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Migrations: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

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Wrapped-Up Memory: Things and Their Order in the Estate of Martha Teichmann (Saxony/New York, 1888–1977)

Edith Saurer[†] and Li Gerhalter

This chapter explores a classification system which is based on individual “categories of perception and appreciation” which cannot get in conflict with public collective ones because they are hidden (Bourdieu 1982, 754f.). The authors are talking about the packaging of memories in a specific location: the written estate of Martha Teichmann, a housemaid who emigrated from Germany to the USA at the beginning of the twentieth century. The authors assume that this classification system we investigate in her estate points to perceptions and orientations that her life abroad rested upon at certain points in time.

Written Estates and the Order of Memory

Usually, written estates are collected by academic institutions primarily for the (ascribed) scientific, artistic, or political significance of their creators. The estate we deal with here, however, belonged to a housemaid. For historiography, it is interesting in terms of a social, cultural, gender, or political history.

Ideally, a written estate contains all the personal testimonies, all the papers that the creator ever wrote or received, and, additionally, all the documents that were issued in her or his name. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. There are diverse reasons for the “incompleteness” of many estates: The letter-writing estate creators rarely copy their own letters or arrange for their return; however, sometimes there are external influences, such as flight, expulsion, or destruction; sometimes the owner wishes to forget and thus destroys individual records or censors part of them.

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An estate is a memory store – where its creator can interfere with it during her or his lifetime to adjust the collected memories. Additionally, it may contain the estates of other persons – for example, of spouses who died earlier. Such a combination gives an estate a new profile as the memories of two persons overlap.

An estate might consist of various kinds of written records: letters, diaries, official documents, photographs, etc. However, an estate may also contain other objects. Martha Teichmann's estate, for example, includes the following items: a watch in a case, a pouch with a prayer card, a pocket mirror, a button, hair, a small purse with coins, some paper silhouettes, and so on.

These objects do not have any material but only symbolic value – that of being the carriers of memory. They are part of the written estate because they neither were considered material assets. These objects are very heterogeneous in nature and turn up at a location that was not intended for them (Foucault 1971, 18f.).¹ Still they are part of an order – which in turn is based on the history of their owner's relationship with these objects: how and under which circumstances did they come into her or his possession, and what emotional and cultural value did they have in her or his daily life, at the time of their acquisition, and at some other point? Finally, there is the question of how these objects became part of the written estate and whether this is of historiographical relevance.

Wrapping up and ordering memories is only possible if there is a written estate and if its creator attached importance to collecting her or his documents or at least to not throwing them away. In how far these collecting activities can be classified as "storing" or had a function (Assmann 1999, 134),² or whether both is true, can only be determined by the thorough analysis of the estate as a whole. Martha Teichmann, for example, worked on her estate at certain times of her life – for instance, by ordering and bundling her letters. Thus, the order of memory manifests itself in her estate. It mirrors the importance and usage of a document during the lifetime of its owner.

At the same time, this order bears witness to the creator's cognitive categories that prevent specific documents from being mixed up with others – or maybe suggest and facilitate such a mix-up. To give you an example, these are the contents of one purse: Martha Teichmann's *Registration Card of Alien Female* of 1918, her *Military Census and Inventory Card* of 1917, a confirmation of her reading and

¹ Foucault refers here to a text by Borges where the latter quotes a Chinese encyclopedia whose taxonomy is a "monstrosity" determined by their location: "What is impossible is not the propinquity of the things listed, but the very site on which their propinquity would be possible." Due to their classification, there is no common ground where they can meet "except in the non-place of language."

² Assmann's term of *Funktionsgedächtnis* ("functional memory") means an "inhabited memory" related to a group of people. On the other hand, *Speichergedächtnis* ("storage memory") incorporates everything that has lost its "vital reference" to the present.

writing skills, a 1945 membership card of a Franciscan monastery, *St. Anthony's Guild*, and a prayer card. To start with, we can only state that Martha Teichmann kept important official documents in this purse – and also religious souvenirs. This classification system stresses the latter's significance for their owner – or is it the other way round? (Figs. 1–4).



