The Schwitters portrait of Klaus Hinrichsen was one of six 2010 special issue stamps in the Isle of Man. Among the others are paintings by other internees – Herbert Kaden, Herman Fechenbach, Imre Goth and an artist known as Bertram.

The stamp with a cover value of 132p is a 1940 drawing of a violinist in Onchan camp, by the Austrian artist Ernst Eisenmayer. I first saw the drawing at the Sayle Gallery in Douglas, Isle of Man, in April 2010. The exhibition, a version of which had originated at the Ben Uri Gallery in London the previous year, was ‘Forced Journeys: Artists in Exile in Britain c. 1933–45’. For the Douglas show, I had loaned two works on paper, which had been my father’s and which he had saved from his year in internment. One was a woodcut by the artist Paul Humpoletz – an image of a Jewish New Year service held in the Palace Theatre, Central Promenade Camp, on 3 October 1940.

Later I found another print by Humpoletz in my father’s papers – a cartoon about life in the internment camp.

We – my sisters and I – also loaned a drawing of my father, made in Onchan camp in 1940 by an unknown artist. The signature is not legible, and even the expert on Jewish artists in exile, Jutta Vinzent, who has written a book on the subject, could not recognise it. It is a beautiful drawing which I think really captures my father’s character. The work itself is very large, and also unframed. I had had smaller copies made, so we could each have one, and it was one of the copies that was on display at the Sayle Gallery. It was also included – as was the Humpoletz New Year woodcut – when the exhibition transferred in June 2010 to the Williamson Art Gallery & Museum in Birkenhead. (Another lovely anonymous cartoon from Onchan – a tribute to my father, the camp’s postmaster, on his thirty-seventh birthday – is also in our family album.)

At the opening of the exhibition in Douglas I was captivated by three drawings by Ernst Eisenmayer, including the violinist. They hadn’t been in the original Ben Uri exhibition, which I’d seen the year before, and which showed six linocuts and three oil paintings of his. I learned from the curators of the exhibition that Eisenmayer was still alive, and that he would probably be delighted to hear from me. Through his
Austerity baby

Portrait of Arthur Wolff, Isle of Man internment camp, 1940
Birthday drawing for Arthur Wolff, Isle of Man internment camp, 27 November 1940
Ernst Eisenmayer violinist drawing, in Lawnhurst apartment
daughter in London I got his email address, and we began an online correspondence. My first email from him is dated 15 April 2010. At the time, he was living in Israel with his other daughter; a year later he moved back to Vienna. I got used to finding an email from him in my inbox first thing in the morning – often several times a week. I think he read The Guardian online as soon as he got up. Many of his emails were about the (in his view) deplorable state of contemporary art.

I saw the report and photos on the Turner Prize shortlist. Can it get any worse?

What a lot of pretentious mediocrity!

The art-scene; the most promising young artists for 2011 had one with three balloons on separate thin rods in a small room. The others I can’t even recollect. Three cheers for next one that features crap. And today a painter (!?) in Israel with abominations of figurative pictures. Anything you can do they can do worse.

I tend to get tired these days, so my correspondence has suffered a bit.

But today’s modern ‘art’ on the guardian has given me a kick.

what price art!? Wei Wei and all. To me it is either laughable or very sad.

And so boringly dull. Piles of this, piles of that and piles of something else.

And, when I happened to mention that I was writing a catalogue essay for an exhibition of the feminist artist Mary Kelly’s work: ‘I find Mary Kelly boring, pretentious and sentimental. Even Germaine Greer has admitted that she went well over the top.’ Never mind. The correspondence was very enjoyable, and I am pretty sure, anyway, that Ernst was trying to provoke half the time. In any case, he had agreed to sell me the Onchan violinist, and I was delighted about that. I took possession when it came off tour, after Birkenhead. Now it’s on my wall, near the piano and next to my Harold Riley print of the Hallé conductor, John Barbirolli, whom I remember so clearly from my teenage years in Manchester.

With a friend, I visited Ernst Eisenmayer in Vienna in September 2011 – a memorable few hours of conversation and looking through art books in his little apartment. He took us for lunch in the apartment complex, a Jewish retirement home, where we were interrupted several times by elegant ladies of various ages coming up to greet and kiss Ernst, in one case with a gift of some delicacies brought back specially from a trip. In the past couple of years the email has
gradually tailed off. Eisenmayer was already nearly ninety when we first began to correspond, and now, some years later, he has less energy for writing. Though I doubt that the passionate opinions about art and artists have abated.

