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Looted art

In the name of my father

Hans Sachs, a Jewish dentist, owned the world's most important collection of posters. It was looted by the Nazis and locked up by East Germans. The son is now intent on recovering this treasure from the state **by Kerstin Kohlenberg**

It smells of linoleum and harsh cleaners. The steps echo against the thick walls. Cold neon lights the floor. Behind five identical doors lies the treasure, now at the center of an all-out dispute. A security key is gotten. A door opens onto 24 closed grey metal drawer cabinets. They contain heavy folders with 100-year old posters, interleaved with acid-absorbing paper. The posters promote films, exhibitions, consumer products – they are a piece of German history reflected in the graphic arts of advertising. A collection that with its 12,500 posters was once the largest in the world and whose 4,000 remaining posters are estimated to have a value of several million euros.

It is the collection of Hans Sachs, a Jewish dentist, who brought this assortment together in the years between 1896 and 1938 when it was confiscated by the Nazis. After the war the posters were long considered lost but then turned up in an East Berlin basement and now have been housed for some time in the former Friedrich-Engels barracks in Berlin-Mitte, the poster storage facility for the Deutsche Historische Museum (German Historical Museum). The climate control equipment on the cabinets is ticking softly, but the tranquility is deceptive. A noisy quarrel has erupted, making the Sachs collection subject of a legal dispute. The thousands of posters may soon disappear from Berlin.

The son, Peter Sachs, is applying all legal means to force the release of the collection and bring it to the United States. The Berlin District Court is to decide on January 20. It will have to clarify many disputed issues: Does the son have a right to his father's posters even though he [the father] had already been compensated at the time when the collection still appeared to be lost? Or should the posters be retained for the common good? And: How could it happen that part of the collection was lost due to the sloppiness of the German Historical Museum? Who owns the art? That is the essence of the issue, 60 years after the war.

Without Hans Sachs poster art would not be what it is today

Peter Sachs is standing on his porch in Florida, smoking a cigarette. An old whirlpool bubbles. The next neighbor resides far away. Sachs wears sneakers and shorts. He looks

like an aged schoolboy. His father would have never worn such a getup. He came out of a well-to-do family of dentists in Breslau (Wroclaw today) who moved to Berlin at the end of the nineteenth century. Hans Sachs always wore three-button suits. He was a prominent citizen with an impressive beard. He had studied in the United State and wrote a number of standard works on parodontosis. However, the rest of his life belonged to posters. A film poster from France was the first in his collection at a time when he was still very young. Next came Toulouse-Lautrec posters, then Steinlen, Valloton, the now rare Beggarstaff and Lucien Bernhard posters. Sachs organized exhibitions and lectured. He collected signatures of the artists and published them in a book. Even now it helps art historians to determine the provenance of posters.

When the collection grew to 12,000 posters Sachs built a private museum in his house in Berlin-Nikolassee. In 1938 the Nazis confiscated his collection. Shortly thereafter Sachs was deported to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. It was lucky that his wife succeeded in getting him out. With 20 Mark in their pockets they embarked for New York. Without Hans Sachs poster art would not be what it is today.

Peter Sachs still stands on his porch. He lights another cigarette. He never succeeded in stopping the habit, perhaps because he does not have his father's iron discipline. Actually Peter Sachs is in many ways the exact opposite of his father. Until his retirement in 1994 he worked as a pilot. The father has now been dead for 44 years, Peter himself was 71 this year. Why is he suddenly becoming so involved with his father's collection? "Because I believed until now that the collection was destroyed in the war," the son says. "It is only a few years ago I learned from the Internet that it is in Berlin."

If he should win his case, he would have to return the restitution payment that is now the equivalent of about 600,000 euros. Should he lose, the court costs will come to close to 100,000 euros. However the son is not rich. Why is he doing this?

"I want justice," he says and then remains silent. For whom? "For my father. He wrote in his memoirs that the loss of the collection was the worst event of his life." Asked what he wants to do with the posters, he replies "I don't know yet" "Do you want to keep them here in your home?" "No, that would be much too expensive." So what is he going to do with them? "I haven't given any thought to that."

Hans Ottomeyer sits in a large, high-ceilinged office located between the Humboldt University and Berlin's Dom, the cathedral. A scarf covers his neck. A signet ring is on his finger. Since 2000 Ottomeyer has been the general director of the German Historical Museum and therefore the administrator of the Sachs collection. He does not believe what the son is saying. Could it be that the father never said anything to him about the rediscovery of the collection? At the latest since the *Art. Commerce. Visions* exhibition in the German Historical Museum in 1992 the poster collection could be found on the Internet. Ottomeyer is a man of books, of the bourgeoisie, educated in archeology, literature and art history. What he and Hans Sachs have in common is his devotion to German culture. Like Sachs he is a collector, albeit of thumbtacks.