Fig. 1–4 One of the purses of Martha Teichmann that served to store various mementoes

(At Least) Two Stories of Migration: Martha Teichmann and Wong Mian

Short Biographical Note on Martha Teichmann

Martha Teichmann was born in 1888 in the small town of Sahlis, situated near the city of Leipzig in southern Saxony.³ She was the youngest of six children, and her father's occupation is given as "*manual laborer*." At the age of 14, she started to work as a domestic servant in her hometown. Soon she followed her older sister, who worked as a housemaid in the city of Dresden, about 100 km from Sahlis. After having worked for 7 years there, she emigrated to the USA in 1909, via Hamburg.

The idea to do so had come from Frieda, a friend who had already found employment in New York 2 years earlier. Although her parents and siblings vehemently opposed the decision to emigrate, Martha Teichmann could not be dissuaded. On arrival in New York, she was put up by a member of a Christian social service. By the very next day, she had already started to work. According to her statement upon entering the USA, she had made the arrangements before leaving Germany.⁴

Still, the two young women had planned only a temporary stay in the USA. They returned to Germany in 1911. However, they only stayed for a couple of months before again returning to the USA together⁵ – where Martha Teichmann continued to live until her death in 1977.

From 1912 onward, she worked for the German-speaking family Blumgart-Brunswick, who had emigrated to the USA in the 1880s. At first, she held the position of cook and took up more duties in the course of time. In later decades, she was also the nanny of her employer's grandchildren. Martha Teichmann worked for this family for more than five decades, and they supported her with private pension payments when she was old. Together they lived in New York City most of the time, but they also spent some time in Florida, Connecticut, Orlando, on Hartford Long Island, and at several places in Europe where the family had second homes.

³ All the biographical information on Martha Teichmann and on Wong Mian was reconstructed from her estate, unless otherwise stated: Sammlung Frauennachlässe (Collection of Women's Estates), Department of History of the University of Vienna, NL 67.

⁴ In the *United States immigrant officer's* list, Martha Teichmann states her contact ("*friend*") as her first employer. The same gentleman had this same function already when her friend first entered the country in 1907. Martha Teichmann was entered into the list as a "*maid*" and declared cash assets of 25 dollars (*List of Manifest of Alien Passengers for the United States*, New York, May 16, 1909/June (...), 1907). We are very grateful for Annemarie Steidl's support of our research.

⁵ Martha Teichmann now declared the profession of a "*cook*" and cash assets of 50 dollars. Additionally, there is a stamp classifying her as "*nonimmigrant alien*" (*List of Manifest of Alien Passengers*, New York, September 7, 1911).

In her work migrations, Martha Teichmann followed her older sister from Sahlis to Dresden and her friend from Dresden to New York. Looking at her two migrations in broader context, she was one of the many women who left Germany since the nineteenth century in order to work in the USA as a housemaid. According to an analysis by Wehner-Franco, roughly 20% of all housemaids in New York were German-speaking in 1910, and about half of them also worked for German-speaking families (Wehner-Franco 1994, 333f. see et al.: Gabaccia 1988; Harzig et al. 1997). This cultural environment had its effects on Martha Teichmann's usage of language: even in old age, she still wrote some kind of "Pidgin English," a mixture of English and German.⁶

In the 1930s, she began a relationship with the Chinese migrant Wong Mian, who for some time worked as a domestic servant for the same family. So far, we have no evidence as to whether the two were married. First evidence of the couple's shared residence dates from 1940.

Short Biographical Note on Wong Mian

Wong Mian was a Chinese national. Since 1916, he had been registered with the British Merchant Navy as an "*alien seaman*"; in 1918, he also acquired a French registration. In 1919, Great Britain granted him the *authority to wear war medals for the Merchant Navy*. In 1920, his *identification certificate* was issued by the US consulate of the Republic of China. From that time onward, Wong Mian lived in the USA. A proof of nationality does not exist; instead, there are *alien registration receipt cards* issued in 1940 and 1942.