The Isle of Man stamps commemorate an important moment in the island’s history – one which was so little acknowledged even a few years earlier that when, in 2006, I asked staff in the main hotel in Douglas, which had been requisitioned as a camp prison during the war, what they knew about those years it was the first they had heard about it. The Sayle Gallery exhibition, articles about it in the local press, and the stamp issue seem to have changed that to some extent. As for the stamps themselves – I have never particularly taken an interest in stamps, but I have recently come to see how fascinating they can be and what stories they can tell. William Kaczynski, another refugee to Britain from Nazi Germany, interned at the age of four with his parents on the Isle of Man, has put together over many years a unique collection of postal history artefacts, all relating to the lives of refugees in the 1930s and 1940s. With Charmian Brinson, a scholar of the German exile experience in Britain, Kaczynski published a large selection of the letters, postcards and stamps in a beautiful book in 2011. These include letters from concentration camps and internment camps, postcards sent from boats en route to emigration, identity cards of refugees, wartime letters (sometimes with the stamp of the censor) to and from family members interned in camps, and letters and other documents from the organisations that assisted refugees in various countries. To see the facsimile documents – the handwriting, the old-fashioned type, the multiple stamps, recording journeys and, often, failed deliveries – is to understand somehow in a more immediate way the familiar and generic stories of persecution and exile.

Another story about stamps:

‘What is that?’ he said and extracted a stamp with his pincers. I bent down over the table to see what stamp he had fished out, but I had known immediately and was momentarily struck dumb ...

‘What a queer affair,’ he said, ‘it’s an overprint, I didn’t know these existed. All the ones I know look different.’

‘Every stamp looks different,’ I said. ‘Let me have a look.’
Cover of Charmian Brinson and William Kaczynski, *Fleeing from the Führer: A Postal History of Refugees from the Nazis*, 2011
'S-a-r-r-e,' he spelt out, 'Sarre? I know there are specimens with this overprint,' he continued, but this one looks queer, don’t you think?’ ‘I’ve never seen any others,’ I replied, tense and attentive.

'It's a genuine stamp all right,' he said, held it up in his pincers and looked at it against the light. 'It's been post-marked.'

In fact, it is not genuine. The narrator of Hans Keilson's 1959 novel The Death of the Adversary (described as a 'lost classic' on its reissue in 2010), is here a young boy, swapping stamps with his friend Fabian. The time is soon after the First World War, the place is Germany. The book records the narrator’s experience of the rise to power of an unnamed ‘adversary’ through the 1930s until he (like the author himself, a German Jew) is obliged to flee to the Netherlands. In this early episode, he had been given a children's printing outfit for his birthday, and was trying his hand at overprinting on certain stamps. This, as he points out, was itself an interesting exercise in the postwar years:

At that time, stamps with overprints were the great fashion. It was some time after the end of the first world war, and the general uncertainty showed itself in the field of stamps by overprints of every kind. Overprints have a curious fascination for collectors. The postal administrations everywhere seem to know it and ceaselessly fan this desire.

As it happens, this is something I know about – and very specifically in relation to those ‘Sarre’ stamps.

My own family’s history can be read through stamps. In this case, it appears in the complex and fascinating philatelic transformations in the Saar area of Germany, which borders on north-eastern France. My father had a Saarland stamp collection, which at a certain point he handed over to my brother-in-law, a keen and knowledgeable stamp collector and dealer. From him I learned how the twentieth-century history of the Saar is legible in its stamps. As the territory changed hands, language, currency and denomination were all transformed, with overprinting sometimes registering recent or immediate shifts, and special issues recording particular events and appeals. And what was manifest in the stamps was, certainly for a few years in the 1930s, radically disrupting the lives of my grandparents and my father.

My father was born in 1903 in Fraulautern, a small town in the Saar region, not far from Saarbrücken, capital city of the region. The town was incorporated into the city of Saarlouis (renamed Saarlautern from 1936 to 1945), across the river Saar, in 1936. My father had left the Saar in 1923 to go to university, first in Freiburg and then in Berlin, but his parents remained there until 1939. Here is an early photograph of
Family wedding group, Germany, c. 1906
Bertha and Arthur Wolff, Fraulautern
Austerity baby
the family, taken somewhere in the region – the Saar or its adjoining territories. My father is the little boy at the front, in a sailor suit, so I suppose it dates from around 1906. His parents are at the top right, just below the man in a top hat. The other photo is of my grandparents’ house in Fraulautern.

Like its neighbours in France, Alsace and Lorraine, the Saarland has had a complicated history of national affiliation, before and during the twentieth century. Through the nineteenth century the region was divided between France, Bavaria and Prussia, before being incorporated into the German empire in 1871. After the First World War French troops occupied the Saar. From an online encyclopaedia:

The Saar Territory came into existence as a political unit when the Treaty of Versailles (1919) made it an autonomous territory, administered by France under League of Nations supervision, pending a plebiscite to be held in 1935 to determine its final status. France also received the right to exploit its coal fields until that time. When more than 90% of the votes cast in the plebiscite favored its reunion with Germany, the Saar was restored (Mar., 1935) to German control and constituted the Saarland prov.