Ottomeyer gets up and walks over to the large white bookshelf behind his desk which is not equipped with a computer. The wooden floor groans under his powerful figure. He runs his thumb over the yellowed jacket of an old encyclopedia. “It does not take long for the paper of posters to look like this if nobody takes care of them. Posters are not made to last more than a week but to be torn off after having been glued to the display space. Only a museum can keep printed paper safely.” Ottomeyer gasps for air. “The restitution process actually benefits only American lawyers, auction houses and historians. Very little is returned to the family, most ends up in auction houses.”

Ottomeyer feels very close in spirit to Sachs, the collector, and is therefore convinced that Hans Sachs would have wished that the collection remains in his museum. He also thinks he can prove that. Ottomeyer pulls out a copy of a letter which Hans Sachs wrote in 1966. After the collection was considered lost, Hans Sachs received 225,000 Mark in restitution from the German government in 1961. Five years later the collector got the surprising news that parts of his collection survived the war. 8,000 posters, wrapped in packaging paper, had been found in the cellar of a house on Clara-Zetkin Strasse in East Berlin and transferred to the German Historical Museum. And that is where they remained because the East German government, which saw itself as a victim of fascism, rejected the idea of paying restitution to other victims. The collection became a token in an ideological war that left Hans Sachs on the sidelines. The letter represented an attempt to get in touch with employees in the East Berlin Museum responsible for the posters. Sachs wanted to offer his cooperation in archiving the work.

Ottomeyer takes Sachs’ letter and reads aloud: “At the outset I want to emphasize clearly that I am not interested in such a cooperation from a materialistic, but merely an idealistic point of view. Some time ago I was paid a larger sum as indemnification by decision of a German court following years of negotiations. It covered all my claims.” Ottomeyer pauses and points to the sheet: “He typed the letter himself. The letter has a date and Sachs made a number of corrections by hand. It has the character of a will.” That is how it was also seen by the Limbach Advisory Commission which announced its recommendation in January 2007: Sachs had made no claims at that time. He had therefore wanted the collection to stay in the Museum in Berlin.

What did the collector really want?
What would he have decided?

“Of course he wrote something like that. Otherwise he would have negated all his chances to see the collection ever again,” says the son. “Besides he was already 85 at the time – an age not exactly suited to bringing a lawsuit.”

Peter Sachs is a shy person and only after you have listened for a while as he talks about his early years you begin to suspect the essence of the claim. His father was 56 when Peter Sachs was born in 1938. The son grows up in America during the fifties, at a time when the country discovered rock’n’roll and fast food, while the father cerebrally continues to live in Germany. In the rare cases when the parents speak German, all sentences begin with “the boy”. Because the boy has problems in every school in which

he is enrolled. He drives taxis and works as a salesman. “I was a loser,” says Sachs, and it sounds as if those times have still not passed. If you read the letters that the father wrote at the time to friends, it is understandable why the son feels that way: The letters are penned by a man who is absorbed in himself and his art (“Because I have been a collector since 1896, and since 1910 publisher of “The Poster” [Das Plakat], and of course also founder, publisher and author of its lead articles …), a man with whom only the friend and Lucien Bernhard, the graphic artist, got along.

“He never talked with me about his love for collecting posters,” says the son. “In essence, he never spoke about anyhing private with me.” Peter Sachs goes up the stairs to his bedroom and returns with an enamel box. In it is a titanium dental bridge made by the father as a student. It is the only object that the father bequeathed to his son. “If he still had his collection, wouldn’t he have wanted it for me, the son?” asks Peter Sachs. It sounded like a final attempt to bring the estranged father a little bit closer.

But wouldn’t he have to sell the collection ultimately? Perhaps, he says. Would your father have wanted that? Yes, says the son, because it was important to his father above all to have the collection exposed to the public. The Germans exhibited the posters only twice since the war. – What did Hans Sachs really want? The best for his son or the best for his collection? It sounds as if this question resonates between every sentence in this lonely house in Florida.

The response to the question what would be the best for the collection leads quickly to Robert Brown, a New York gallery owner. The gallery is located on the second floor on Madison Avenue, only one block away from Central Park. Robert Brown and Susan Reinhold are the two art dealers who were hired by Sachs’ attorney to evaluate the collection. Brown opens the door to a large bright residence decorated with posters in expensive frames. Brown takes a seat at the computer and brings up a program written for him by a friend of his. It has allowed him to track changes of the collection’s inventory for many years - like a climate researcher. That isn’t that simple because each Sachs poster has in the meantime acquired three inventory numbers. Brown has spent months staring at the abstract numbers. And while he was sitting at the computer he notices that, for instance, August Hajduk’s 1914 poster was still listed on the Museum’s site in 2005. Now it is missing like many others. Only 4,000 of the erstwhile 8,000 posters found in East Berlin still exist. “What happened to the rest?” asks Brown.