During his time with the Navy, he had been employed as "*second steward*." In the USA, he worked as a "*servant*." The references written by various employers between 1921 and 1947 give the positions of "*butler*", "*houseboy*," or "*houseman*." At the same time, they are evidence of Mian's frequent change of employment.

The various official documents show a great deal of inaccuracy in the personal data of Wong Mian: his date of birth, for example, is given as September 8, 1892; as October 18, 1896; or just simply as "1891." On the one hand, we may probably draw the conclusion that Wong Mian did not attribute great significance to his date of birth. On the other hand, these inconsistencies might be an indication of how the British, French, and US authorities dealt with the personal data of (Asian) work migrants – authorities that insist with much emphasis on registering their own nationals as exactly as possible.

⁶ In 1972, for example, she ended a letter: "*To much Rain here, no Snow, but cold Wind. Much Influenza around – I had Schnupfen. – Alles Gute wünscht Much Love Martha*" (Letter to D. and D. Brunswick, January 24, 1972).

The Estate of Martha Teichmann. Its Order at Delivery and Its Order in the Archive

Martha Teichmann's estate of written records and mementoes, which is also the estate of Wong Mian, was incorporated into the Collection of Women's Estates at the Department of History of the University of Vienna in 2004.⁷ When accepting an estate into the archive, we take great care to stick as closely as possible to the original orders of memory – that is, to the order as arranged by the donor – and to document them. Accordingly, we keep bundles of documents in the same condition as received.

However, there are certain restrictions to be kept in mind: In many cases, the persons handing over an estate make a deliberate choice of the documents to be included. Quite often, they also order it according to new classifications for this purpose. Others hand over an estate with all the records left by one person (or one family) (Gerhalter 2009), as in the case of Martha Teichmann.

And yet, even in these cases, it is hardly possible for an archivist to fully reconstruct the original order of objects as it may have been in the estate creator's home. This, of course, has its causes in the events before the actual donation. The documents are packed for transport (by the original owners themselves or maybe by their heirs); they might be stored at a third place, and their order might be changed again while being transferred. The four boxes of Martha Teichmann's estate, for example, had to survive the journey by cargo ship from New York to Vienna.

The estate was handed over by Peter Ludwig Ochs, the grandson of Martha Teichmann's employer. After her death in 1977, he cleared the apartment of his former nanny and took everything that is now her estate to his own place. He kept it there until 2003, when he decided to donate it to an archive. Because he could not find a suitable place in the USA, he finally approached an institution in Austria where he has a second residence. Peter Ludwig Ochs did not make any additional selections before sending the estate to Europe. He handed over everything that had made its way into the boot of his car. He packed, and we unpacked (Fig. 5).

Examples of Classification Systems in the Estate of Martha Teichmann

Love Letters

After thoroughly looking through all the documents, we were able to reconstruct several classifications established by Martha Teichmann herself. Apart from the document purse already mentioned, there was, for example, a bundle of love letters from 1908.

⁷ <http://www.univie.ac.at/geschichte/sfn> (February 1, 2012; in German).

Fig. 5 The written estate of Martha Teichmann after its shipment from the USA to Vienna as it arrived at the Collection of Women's Estates



This correspondence is a double exception within the estate. The 23 letters that a certain Bruno Schmidt wrote to Martha Teichmann between February and August 1908 were kept with decorative ribbons tied around them, indicating a great deal of affection. Enclosed in this bundle, we find a photograph of her and one of her lover. Compared with other correspondences, this arrangement is quite elaborate. It suggests that the letters had a special meaning for Martha Teichmann. Most importantly, however, these letters are the only records (besides a friendship book) that she kept from Germany. Obviously she carried the bundle with her – at the time of emigration and at every later change of house. Even if the significance of these devotional objects of a former love may have decreased in the course of her life, they were nevertheless preserved. The fact that she did not keep any of her extensive subsequent correspondence in a similar manner is also an indication that Martha Teichmann's practice of memory and order changed with time.