The first new stamps, on sale on 30 January 1920, were contemporary German stamps, overprinted with ‘Sarre’, and with a heavy solid bar striking out the ‘Deutsches Reich’ at the bottom. A couple of months later, more German overprints were issued, reading ‘Saargebiet’, but not striking out the name of the Reich. The first definitive series for the Saar was issued in early 1921, showing local scenes.

Saarlouis is depicted in a new series of 1927, which borrowed designs from the earlier series, but in different shapes (and photogravure replacing roughly letterpress printed stamps).

In advance of the plebiscite (Volksabstimmung) of 1935, the Saar came under the German postal system, and four stamps were issued, perhaps to encourage voting.

Given the outcome of the vote, and the consequences for my grandparents, it is difficult not to regard this philatelic invitation with (if there can be such a thing) retrospective foreboding. Just as anti-Nazi Germans had left Germany for the Saar in 1933, inhabitants of the Saar now began to leave. But of course crossing the border into Alsace would not necessarily have done much more for enemies of the Third Reich than give them another five years of safety. And for those, like Leonie and her husband, who remained in that area of Germany – the Saar and its neighbouring regions, Baden and the...
Palatinate – forced expulsion to France in October 1940 was the beginning of a new nightmare.

After the Second World War, with the Saar under French administration again, the complicated sequence of stamp issues reflects the political changes (‘Saarpost’, ‘Saar’, German currency then French currency), ending with the return of the region to Germany in January 1957, and special stamps inscribed ‘Saarland’ and ‘Deutsche Bundespost’.

The Holocaust memorial in Saarbrücken, capital city of Saarland, is an example of what James Young has called a ‘counter-monument’. Designed by Jochen Gerz in 1991, it can be found in front of the palace in Saarbrücken, a former Gestapo headquarters. It is, however, invisible. The monument, entitled 2,146 Stones – Monument against Racism, consists of cobblestones, each inscribed with the name of a German Jewish cemetery, placed into the ground with the inscribed side face down. A kind of conceptual art, the project has the very serious purpose of refusing viewers easy assimilation – or avoidance – of the history told. It is one of a number of such memorials and monuments which engage the viewer in a more active kind of contemplation.

James Young describes the characteristics of this kind of work:

As the antimonument-makers show so well, by themselves memorials remain inert and amnesiac, mere stones in the landscape without life or meaning. For their memory, these memorials depend completely on the visitor. Only we can animate the stone figures and fill the empty spaces of the memorial, and only then can monuments be said to remember anything at all. In this way, we recognize the essentially dialogical character of Holocaust memorials, the changing faces of memory different visitors bring to them.

Another memorial by Jochen Gerz, in collaboration with Esther Shalev-Gerz, is the Monument against Fascism in Harburg in Germany (1986–93), a twelve-metre-tall, lead-covered steel column, on which visitors were invited to inscribe their names, and which – with seventy thousand signatures – gradually vanished into the ground, finally disappearing on 10 November 1993. As Young says: ‘In effect, the vanishing monument will have returned the burden of memory to visitors: one day, the only thing left standing here will be the memory-tourist, forced to rise and remember for himself.’ Its creators describe this as a Gegen-Denkmal – a ‘counter-monument’. In the
Saarland stamps

Jochen Gerz,
2,146 Stones
– Monument
against Racism,
Saarbrücken,
1991 (right)

Philately and chemistry
Ernst Eisenmayer, attempting to leave Austria for France after the Anschluss of 1938, was arrested trying to cross the border near Saarbrücken, and taken to the city’s prison. In his memoir, A Strange Haircut, he tells the story in comedic form, though he was kept there for weeks, and eventually sent to Dachau. He was released when his brother got him a visa to emigrate to England. His account of the prison, and of his two cell-mates, is cheerful throughout.

Sunday night was very much the same. It had been an uneventful day.

Bill and Bob had enjoyed their three after-meal-smokes. They had declared lunch, with the small piece of boiled beef next to the pell-potatoes and cabbage, a major feast truly worthy of a cigarette.

We had had a half hour’s exercise, walking round the confined yard. We had played a few games of 'mills' on the bench. The pattern had been scratched into the wood, and the 18 pieces were made of kneaded bread. An awareness, that another week had passed without any news from outside, or what may or might not be in store for us made us both drowsy and restless. We had spent a good deal of time lying on our backs, heads on folded arms, occasionally dozing off.

‘Till tomorrow, my lads!’ said Bill at lights out.

‘Another day, another week!’ said Bob.

‘Good night!’ said, I watching the bright strips on the ceiling.

