Will posters confiscated by Nazis from Einstein’s dentist be returned?

Hans Sachs checked Einstein’s molars. He also owned the world’s greatest poster collection, until it was stolen by Nazis in 1938. Today, his relatives may finally get it back. His great-granddaughter reports

Suzanne Glass

My great-grandfather was Einstein’s dentist. In a letter of recommendation, Einstein writes of the “extraordinary success of Dr Sachs’s treatments”. The list of his patients reads like a Who’s Who of the Weimar Republic. Throughout my childhood the powder-blue airmail envelopes from him fluttered to the doormat once a month. I knew that he lived in a place called New York, that he had run away from people who’d bullied him and that he used to love to collect things.

My grandmother would pore over postcards with me — of Toulouse-Lautrec and Gustav Klimt and Alfonse Mucha — and explain that her father had owned thousands of huge versions of such pictures in Berlin. By the time I was 10, I understood that Hans Sachs once owned the world’s largest poster collection: 12,300 works of graphic and commercial art that told a unique pictorial story of Europe before and between the world wars.

I remember asking my grandmother if he had taken his collection to New York. She said that was a grown-up’s story. Later I learnt that it had been stolen from him at gunpoint in 1938, on the orders of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda chief.

It was in 1898, when he was just 16, that Hans Sachs’s philatelist passions ceded to a passion for posters. He had been drawn one evening to “a new kind of advertising art”, in the form of a poster, on the walls of a schoolfriend’s room. The next morning he decided to start his own collection. In diaries penned from New York in 1957, he writes of the birth of his collection. “My father received three multicoloured lifesize prints of the great Sarah Bernhardt ... They were signed by Alphonse Mucha, a Czech artist. Perhaps to outbid my friend, I induced my father to let me have them for my ... embryonic . . . poster collection.”

During his years as a dental student, he would travel through Europe in search of posters. From these trips he brought back one-off and first-edition posters by Jules Chéret, Lucian Bernhard and Pierre Bonnard among others. They were integrated into his growing collection of German artists, who would include Kollwitz, Steinlen, Hohlwein and the Russian Kandinsky.

If the posters brought art from a monied milieu to the masses, they were also the first powerful advertising tool. In those hedonistic days at the turn of the century, they spoke of fashion, of film, of chocolate and of cabaret. Later they spoke of the First World War and then the rise of fascism.

Sachs had two professions: by day he would practise dentistry, by night he would sit in his study and catalogue his posters. In his twenties, he created the “Society for the Friends of Posters”, a community through which enthusiasts the world over could swap posters. Then he founded Das Plakat (The Poster), a magazine for graphic art. Helped by the artist Lucian Bernhard, Sachs wrote under pseudonyms of the burgeoning world of poster art. In 1913, he was awarded the “Great Golden Medal of the City of Leipzig” for promoting “understanding of an artistic means of advertising”. Then came the First World War.

Sachs was disinterested in his Jewish heritage. He had been baptised and considered himself a loyal German. He served as
an officer in the cavalry and for a couple of years his poster collection lay in his Berlin attic. But his enthusiasm was reignited by a fire that threatened the entire works. Thirty years after the fire, he wrote of the “difficulty and restrained emotions” he still felt when “the watchman called, and said, ‘Dr Sachs, the collection room is on fire’.”

The posters, protected by aluminium sheaths, were saved and Sachs vowed to build an entire annexe to house them. By the time he did, in the late 1920s, he had left my great-grandmother and married Felicia. A great beauty, she was both a dancer and his dental nurse. The collection now included not only the works from the turn-of-the-century Vienna Secessionist movement, with the new wave of European artists breaking away from the naturalism of their predecessors, but also a variety of new styles — Art Nouveau, Art Deco, German Symbolism and Expressionism. But as the renown of the collection grew, so too did National Socialism. The Society for the Friends of Posters dissolved; to be a member of a club founded by a Jew, albeit one in name alone, was unthinkable. In 1936, Sachs acquired a poster with the slogan “Hitler, Unsere Letzte Hoffnung — Hitler our last hope”, yet he remained unprepared to confront its implications. “It wasn’t easy for me to leave the country where the roots of my forefathers were firmly anchored; where landscape, language, art, literature, music and human relationships meant so much to me,” he writes.

Even after his dental licence was revoked, Sachs refused to leave Germany. “One question bothered me from dawn till dusk,” he writes. “What would become of my collection? The thought of parting with my posters seemed unbearable to me.”

Through the grapevine he had heard that Joseph Goebbels coveted his collection for his proposed new Museum of the Third Reich. On Kristallnacht, in November 1938, Goebbels’s henchmen ransacked Sachs’s home. “The blackest day of my life had begun,” Sachs writes, “With my own hands [at gunpoint] I took all 250 aluminium sheaths each containing 50 posters [and loaded them on to] three giant trucks. They were carried off, never to be seen by me again.”

At dawn, he was sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. He contracted triple pneumonia. His arms were lacerated from digging graves. An aesthete to the last, at nightfall Sachs would imagine he was staring at an orange sunset over the Matterhorn. “I won’t be in here long,” he would say. “My wife will get me out.”

