

Franz Kafka and the Third Reich in Berlin

compiled for the Stiftung Topographie des Terrors, Berlin

**by the Kafka Project, San Diego State University,
San Diego, California**

Kathi Diamant, Director

BERLIN:
Until 30 Sept 1998:
Margaretenstrasse 20
12203 Berlin
(30) 832 49 27

USA
4527 33rd Street
San Diego, CA 92116
Telephone: 619 528 1108
Fax: 619 528 1678

email: kdiamant@mail.sdsu.edu

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Introduction:

Franz Kafka died in a small sanitarium outside Vienna in 1924, nine years before the Nazis came to power in Germany. Nevertheless, the personal and literary history of the now internationally famous Jewish writer from Prague is inextricably bound up with the Nazi reign of terror, and with the ensuing political oppression in the Eastern Bloc countries. Under both the Nazi and Communist regimes, Kafka's writings were banned as "subversive." In 1934, Kafka's handful of published stories were branded as an example of "degenerate Jewish influence on German literature," and were burned in the infamous literary conflagration in Opernplatz on May 10. Had Kafka not died prematurely of tuberculosis at the age of 40, -- or had he lived, and not emigrated to Palestine, as was his dream -- he most probably would have met the same fate as his three sisters, all of whom died in Hitler's concentration camps.¹ But even death could not keep Kafka from the clutches of the Third Reich. His last letters and diaries, a literary treasure, were confiscated by the Gestapo in 1933.

Many scholars argue that Kafka's surrealist writings were prophetic, a vision of the coming horror of Hitler's Holocaust and Stalin's murderous oppression. In fact, Kafka's personal correspondence and diaries add weight to the claim. In October 1923, shortly after moving to Berlin, Kafka wrote to his friend Max Brod in Prague, "But there is a certain justice in being associated with the fate of Germany, like you and me." The books of Max Brod, Kafka's literary editor, would also be burned ten years later. Brod himself survived by emigrating to Tel Aviv in 1939, where he died in 1968.

1. Kafka: Berlin 1923-24

1.1. "A Free Life in Berlin"

Franz Kafka moved to Berlin in late September 1923 to live with a young Eastern European Jewish immigrant named Dora Diamant.² This was, for Kafka, the culmination of a long cherished dream. As he had written several years earlier to his former fiancée in Berlin, Felice Bauer, "I would gladly have a free, peaceful life in Berlin prescribed for me, but where is a doctor with such authority to be found?" Considering

¹Kafka's younger sisters Elli and Valli and their husbands were arrested by the Germans occupying Czechoslovakia in October 1941 and deported to the Jewish ghetto of Lodz in Poland where they died in the mass murders of August-September 1944. More is known of Ottla's fate. Kafka's youngest (and favorite) sister was exempt from the deportation law as the wife of an Aryan. Nonetheless, she registered as a Jew and shortly after, in August 1942, was deported to the concentration camp at Theresienstadt, where she volunteered to accompany a transport of Jewish orphans whom the Nazis announced were being sent abroad. Instead the transport was sent to Auschwitz, where all, including Ottla, died. (From: Mailloux, Peter, *The Life of Franz Kafka*. Associated University Presses, 1989, p. 567.)

²In the mid-1920s, after Kafka's death, Dora changed the spelling to "Dymant."

the sad state of Kafka's health that autumn, the move was, as he said, "a foolhardiness, comparable to Napoleon's march to Russia."³

Nevertheless, Kafka made the leap of faith with the encouragement and support of the 20-year-old Dora Diamant⁴, a volunteer-worker in the Jewish Peoples Home (Jüdisches Volksheim) of Berlin, whom he had met earlier that summer at the Baltic Sea. Kafka arrived in Berlin at the height of Germany's phenomenal inflation crisis, when a pound of butter could cost a million marks or a newspaper, 150 million marks. In seven months, Dora and Kafka moved three times.⁵ The rent on their first apartment, a furnished room in Steglitz, leapt from 28 crowns to 70 in September, and soared to 180 by October. Ironically, despite the growing anti-Semitism and political violence, Kafka and Dora found a peaceful idyll together in the midst of one of Berlin's most turbulent periods. Kafka wrote two of his better-known short stories during this time, "A Little Woman" and "Der Bau."

Unfortunately, Kafka's health continued to decline, and by mid-March, 1924, Kafka was forced to leave Berlin and enter a sanitarium near Vienna. With Dora by his side, he died ten weeks later of tuberculosis of the larynx, and was buried in Prague on June 11, 1924.

1.2 "Everything is to be burned."