After finishing high school in Saarlouis in 1923, my father went to the University of Freiburg to study chemistry. His first semester’s course registration list includes, rather surprisingly, an introduction to contemporary painting, with the famous art historian Walter Friedländer – scholar of the Baroque, teacher of Panofsky and later dismissed from his post by the Nazis. In the same semester, my father also registered for a class on ‘selected phenomenological problems’ with the founder of phenomenology himself, Edmund Husserl (also dismissed by the Nazis some years later). Disappointingly, neither professor has signed the Anmeldungs-Buch.
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Honorare: 1600
Erstgelder (Praktikantenbeiträge): 1400
Auditorienbeur: 100
Seminarbinder: 100
Bibliotheksbinder: 100
Lesehallenbinder: 100
Studenten-Krankenkasse: 100
Studentenausschuß und akadem. Hilfsbund: 100
Diebstahl- und Unfallversicherung: 100
Beitrag für "mensa academica" und Wohlfahrtsbeitrag: 100
"Leibesübungen: 100

Regelm. Teilnahme wird bescholnt.
Das A. f. L. i. V. Buchgelister

Freiburg i. B., den 19. 1923

Akad. Quästur:

Janet Wolff - 9781526121296
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Austerity baby

Jewish student fraternity, University of Freiburg, c. 1923-26

Arthur Wolff in fraternity uniform
Later, pursuing his studies for the PhD in chemistry at Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Berlin, my father also took a philosophy class with the illustrious Professor Wolfgang Köhler (another academic who would be gone ten years later, emigrating to the United States in 1935). In Freiburg, my father joined the Jewish student fraternity, Ghibellinia. Membership of a duelling fraternity always seemed a most unlikely thing for him, but I learn now that it was more or less a requirement. Miriam Rürup, scholar of German Jewish fraternities, has shown how student fraternities were an integral part of student life. Banned from membership of other fraternities, some of them explicitly antisemitic, Jewish students established their own societies from the late 1880s.

But chemistry was the main thing, the subject for which his wealthy American uncle Max was sponsoring him. He got his PhD in 1930, the year he started his first job at the Oranienburg chemical firm in Berlin, with a thesis on ‘parawolframate’. I wish I could say I know what that is, or what it was that he discovered. I also wish I could find his chemical element in Primo Levi’s ‘periodic table’. From the internet, I learn that ‘wolframite’ is an iron manganese tungstate mineral; and that ‘tungsten’ is also known as ‘ wolfram’, an element with the symbol W. Wolframite has the composite formula (Fe,Mn)WO₄. The nearest to it in Levi’s classic chemistry-themed memoir is iron, though actually I can’t find any Fe in the many formulas and equations in my copy of the thesis, so there is little profit in pursuing this connection. In fact it is in Primo Levi’s other writing that I discover suggestive links and associations, though in The Periodic Table we find a very beautiful formulation of what chemistry meant to him. It comes in the early chapter on hydrogen, and recounts a time, when he was sixteen, when he and his friend Enrico gained rather unauthorised access to the laboratory, where their experiment ends with the lab ‘filled with a choking fog’.

We had no doubts: we would be chemists, but our expectations and hopes were quite different. Enrico asked chemistry, quite reasonably, for the tools to earn his living and have a secure life. I asked for something entirely different; for me chemistry represented an indefinite cloud of future potentialities which enveloped my life to come in black volutes torn by fiery flashes, like those which had hidden Mount Sinai. Like Moses, from that cloud I expected my law, the principle of order in me, around me, and in the world.

By 1941, by now at university, and in the context of the new political realities, he lost faith in chemistry as the source of certainty:

Chemistry, for me, had stopped being such a source. It led to the heart of Matter, and Matter was our ally precisely because the Spirit,
dear to Fascism, was our enemy; but, having reached the fourth year of Pure Chemistry, I could no longer ignore the fact that chemistry itself, or at least that which we were being administered, did not answer my questions.

Later, as is well known from his memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* (also translated as *If This Is a Man*), being a chemist saved his life, when he was employed in the Buna chemical plant at Auschwitz.

I am really no more interested in chemistry than I am in philately. And yet the subject keeps drawing me in. It isn’t just that it was my father’s profession, I think. In some research I did recently on the history of Manchester, specifically the involvement of cotton manufacturers and calico printers in the development of art education, I learned fascinating things about the German dye industry, and the centrality of immigrant German dye-experts in both manufacture and the nascent university education in the city. And then my interest in colour – blue and otherwise – led me to read about the history of synthetic dye. Which turned out to link back to my father’s job in Oranienburg in the 1930s, through the figure of Friedlieb Runge. Once you start reading about chemistry in Germany, it also becomes unavoidable to confront the implication of the profession with the politics of the Third Reich. In *The Alchemy of Air*, Thomas Hager follows the doomed trajectories of the brilliant chemists, Fritz Haber and Carl Bosch, whose careers began with distinction (including, as it happens, discoveries relating to synthetic dyes). In the early twentieth century, they both worked for BASF, which had started as a dye company in the 1860s. In 1925, BASF merged with two other companies to found IG Farben.

It became official in the fall of 1925 under the name of Interessengemeinschaft Farbenindustrie Aktiengesellschaft (literally the Interest Community of the Dye Industry, Inc.), an unwieldy name that the public quickly shortened to IG Farben, or, simply, Farben. Farben was, at the moment of its birth, the largest business in Europe, the largest chemical company in the world, and the third-largest business organization of any sort, measured by the number of employees, on the globe (bested by only U.S. Steel and General Motors).