"Gold I Gave for Iron"

As already mentioned, the estate contains a number of various objects. In addition to the ones specified above, there are, among other things, an iron ring, some card games, small dolls, a plastic soldier, a small embroidered cloth, and a small US paper flag. These are objects that have lain in their boxes for decades and settled – the sedimentation of memory – and objects that may have been important at the time of encounter but which have long lost significance (or at least may have done so).

This is certainly true for the iron ring which Martha Teichmann presumably bought herself in 1914. It is placed in a small white box labeled "*Für edle Opferwilligkeit 1914*" ("*For noble-minded willingness to sacrifice 1914*"). On the wider top of the ring, there is an Iron Cross with oak leaves; on its sides, it bears the inscription "*Dem alten Vaterland die Treue zu beweisen/Gab ich in schwerer Zeit Gold für dieses Eisen*" ("*To prove my loyalty to the old fatherland/I gave gold for this iron in hard times*"). Martha Teichmann probably did not swap gold but money

Fig. 6 Ring of the campaign "Gold gab ich für Eisen" with box "Für edle Opferwilligkeit 1914"



for iron and bought the ring. At least that is what the not so abundant research literature has to say on the topic: "Thousands of iron rings were sold to German Americans, who treasured them as souvenirs of the time when they gave 'gold for iron'" (Wittke 1995, 35). This does not have to mean, however, that there were no cases where jewelry, watches, and other valuables were swapped for such a ring, as people did in Germany and Austria.

As regards the iron ring's significance for Martha Teichmann in 1914 and during the decades to follow, we have to take into account the context of German-Americans, as they called themselves, and their ethnic-political activities after the outbreak of World War I (Fig. 6).

Germans were the largest group of immigrants to the USA from 1860 to 1890. The numerous German-American associations displayed lively cultural activities, and there was a very diverse landscape of German-language journals. This promoted strong ethnic cohesion among many German-Americans, and they were also perceived as a strong ethnic group. This situation changed around 1900. There were eight million German-speaking immigrants, but moving in from Germany decreased and integration into American society grew stronger. The German language lost its significance, especially among members of the second generation (Blaschke 1992, 171–177). And not all members of the community were prepared to acknowledge this fact.

After the outbreak of war in 1914, ethnic associations – especially the *National German-American Alliance* but also churches and journals – started and propagated varied and numerous war relief initiatives: they offered war bonds and organized fund-raising events and "war bazaars" in the larger cities. The members of the "Quarter Clubs" promised "to donate a quarter per week" (Johnson 1999, 99; Luebke 1974, 98ff.). The campaign "Gold I Gave for Iron" was part of these initiatives, and it is said to have been established in New York by the *German Historical Society*. The ethnically oriented journals supported these activities, giving them the chance to recover lost ground. The American public, on the other

hand, saw the danger of political and military infiltration. When the USA entered the war as part of the Allied Forces in 1917, the conflicts with German-Americans intensified. Now, absolute loyalty was demanded. After World War I, there were no German-Americans anymore; they had fully integrated into American society.

It is improbable that this development left Martha Teichmann untouched. When she bought the iron ring in 1914, she had been living in New York for 4 years. The purchase of the ring can probably be seen as an act of patriotism. But what is the significance of the ring still being part of her estate in 1977? She had been part of a great wave of assimilation, and she also had spent the period of World War II with the same German-Jewish employers in New York. Most certainly, it does not mean that Martha Teichmann wanted to continue her World War I patriotism. Similar to the love letters of 1908, the ring is a documentation of a distant past its owner did not try to rewrite.