After Kafka's death, Max Brod found two notes addressed to him in Kafka's desk, demanding that all his unpublished works be collected and destroyed. "Everything, in journals, manuscripts and letters, ...without exception, everything is to be burned,"⁶ Kafka wrote. Although Brod clearly did not follow his friend's implicit instructions, Dora came closer to fulfilling Kafka's demands. Dora admitted to having burned some of Kafka's writings, at his insistence, near the end of his life. But when Brod asked her for any of Kafka's remaining writings or letters to her, Dora lied. While insisting that she had complied with Kafka's wishes and burned everything, Dora secretly kept some thirty-five letters Kafka had written to her, as well as his last diaries.⁷ Despite a growing interest in Kafka over the next decade, Dora steadfastly clung to her claim. Unfortunately, her lie led to a tragic loss which has yet to be rectified or resolved.

³ Letter to Oscar Baum, 26.9.23. See "Berliner Morgenpost," 7 Juli 1998 (enclosed.)

⁴ By most accounts, including hers, Dora Diamant was only nineteen when she met Kafka in Müritz at the Ostsee in July 1923. However, Gestapo files list her birthdate as 1898 (not 1903) and her husband's SED files indicate that she was born in 1900, which is the date recorded on her death certificate in London, England.

⁵ In Berlin-Steglitz at Miquelstrasse 8 (September to November 15, 1923) and Grunewaldstr. 13 (November - January 1924); and in Zehlendorf (February 1 - March 15) at Heidestrasse 26-27, now Busseallee 7-9 (demolished in 1998.)

⁶ Postscript to the first edition of Kafka's *The Trial*, (1925.)

⁷ See *Der Monat*, June 1949, "Erinnerungen an Franz Kafka" p. 95 (enclosed.)

2. Dora Diamant (Dymant)

2.1 Life in Berlin, 1920-33

Seeking "the light in the West," Dora Diamant, the daughter of a respected Orthodox Hasidic family in Poland, came to Germany in 1919. She lived first in Breslau before moving to Berlin, where she worked as a volunteer with the Jewish People's Home, a Zionist organization established for the education of the children of Jewish refugees from Galicia. Dora also worked as a seamstress in a Jewish orphanage, where she lived. After Kafka's death, following his encouragement and urging, she pursued an acting career, and spent several seasons with a theatre company in Düsseldorf.

It is possible that it was in Düsseldorf that Dora met Berta Lask, the celebrated communist author and playwright, and her future mother-in-law. In the fall of 1927, Berta Lask's play, "Leuna 1921," *verboten* in Berlin for its political content, was performed at the Düsseldorf City Theatre.⁸ In any case, Dora who by now was spelling her last name "Dymant", was "very political" and "a strong socialist,"⁹ nevertheless joined the German Communist Party (KPD) in 1929. Three years later, "Comrade Dora Dymant" married Ludwig (Lutz) Lask, an economist, the oldest of Berta's four children.

2.2 Kafka's Lost Papers

According to the gesperrt SED files of Dora's husband, Ludwig "Lutz" Lask (1903-1973) joined the KPD in Berlin-Lichterfelde-Ost in 1931. In early 1933, Lask organized the publication of "Die Roten Fahne" in his subdistrict of Steglitz, and edited the illegal publication from March until August, 1933. At the beginning of the second week in August, Lask was arrested in the sublet furnished room he shared with Dora. On August 8, 1933, their apartment at Pariserstr. 13, was raided by the Gestapo¹⁰ and "every scrap of paper they could get their hands on was confiscated," including the Kafka material.¹¹

Kafka biographer Ernst Pawel describes how Dora, "disconsolate and hysterical with remorse, confessed her folly and appealed for help to Brod, who immediately mobilized the Prague poet Camill Hoffmann,¹² the cultural attaché at the Czech embassy in Berlin. Hoffmann was informed by the Gestapo that the mountainous stacks of paper confiscated in those first days of Nazi rule had already reached such monstrous proportions as to defy all rational attempts at locating a specific document." Since then, the thirty-five Kafka letters and other papers have been considered lost. "For all we know," Pawel wrote in his 1984 biography, "those mountains are still there...being sifted, indexed, and filed in the bowels of some bomb-proof archives beyond the Berlin wall, and may yet disgorge further incriminating evidence in the trial of one Franz Kafka."¹³

⁸ Bundesarchiv, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR, (Lichterfelde) Band: DY 30/ IV 2/ v.1003.

⁹ Betty Kuttner Interview, by Hanny Lichtenstern, London, 16.8.95.

¹⁰ Bundesarchiv, Band: DY 30/IV 2/11/v.1556 (biographies enclosed.)

¹¹ Pawel, Ernst, *Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka*. Vintage, 1984, p. 439 (page enclosed.)

¹² One year later, Camill Hoffmann's poems were also burned in the Opernplatz bonfire.

¹³ Pawel, E. (enclosed.)

2.3 Dora's Legacy

In March 1934, Dora gave birth to a daughter, Marianne Lask, in Berlin. Shortly thereafter, ("because of the life-threatening illness of his wife, Dora") Lask was released from prison, and fled to Russia. In 1936, traveling in the company of her father-in-law, Dora and her daughter joined the rest of the Lask family who had already immigrated to the Soviet Union. The idyll in the Worker's Paradise was short-lived. In 1938, Lask was swept up in Stalin's purges, and was sent to the Gulag on suspicion of spying. Dora never saw him again.