IG Farben’s part in the Nazi regime, and in the concentration camps, has long been known. The company was ‘Nazified’ in 1937, and all Jewish directors removed. It conducted chemical research in the concentration camps, as Esther Leslie and others have recorded. And IG Farben owned more than forty per cent of the company, Degesch, which produced Zyklon B, the prussic acid mix used in the gas chambers. Neither Haber nor Bosch was involved directly in any of this
work – in fact Haber resigned as head of his research institute in 1933, rather than obeying the directive to dismiss all his Jewish staff. And yet the perversion of his work could not be prevented. In the First World War, Haber’s research had been essential for the development of gas attacks and chemical warfare, and for this collaboration he was briefly cited as a war criminal, moving temporarily to Switzerland in 1919 to avoid prosecution. But the fact that his research on insecticides had some role in the development of Zyklon B cannot be laid at his door. He died in 1934, Bosch in 1940. Both had been awarded the Nobel Prize, Haber in 1919, the very year he expected prosecution, and Bosch in 1931.

In 1942, IG Farben built a factory to produce Buna substitute rubber, needed to help the war effort. Esther Leslie describes it:

The SS supplied the bunks. The SS also supplied the guards. IG Farben contributed factory police. The SS took on the surveillance, discipline and supplies of inmates. Auschwitz IV had all the features of other concentration camps: watchtowers, barbed wire, sirens, armed guards ... Thirty-five thousand prisoners were deployed in the Buna plant of IG Farben in Auschwitz-Monowitz.

Primo Levi spent nearly a year in Monowitz, from arrival in February 1944 until the liberation of Auschwitz in January 1945.

Every morning we leave the camp in squads for the Buna; every evening, in squads, we return. As regards the work, we are divided into about two hundred Kommandos, each of which consists of between fifteen and one hundred and fifty men and is commanded by a Kapo. There are good and bad Kommandos; for the most part they are used as transport and the work is quite hard, especially in the winter, if for no other reason merely because it always takes place in the open. There are also skilled Kommandos (electricians, smiths, brick-layers, welders, mechanics, concrete-layers, etc.), each attached to a certain workshop or department of the Buna.

When, after a few months, a Chemical Kommando was formed, Primo Levi was transferred to that. Managing to avoid a major ‘selection’ (that is, for the gas chamber) in October, he was saved again by fortune in January, when he escaped the ‘death march’ because he was ill with scarlet fever. After his return to Italy – itself a difficult journey taking another eleven months and related in his second book, The Truce – he resumed work as a chemist. He returned to the house – number 75 Corso Re Umberto in Turin – where he had been born, where he had lived most of his life, and where he remained until his death in 1987.

From 1948 he worked at a chemical business specialising in varnishes and paints, retiring in 1977 to devote himself full-time to writing. In one
of the last essays he wrote before his death, ‘The spider’s secret’, he reflects on his professional life:

It seems strange to many people, and it is beginning to seem strange to me as well: for thirty years, that is, for the entire active center of my life, I’ve worked at producing varnishes – liquid substances that, when spread in a thin layer, after a certain period of time, become solid, either spontaneously or when heated. It seems to me just as strange that varnishes are displacing Auschwitz in the ‘ground floor’ of my memory: I realise this from my dreams, from which the Lager has by now disappeared and in which, with increasing frequency, I am faced with a varnish maker’s problem that I cannot solve.

As for writing and chemistry – in an interview with Philip Roth that same year, 1986, he says: ‘I worked in a factory for almost thirty years, and I must admit that there is no incompatibility between being a chemist and being a writer: in fact, there is a mutual reinforcement.’

In 1937, realising he needed to leave Germany, my father began to apply for jobs abroad, writing to chemical companies with which his employer, ORACEFA, had connections. Amongst these were two in Italy – one in Milan and one in Pisa. In his letters, he gives his qualifications and describes his expertise. To Dr Sessa, at Industria Applicazioni Chimiche in Milan, he says only that he wants to leave his job ‘for personal reasons’. A reference from ORACEFA on his behalf is a little more specific, though peculiarly (if understandably) bland in giving the real reason: ‘Our chemist, Dr. Wolff in Oranienburg, who has been with us since February 1930 and whom you perhaps remember from your visits to Oranienburg, intends, as a non-Aryan, to leave Germany and start a life abroad. He has decided on Italy.’

Clearly it didn’t work out for this particular move, but it’s an interesting thought that my father might have continued his own work as a chemist in Italy instead of England.

