD member, she was able to obtain an entry permit for her son from there after only four months. Ludwig Lask arrives in Moscow on February 28, 1935 and is assigned a position as a research assistant at the Marx Engels Institute.



Dora Lask, formerly Dora Diamant, met Kafka in 1923 at the Otsee and looked after him until his death in 1924. In 1932 she married the economist Ludwig Lask. Here she is in 1936 with their daughter Marianne.

(Photo: Lask Collection)

During this time, his wife Dora and their daughter Marianne lived with her father-in-law. In the spring of 1936, Berta Lask managed to obtain an invitation from the Soviet Ministry of Health for her husband, the neurologist and neuroanatomist Louis Jacobsohn. Jacobsohn is to continue his research at the University of Sevastopol, his daughter-in-law and granddaughter are allowed to accompany him. The Gestapo report on the Lask family notes that "the well-known Jewish professor and brain researcher Dr. Louis Jacobsohn-Lask left on February 11, 1936". In her luggage, Dora

Lask takes a hairbrush with golden bristles, the only souvenir she still has from her friend [Franz Kafka](#) , who died in 1924.

Dora Lask, née Diamant (also written as Dymant) was the last friend of Franz Kafka, whom she met in July 1923 on the Baltic Sea. She had looked after the Prague author, who was seriously ill with tuberculosis, from his move to Berlin in September 1923 until his death on June 4, 1924. From their time together, she not only kept 35 letters addressed to her, but also 20 manuscript books and conversation sheets from Kafka's last weeks of life, on which he wrote down his questions and answers after the doctors had imposed a ban on speaking.

Like Lask, Anna Seghers was arrested in 1933 and her texts were also confiscated

When Kafka's friend and estate executor Max Brod asked Dora Diamant for these manuscripts - following the instructions in his will - she claimed that Kafka had asked her to burn everything in his presence. A protective claim, as she later confessed. She hadn't been able to part with the manuscripts - and nine years later all was lost. After the first house search by the Gestapo, she had to confess to Brod on April 20, 1933: "Franz's things are gone. Letters, diary pages and everything else I had."



Ludwig Lask (1903-1973), husband of Dora Diamant.
(Photo: Lask Collection)

Everything else? It is possible that these were texts for a book project for which Kafka signed a contract with the Berlin publishing house "Die Schmiede" in July 1923. We know about this because the surviving contract for his last book, the volume "Ein Hungerkünstler", says: "As a result of this contract, the contract concluded between the author and the publisher of August 1st and 28th, 1923 loses its validity." Soon after signing the first contract with the smithy, Kafka had moved to Berlin, where he lived with Dora until March 1924. Apparently much more was created during this time than the texts handed down in the estate. After the confiscation in 1933, the manuscripts ended up in the Gestapo archives, which also included manuscripts from many other authors who were not on the side of the National Socialists. One of them was Anna

Seghers, a KPD member like the Lasks. She was also briefly arrested after the seizure of power, and her manuscripts were also confiscated, which are still considered lost today. But are they really lost?

How the Allied victors of the Second World War dealt with German booty files has long since become a separate field of research, which also investigates the whereabouts of these documents. In the decades after the Second World War, the search for manuscripts by Klaus Wagenbach and other Kafka researchers repeatedly ended at the Iron Curtain. Today we know that the Gestapo files were brought to Moscow in 1945 by the Russian secret service. From there they were sent back to the socialist brother state of the GDR as early as the 1950s .

As disorderly, never regularly archived material, they were kept under the responsibility of Department IX/11 of the Ministry for State Security (MfS) until 1990. Henry Leide, long-time employee of the Federal Commissioner for Stasi Records, writes in his book "NS Criminals and State Security. The Secret Politics of the GDR" (Göttingen 2005): "The MfS received the (...) directly from the SED party apparatus. At the end of February 1953, the MfS took over 369 Gestapo folders, 695 files from the Reich Ministry of the Interior and 27 file packages with Gestapo situation reports from the SED's central cadre registry of the Central Committee."

The huge bundle of files finally ended up in Main Department IX/11 of the MfS, whose last head, Lieutenant Colonel Dieter Skiba, was able to question Henry Leide. According to Skiba, "in the course of more than 20 years of activity [...] in HA IX/11, around 9,000 linear meters of archive material have accumulated". Because the return transfers from the Soviet Union took place successively until the 1980s.

Leide's questioning of Lieutenant Colonel Skiba showed that the files were handled from a secret service rather than an archival point of view: "Individual documents and sub-collections were archived one after the other for 'political-operative information activities, related collections were partly separated and signed arbitrarily'. The principle of provenance played a role in the development doesn't matter." A systematic search for documents confiscated during house searches, for example under the keyword "Lask", was therefore not possible at the time - and is still not possible today.

Descendants of confiscation victims are interested in these files
These huge files are now in the Federal Archives. According to an employee commissioned by the President of the Federal Archives, thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, they are still undeveloped or only partially developed. It is a treasure trove for historians, social scientists and literary scholars. The documents could provide information about many fates in the Nazi state, about entanglements with those in power. The unmasking of collaborators in the West German elite, but also among their own comrades, may have been one of the motives for the early transfer of the files to the State Security Service of the GDR.

Many questions can be asked of these untapped Gestapo files. What role did the Allies, especially the Soviet authorities, trophy commissions, intelligence services, etc. play in the recovery of cultural property - especially archives? How did the Soviet occupation authorities and the MfS deal with the Nazi archives between 1945 and 1989? What role did the group of political opponents of National Socialism and their legacies play in the GDR in the context of resistance research or so-called "cultivating tradition"? What exactly happened to the Gestapo files in the GDR?

In addition, there is a legitimate interest of the descendants of those affected by confiscation, because claims for restitution do not only apply to works of fine art. Kafka's manuscripts, for example, would have to be returned to his family, the descendants of his three murdered sisters, who have been trying since 1945 to ensure that his work is available to literary scholars.

Like the German Literature Archive in Marbach, the Federal Archive is part of the area of responsibility of the Federal Commissioner for Culture and the Media. The personnel and financial resources of both archives are not sufficient to unearth the treasures that could be hidden in the Gestapo files. The federal government should ensure that the mountain of files, which has been neglected for far too long, can finally be opened up through cooperation between the two institutions. If unknown manuscripts by Franz Kafka were found, that would be a sensation, but in view of the dimensions of the mountain of files, it probably wouldn't be the only one.

The author is a literary scholar and editor of the volume of letters in the Critical Kafka Edition published by S. Fischer.

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