Felicia did manage to secure his release after only 17 days. Sachs was literally kicked in the back by a Nazi boot and fell flat on his face on to a plane for London. From there he travelled by ship with his wife and one-year-old son Peter to the US. His friend Albert Einstein campaigned in vain for him to be allowed to practise dentistry without requalifying. In 1942, my great-grandfather graduated from Harvard Dental School. He was 60 years old. Sachs supported his family with the sale of 31 Toulouse-Lautrec posters, which he had managed to smuggle out of Germany in the mid-1930s. “Mr K of Baltimore took over my Lautrecs [for $500] and informed me that I might take a look at the posters any time I felt like it . . . I never did feel like it.”

In the 1950s, Sachs was told by the German Government that his poster collection had been used by Soviet soldiers to wrap fish and sausage meat. He accepted financial compensation. It took 12 years till my great-grandfather felt able to talk of his loss in writing a work dedicated to his family: The World’s Greatest Poster Collection: How it came into being and How it Disappeared From the Face of the Earth.

Then in 1970, the East German curator Helmut Rademacher stumbled over bundles of Sachs’s posters in the basement of the Museum for German History, the predecessor to the German Historical Museum. Informed of the discovery in 1974, my ailing and ageing great-grandfather flew to Germany for the first time since his release from Sachsenhausen. But Rademacher was denied permission by the museum director to cross the wall from East to West Berlin and my great-grandfather was not allowed into the East. At the time, there was no legal channel for the restitution of art stolen in the West Berlin and rediscovered in the Eastern Bloc. His premonition that he would die without seeing his collection again proved to be true.
Sachs never told his son Peter of the continued existence of a large part of his collection, and his wife refused to entertain any discussion of “searching” for them, fearing that she could lose the reparation payments on which she relied. It wasn’t until 2005, that my great-uncle, a retired US airline pilot, discovered the truth. When he demanded the return of the posters, the German Culture Ministry called upon the Limbach Commission to determine the rightful ownership. The museum’s director, Herr Ottomeyer said that if the works were returned to the collector’s son, he would “hawk them poster by poster”. Peter Sachs claims he would like the collection to remain as intact as possible.

In the event, the Limbach Commission ruled that the multimillion-pound Sachs collection should stay with the German Historical Museum, where it had been, for the most part in the archives, since the reunification of Germany. To justify the decision, a letter was produced that Hans Sachs had written to Rademacher when he feared he would never be united with his collection. “I trust that they [the posters] are in good hands,” he wrote. The commission inferred from this that they were carrying out my great-grandfather’s last wishes by keeping his posters in Germany.

“Yes,” says Matthias Druba, the lawyer for Peter Sachs, “Hans Sachs would most definitely have wanted his collection to remain with the thieves.”

Last year, Peter Sachs sued the German Historical Museum for the return of his father’s posters. In the Berlin courtroom a curator peeled back layers of tissue to reveal an image of a red dog. The judge lifted the corner of the poster to reveal my great-grandfather’s insignia, HS, stamped on the back of the work. On the eve of the court case, I visited the retired Rademacher, who worked with the Sachs collection until 1992, when he organised an exhibition of the posters. Rademacher agreed to retrieve his correspondence with Hans Sachs. I arranged to meet with him after the court case, of which he appeared unaware. In an echo of his cancelled rendezvous with Hans, it never took place. I wonder if Rademacher had been asked not to speak?

The German Government had declared its commitment to return stolen art found in museums by signing the Washington Principles in 1999. A former Minister of Culture had also pledged that where the Third Reich was implicated Germany would not invoke the statute of limitations, whereby claims have to be made within 30 years of the crime. If the victim or his family had received compensation, they would still be eligible to reclaim the artwork and to refund the compensation.

Yet two weeks after the court judgment last year in favour of Peter Sachs, the German Historical Museum filed notice of appeal, turning the posters into Germany’s version of the Elgin Marbles. Today, in a Berlin High Court, that appeal will be heard.

I have scoured my great-grandfather’s writings for signs of what he would have wished for his collection. That he would have wanted as much of it as possible to remain on show is unquestionable. He wanted a “a little museum for applied graphic art”. That he would have wanted the posters to remain in the possession of a country in which he was tortured is highly unlikely.

Surely with German unity should come German dignity. Yes, the museum may be concerned for the fate of the collection, and yes, it is hard to part with what has been in one’s possession for 70 years. But when last Monday, the spokesperson for the German Culture Minister, Berndt Neumann, said: “We believe the collection is legally in the German Historical Museum,” he was overlooking a small fact. The posters are in the museum for one reason alone; because on November, 1938, they were stolen by Goebbels.

Perhaps my great-grandfather was prophetic, for in writing of his posters, he cites a couplet by the poet Elizabeth Heyking as the guiding principle of his thoughts:

“He who touches the ashes of the past, Will burn himself with still glowing coals.”

That Peter Sachs has once again been forced through the German courts to retrieve his father’s collection is just too redolent of ashes of the past. A past that burns still after all these years.
Suzanne Glass is now writing a book: Einstein's Dentist and his Posters