In September 1994 I was in Berlin for a conference on art education, and took the opportunity to visit Oranienburg – the last stop on the S-Bahn north of the city. From my father’s short memoir I knew that he had lived at Königsallee 22 – later, as he explains, to save his landlady embarrassment at having a non-Aryan in her house, he moved in with a Dr Baerwald and his wife at Markgrafenstrasse 2. Having these addresses proved not to be much help in the new Oranienburg.
10.6.1937

Herrn
Dr. L. Sessa,
m.Br. S.A. Industrie Applicazioni Chimiche,
16, Via Ariceto,
Mailand (1/40) / Italien.

Sehr geehrter Herr Doktor!

Betn.: Dr. Arthur Wolff.

Unser Chemiker, Herr Dr. Wolff in Oranienburg, der seit Februar 1930 bei uns ist und dessen Sie sich vielleicht aus Ihren Besuchen in Oranienburg erinnern, beabsichtigt, als Nichtarier Deutschland zu verlassen und sich im Ausland eine Existenz zu gründen; seine Wahl ist auf Italien gefallen. Herr Dr. Wolff kennt unseren Betrieb in Oranienburg.
Austerity baby

Oranienburg Chemical Factory (Oracefa), 1930
When I got home (Rochester, New York), I wrote a long letter to my sisters to tell about my search:

Neither of his streets was in the map. So I first assumed that the town had been bombed in the war and totally rebuilt ...

Before I got there, I’d realised something else – that of course the street names wouldn’t be there any more because they were both royalist names. So the East German city government would have given them new names. There were plenty to choose from on the map I’d bought – Leninallee, August Bebel Strasse, Strasse des Friedens. (Anyway, re-reading Dad’s book on the train, I remembered that Königsallee had been re-named Adolf Hitler Allee – which I assume had been changed since the war.) So then I thought perhaps everything was still there, but with new names.

I’d been told to find the Kulturamt at Schlossplatz 2, which didn’t exist either on my map. So in Oranienburg I asked and got directions, and realised that (of course) the names had all changed again after reunification. So I bought another map. (I ended up with 3 Oranienburg maps.) Schlossplatz had been Platz des Friedens. I found it – the office was in the castle itself (which Dad talks about, and which seems to be pretty much as it was in his day) ... The castle was mostly derelict and empty, with signs of some redecoration in a few rooms. I eventually found Frau Herzberg, who was sitting down having coffee and cakes with a woman in an overall, who looked like the cleaner ... Didn’t speak English, of course (being east not west German), so I had to mobilize my German, which seemed to work OK. The cleaner turned out to be (I think) another employee of the Kulturamt, because they both started rushing around looking for old maps and information – so did another woman (with heavy makeup and a beehive hairdo) who came in and immediately ran out again in search of other information for me. Eventually they told me that Königsallee is now Bernauerstrasse – the main road through the town, which I’d walked along from the station to the castle; that Markgrafenstrasse is Freiburgerstrasse, near the station on the other side; that ORACEFA is now a Dutch chemical factory called Byk; and that Runge’s house is no longer there, but that there is a memorial to him on a nearby street ... However, I also found out (realised in walking through the town anyway) that Oranienburg had been heavily bombed in 1945, and that both dad’s original addresses had gone. That’s why I’m sending you photos of unattractive housing and shopping developments.

From one of the books they gave me – a photo of ORACEFA in 1930.

I was right about the bombing. There were three American bomber raids, in March 1944, and March and April 1945, in which hundreds were killed.
and much of the town destroyed. According to Spiegel magazine, on 15 March 1945, 612 aircraft flew on a mission against Oranienburg, which was an important SS command centre; in forty-five minutes, a total of 4,977 explosive bombs and 713 incendiary bombs were dropped. A few postcards I bought there, and the photographs in the books given to me at the Kulturamt, are all I have to give me an idea of what it was like when my father lived there from 1930 to 1938.

Odd Nansen also experienced the bombing of Oranienburg, described in his wartime diary, *Day after Day*. Arrested by the Gestapo in January 1942 as member of the resistance in Norway, he was held first in the Grini prison camp and then transferred in October 1943 to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, where he remained until March 1945. I knew the camp was near Oranienburg but, as I wrote in my letter to my sisters, I was shocked to find it was only a fifteen-minute walk from where my father lived. Nansen records the raid of 15 March 1945:

Then came the alert, and one of the heaviest raids we have ever witnessed. It was on Oranienburg, and the camps and buildings in the immediate neighbourhood of Sachsenhausen were levelled with the ground.

From the moment the first bombs dropped, we realised that this was more our concern than usual. For in general we’ve got used to taking very little notice. But the bomb-thuds this time were not to be stifled. At every deafening crash, and one had the impression that whole showers of bombs were coming down, the huts shook so that everything hanging on the walls or standing loose on shelves fell to the floor, and every moment we were expecting that the roof would lift in the blast and the walls collapse on us. But they stood up, for a wonder. The raid lasted two hours – that is, it didn’t leave off, only quietened down a bit, and the planes stopped coming; otherwise it’s still on, twenty-four hours later, and has been all the time, with an unbroken series of exploding time-bombs. During the raid the whole of Oranienburg and district, up to this camp, was larded with bombs, a large proportion of them time-bombs. All night long colossal explosions have been shaking the huts in all their joints.