That several hundred posters found their way to the Ketterer Gallery in Munich during the eighties is known both to Brown and the German Historical Museum. A worker in the museum stole them. In 1988 three posters emerged at an auction at Christie’s in London and were sold there. Susan Reinhold, one of the gallery owners, learned from a colleague that after Germany’s reunification a worthless Aids poster was exchanged for a valuable poster from the Sachs collection. “How can Ottomeyer accuse Peter Sachs that he would sell the collection when Ottomeyer himself has no idea what has happened to half of it?” asks Brown.

3770 posters disappeared –
How could that happen to the Museum?

That is a question that is more than uncomfortable for Ottomeyer. That is why his museum is now working on systematically cataloging and overhauling the Sachs collection. After their discovery in East Berlin the posters had been simply assigned to the general collection, partly organized by topic, partly on the basis of artists or simply in keeping with the year they were published. The greatest difficulty is now, according to curator Andrea von Hegel, to find the Sachs posters among the more than 80,000 in the Museum's inventory. 4,230 Sachs posters have been identified until now. All bore the Sachs stamp or adhesive labels. And what about the remaining 3,770 posters? Andrea von Hegel shrugs her shoulders: "Perhaps they were designated as Sachs posters mistakenly."

Rene Grohnert, former assistant in the poster department and now head of the poster museum in Essen, knows that Sachs did not tag all posters because many were planned to be exchanged. "After so much time has passed it is almost impossible to determine what unmarked posters belonged to the Sachs collection. It could only be done with the help of Sachs' filing cards." But they disappeared also.

For the son this sloppiness resulted in an extraordinary situation: In 2005 his lawyers had received a list of the Sachs posters held by the Museum. From this list they selected one poster as representative of their demand to have the collection restored - "The Blonde Venus", a poster for the 1932 film by Josef von Sternberg starring Marlene Dietrich. The poster is estimated to be worth 13,500 euros. In response the Museum replied that the Blonde Venus was not a Sachs poster. It had neither a Sachs stamp nor an adhesive label. Can it be one of the unmarked posters from Sachs? On what basis was this poster once categorized as a Sachs poster? Who prepared the list? "Unfortunately I do not know the answer", says Andrea von Hegel. "Entire inventory books have disappeared; whole categories of numbers are lost. There are gaps for which there is no explanation. We have to live with what we have and try to establish a factual basis."

Hans Ottomeyer regrets the confusion but considers it completely normal for a museum that lived through reunification and various physical moves. He wants to safeguard the remaining collection, however, in the final analysis from gallery owner Robert Brown. His campaign against the museum has a single goal, Ottomeyer claims: "To transfer art from the museums to auction houses and galleries." To be sure, that is everything but desirable for a museum and art history of a country. But is that enough to deny a son his inheritance?

The best solution is likely to be a compromise: The posters remain in the museum and will be appropriately honored as the Sachs collection. The son gets additional restitution. However, to arrive at such a compromise, there has to be the right tone by all those involved and that is not the case: In the most recent letter exchange the Museum asserts that Hans Sachs was no longer even the owner when the Nazis looted the collection. In

fact, Sachs had transferred the posters to the Aryan banker Richard Lenz in the hope that the collection could survive the war. Yet, before Lenz could take possession it was confiscated by the propaganda ministry.

In accordance with the Washington Declaration of 1998 which governs the return of art looted by the Nazis, such forced sales are legally not valid. The government of the Federal Republic holds to this self-imposed obligation and encourages those dispossessed by the Nazis to report their claims. Why does the attorney for the Museum want to ignore this obligation? Legal nit-picking will decide this case, not the moral approach.

Peter Sachs closes his enamel box. “When at 22 years of age I finally knew what I wanted to do with my life, I asked my father for 5,000 dollars. I wanted to get a pilot license. Without hesitation, my father gave me the money.” He liked the idea. Apparently he thought his son capable of accomplishing something. Now Peter Sachs is retired and is again not really sure what he should be doing with his life. “I would have liked to know my father better,” says the son and lights a cigarette. Later he wants to call his attorney again.

[Photo caption:]

Together with many hundreds of posters **Blonde Venus**, published in 1932, is to be shipped to the United States if Peter Sachs (above right) and the gallery owner Robert Brown (lower left) have their way. Hans Ottomeyer of the German Historical Museum in Berlin wants to prevent that. The collection is housed in his Museum.