In 1939, when Marianne became seriously ill with complications from scarlet fever, somehow Dora was able to leave the Soviet Union to seek medical attention for her. They reached relative safety in England in April of 1940, only to be arrested as enemy aliens and sent to an internment camp on the Isle of Man. Following the war, Dora was a founder-member of the Friends of Yiddish, and worked as a Yiddish remembrancer until her death in London in 1952. Dora is buried in an unmarked grave in a Jewish cemetery in East Ham, on the eastern outskirts of London.

Marianne Lask survived her childhood illnesses, and in 1956 was reunited with her father in Berlin, after more than twenty years separation. Until his death in East Berlin in 1973, Lutz Lask remained a committed communist. Marianna Lask's Last Will and Testament, written in 1978, 25 years after Dora's death, bears testimony to her belief that Kafka's letters would some day be recovered. On the first page, Marianne Lask leaves to Mrs. Marianne Steiner, Kafka's niece and oldest living relative, "all correspondence relating to Dora Dymant and Franz Kafka....to add to the Kafka Archives as she thinks best."¹⁴ Dora's and Lutz Lask's only child never married, and had no children. Marianne Lask died in London at the age of 48 in 1982.

3. The Kafka Project

In late 1996, conversations began concerning an international effort to conduct a documented search for Kafka's missing letters and diaries between Mrs. Marianne Steiner, executrix of the Kafka Estate in London, and Kathi Diamant, a journalist and adjunct professor in the College of Arts and Letters at San Diego State University, who has conducted original research and written extensively on Dora Diamant since 1971. Subsequent correspondence with the Department of Western Manuscripts at Oxford University in England revealed the lack of any record or documentation for previous searches,¹⁵ other than the first attempt by Max Brod and Camill Hoffmann in 1933.

In March 1997, a petition was filed with Der Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR (Gauck Authority) requesting a search for the lost property of Dora Dymant on behalf of Marianne Lask, Dora's deceased daughter, and the Kafka Estate in London.¹⁶ A four-month research trip to Berlin was organized to correspond with opening of the Kafka Project's case.¹⁷

¹⁴Marianne Lask's Last Will and Testament, dated 6 June 1977 (copy enclosed.)

¹⁵ Bodleian Library Letter of 4 November 1997, enclosed.

¹⁶ Letter from Denton Hall, 20 Jan 1997 (enclosed.)

¹⁷ Letters, 21.05.97 and 10 Nov. 97 (enclosed.)

The Kafka Project produced an informational report, written in German, establishing what Kafka material is being sought, with descriptions for identification purposes. In order to provide context and more information to aid in the discovery of the missing papers, research would also be conducted on Dora's life in Berlin, leading up to the Gestapo raid of her apartment. Amongst the chief goals was to provide evidence of the theft, and to discover the destination of the Lask's possessions.

In early 1998, the Kafka Project, directed by Kathi Diamant and backed by an advisory committee of Kafka scholars, university faculty, researchers, information systems managers, and international project directors, became a nonprofit independent research program of San Diego State University in San Diego, California.¹⁸

3.1 Berlin: 1 June - 30 September 1998

Der Bundesbeauftragte (Gauck Authority) officially opened the case at the end of June 1998, but revealed very little.¹⁹ On the other hand, the Deutsches Bundesarchiv (Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR) has been of considerable assistance, providing research support with the Gestapo and SED files concerning Dora Dymant and the entire Lask family. The most exciting discovery to date has been a notice of property confiscation and loss of nationality order, dated 19 Januar 1938, issued by the office of Dr. Best, Der Reichsführer SS und Chef der Deutschen Polizei im Reichsministerium des Innern. Lask's name appears on page 2 and Dora's on page 3 of the four-page document. According to the order, the seizure of their property was executed through the Finance Office Moabit-West, Berlin NW 6, Luisen Str. 33/34.²⁰ Letters have been written to three departments of the Landesarchiv, requesting more information on the old records of the Finanzamt.

The Kafka Project is documenting in detail the strategy and actions taken in Berlin from 1 June to 30 September 30, and will produce a complete report at the conclusion of the research trip. The report and accompanying documentation will be on public deposit at the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, Berlin Jewish Museum, the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach, and San Diego State University.

3.2 Future plans

With the initial research completed and contacts established, the search is now just "heating up." It will be possible to pursue open leads as they develop on an ongoing basis. A research assistant in Berlin will be hired to continue the work locally in Berlin, and will communicate all results to the Kafka Project in San Diego, which will continue to fund the research efforts. The Kafka Project is committed to leaving no stone unturned until conclusive evidence is found concerning the fate of Kafka's lost papers.

¹⁸ Kafka Project documentation enclosed.

¹⁹ The case has since been closed. Letter of 12.08.98 enclosed

²⁰ Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde, Band R 58/3565 (enclosed.)