On 18 March, three days after the raid, Nansen writes that time-bombs were still exploding:

The condition of Oranienburg is said to be indescribable. Thousands of people were killed. Dead men are lying in the ruins, and bits of people lying everywhere. They have no water or electricity. We are without them in camp as well, and the lavatories can no longer be used.
Earlier in the diary he records his arrival at the camp, which has echoes of the accounts of arrival at Gurs camp, where Leonie arrived three years earlier:

We were in cattle trucks, tired and stiff after a night and a day without sleep or rest. The train stopped at a station with a jerk. A board said: Oranienburg ... Then suddenly the whole train moved on again. It didn’t stop till we reached another station, which said Sachsenhausen and was some distance from Oranienburg. There we were ordered out ...

We were lined upon the platform in three ranks and counted ... It was a country station with an elderly station-master, whose entire family was assembled at the door of the station building looking curiously at these prisoners from Norway. Up in the garret rooms on the first floor a married couple sat gazing on us. He in shirt sleeves, with a cutty pipe in his mouth, and she gaping eagerly, no doubt at the queerest of us, wanting to make out what kind of people these were. I don’t suppose it was the first prison transport she had gazed on from that window.

In his memoir, my father writes that his Works Director, Dr Kurt Lindner, was arrested soon after the National Socialists took power in January 1933, and sent to Sachsenhausen, though soon released. In fact the camp at Sachsenhausen was established only in 1936, so it is more likely that Dr Lindner was sent to a camp set up in 1933 in an old brewery in Oranienburg, which was used for political prisoners in the first years of the regime. This closed the following year. Sachsenhausen too was for political prisoners, but also for ‘racially or biologically inferior’ people. Over two hundred thousand prisoners were held there between 1936 and 1945, and one hundred thousand of them died. From an online summary:

The camp was established in 1936. It was located 35 kilometres (22 mi) north of Berlin, which gave it a primary position among the German concentration camps: the administrative centre of all concentration camps was located in Oranienburg, and Sachsenhausen became a training centre for Schutzstaffel (SS) officers (who would often be sent to oversee other camps afterwards). Executions took place at Sachsenhausen, especially of Soviet prisoners of war. Among the prisoners, there was a ‘hierarchy’: at the top, criminals (rapists, murderers), then Communists (red triangles), then homosexuals (pink triangles), Jehovah’s Witnesses (purple triangles), and Jews (yellow triangles). During the earlier stages of the camp’s existence the executions were done in a trench, either by shooting or by hanging. A large task force of prisoners was used from the camp to work in nearby
Sachsenhausen Tower A
Sachsenhausen monument

Austerity baby
brickworks to meet Albert Speer’s vision of rebuilding Berlin. Sachsenhausen was originally not intended as an extermination camp – instead, the systematic murder was conducted in camps to the east. In 1942 large numbers of Jewish inmates were relocated to Auschwitz. However the construction of a gas chamber and ovens by camp-commandant Anton Kaindl in March 1943 facilitated the means to kill larger numbers of prisoners.

The camp was liberated in April 1945 by Soviet and Polish units of the Red Army, and for the next five years it served as a Soviet Special Camp, soon holding twelve thousand prisoners; in all, sixty thousand were detained over the five years before the camp was disbanded in 1950. The prisoners were mainly German officers, Nazi collaborators and anti-Soviet activists. At least twelve thousand of them died of malnutrition and disease during that period.

When I visited Sachsenhausen in 1994, it was only a few years after the reunification of Germany. I was struck by a prominent notice there (German only), which I copied down carefully:

Sehr geehrte Besucher,


Die Leitung der Gedenkstätte

My translation:

Dear visitors,

This exhibition was opened in 1961. It represents the views of the previous party and state leadership of the DDR. A completely new configuration of the exhibits is in preparation.

The management of the memorial

And, indeed, the later display, which I saw on another visit in June 2007, is radically different. For one thing, the fate of the Jews was no longer marginalised. The story the regime of the DDR wanted to tell was centrally one of the anti-fascist struggle and the heroism of the Soviet fighters. As Caroline Wiedmer says, ‘This ideal fighter was in no way related to the masses who had been persecuted for racial reasons, i.e., the Jews and the Sinti and Roma, nor indeed did it include women’. Moreover, the insistence on interpreting National Socialism ‘through the lens of a Marxist theory of fascism’ also obviated any focus on the primary victims of the regime.
The ramifications of this economic interpretation of fascism were that those aspects of mass killing that could not be perceived as having been economically motivated – in other words, the genocide of the Jews and the Sinti and Roma – were naturally threatening to the self-understanding and legitimization of the new state ... Since anti-Semitism and racism, according to the GDR paradigm, were at most lesser symptoms of class struggle, the destruction of the Jews was hardly mentioned in the exhibit.

The primary monument erected on the site, called the Monument of Nations, 20 metres tall, is intended to recall the heroic resistance of the prisoners of the camp, and the triumph of anti-fascism. In its focus, and in its aesthetic and political strategies, it could not be more different from the Saarbrücken memorial.

As for the observers at Oranienburg station, watching the Norwegian prisoners arrive, the evidence of local knowledge is elsewhere very clear. Another Sachsenhausen inmate, Jerzy Pindera, records an episode in the summer of 1941, when – rather incredibly – the concentration camp inmates were sent to work on a job in the middle of the town itself:

The whole day was an unusual one – for the first time since I had arrived at Sachsenhausen, I was assigned to a Kommando that was working in Oranienburg, a small city not far from the camp and not far from Berlin. We were building a sewer system in a residential area of the city. I was in shock, just from seeing the city. It was a typical residential neighbourhood, of single-family homes with neat lawns, small flower gardens, and with normal, properly dressed men and women walking along the sidewalks, and children playing in the yards. It was like a fairy tale, so far removed was it from what had become my reality ... I could sense that these people, the residents, were very uncomfortable around us. We did not belong, we felt that as well. We were intruding and not welcome, our presence was dangerous and only just tolerated. Some viewed us with contempt, some with open hostility. I also saw embarrassment and confusion in the faces of some who passed by. I suppose we did not look like the hardened criminals they have been told we were.

A melancholy afterthought on the question of stamps in the period of exile. Or rather, here, a question of lack of stamps. Among the papers kept by Leonie’s daughter, Eri, in New York – mostly letters from Leonie in Gurs and Marseilles – is this much-travelled envelope.
Envelope for 13 October 1941 letter
Meine liebe Butti!

Ich komme gerade aus einer Stelle, die nur ein Tag gedauert
denn es hat mir nicht gefallen. Ich konnte kaum los kommen, denn sie wollten
mich kaum gehen lassen, & musste allerlei Aussprechen benützen, um wegzukommen. Ich
wartete nun auf Willy, der natürlich noch keine Ahnung hat, dass ich schon wieder
zu Hause bin. Nun es findet sich schon wieder was anderes. Jedenfalls habe ich
in diesem einen Tag sehr zu verdient, um dafür ein Paket an Dich zu bestellen.
Ich habe nämlich gestern noch eine weitere angefangen ein Paket ab Lisbon
für Dich bestellen mit allerlei guten Sachen, wenn es nur auch ankommt. Eine
Frau Dr. Ehret, die früher auch zuhören hat in Auswanderungsfragen, nahm die
Bestellung hier an, & bestellt es per Kabel durch das Rote Kreuz in Portugal.
Sie sagte, dass es etwa in 4 Wochen bis 2 Monaten dort ankommen sollte. Sie selbst
erinnert sich Deiner, & hat auch selbst noch Verwandte dort. Wenn es klappt, san-
de Dir öfters durch sie was. Es soll enthalten: 450 Gramm Kuchen, 360 Gramm Kakao,
600 Gramm Butterdosen, 750 Gramm Schokoladenrinden, 1000 Gramm Honig, 800 Gramm

Austerity baby
It is pretty difficult to read all the stamps and the handwritten addresses (and readdresses). As far as I can see, it is an air mail letter from Eri Kahn (by then Mrs William Cohen) in New York to her mother, Leonie Kahn, in France. It is sent from New York to the Gurs camp in October 1941. Someone has forwarded it to Leonie at the Hotel du Levant in Marseilles (where we know she went in December 1941), so the letter perhaps arrived too late in Gurs. But it seems Leonie never got it – it was returned to Eri in New York, with a flurry of stamps and dates – right up to one of 2 September 1949! At the top right, on the front of the envelope, it says ‘Parvenu Oloron sans timbres’. Oloron is the small town near Gurs, probably the access point for mail to the camp in Gurs. The letter is still inside the envelope, at least the first page. Eri tells her mother she has just sent her a package via Lisbon, ‘mit allerlei guten Sachen’ (with all kinds of good things) – 450 grams of cake, 360 grams of cocoa, 58 grams of sardines in oil, 750 grams of chocolate, 400 grams of tuna, 900 grams of marmalade, 450 grams of honey. She tells her mother the packet is for her alone, and not to share. She speaks about trying to get the requisite papers for Leonie, about her husband Willy’s plans to go to Washington on her behalf. A year after her father’s death in Gurs, she says how sad it is that he can’t be there to share Leonie’s difficulties with her. And offers a sad reflection: ‘It is often like a dream for me when I look at the picture of you both in front of me on my writing desk, only four short years before my departure.’

I don’t know whether the non-delivery was because it arrived too late to catch Leonie in Gurs or – perhaps more likely – because the letter arrived ‘sans timbres’ – without stamps.
George Romney, The Spinstress: Lady Emma Hamilton at the Spinning Wheel, 1782-86

Austerity baby