Correspondence with Family Members in Germany

In addition to the early love letters, the estate also contains extensive correspondence from the period between August 1913 and July 1977, consisting of roughly 800 documents. At the beginning of this chapter, we noted that correspondence frequently consists of letters the bequeather received, whereas those written by her or himself are not preserved. This is also the case with Martha Teichmann. Only a few of her letters to Europe, part of the many millions of "emigrant letters" ("Auswandererbriefe"),⁸ have been preserved. In this sense, the estate of this "emigrant" is less a documentation of her migration through the genre of "emigrant letters" (cp. et al. Gerber 1999; Helbich 2006), collected by historiography with a long tradition,⁹ but rather through the voices of "the others" (e.g., her colleagues and employers in the country of destination, the remigrated friend, or the family members who never emigrated).

In any case, Martha Teichmann continued to write letters to her family throughout her life, resulting in more than 400 letters from the period between December 1913 and March 1976. We were able to identify 29 different authors; some of this correspondence with the "aunt in America" involved three generations of writers. We may assume that she never met some of her correspondents in person.

The great number of letters from Europe becomes relative, however, if we take into account the long period of time. On average, Martha Teichmann received six to seven letters per year (or seven letters per year of peace). Even if we concede that an extensive estate like Martha Teichmann's has gaps and does not contain every single document she ever received, the letters' frequency is not very high. Additionally, none of the correspondences' storage followed a (recognizable)

⁸ Estimations assume that between 1820 and 1914 on the territory of the German Reich alone, there were more than 100 million private letters by migrants arriving from the USA (Pichler 2003, 164).

⁹ See, for example, Thomas WI, Znaniecki F (eds) (1918–1920).

classification system devised by her, such as, for example, bundles by sender. We therefore might conclude that she did not attribute great significance to any of this correspondence. On the other hand, the longevity of her correspondence with her family – which, after all, continued until the year before her death – is remarkable.

From her arrival in the USA until her old age, Martha Teichmann used to put bank notes into the letters to Europe. These remittances were perceived differently by their various recipients. Decisive factors were the degree of relation between them and Martha Teichmann and obviously also the passing of time. In a 1913 letter to her father, she complains that he would refuse her money “*out of pride*,” although he would have needed it badly due to her mother’s illness. She regrets being “*far away*,” therefore being unable to “*help in person*” (Letter to Christlieb Teichmann, 1913, without date). In a 1923 letter by her sister Amalie, the reaction to Martha Teichmann’s financial support has changed: “*We all were very happy about [the dollar note] and it was a great help to us in our business.*” Amalie then mentions a “*Blutwurst*” (black pudding) she wanted to send in return (Letter to Martha Teichmann, November 5, 1923). A granddaughter of Martha Teichmann’s sister Ida sent a letter from Leipzig in 1973, also thanking politely (and with striking similarity of wording) for received remittances: “*I like your letters very much, and they help me a lot.*” At the same time, she makes suggestions for her aunt’s next remittances – concretely, she asks for dollar notes instead of the GDR marks that she obviously had received (Letter to Martha Teichmann, October 10, 1973).

Testaments

Finally, we find in Martha Teichmann’s estate an English-language testament, handwritten in 1952, and a separate set of documents of 1978 relating to an oral testament. In another document, she is mentioned as heiress. On top of that, there are drafts for another testament that maybe never was written. She did not put these texts on bequeathing and inheriting into any order.

Testaments have been valuable historical sources for a number of reasons. Just to mention a few aspects: they give insights into the strategic use of property, gender-specific inheritance practices, or the mental changes that become manifest in the process of writing different testament versions over time. As part of a history of migration, testaments supply additional information. Certainly, their informative value also depends on the kind of legacy that is to be divided. Generally, however, they are reference to the organization of life and of the way the emigrants were integrated into the social and cultural environment of their country of arrival. All of this is also true for Martha Teichmann.

In her testament of 1952, she wrote: “*Everything I own, I leave to my faithful Husband Wong Mian with my best wishes. Martha A. Teichmann, Martha Mian (29. Okt. 1929)*” (September 3, 1952). We do not know whether Martha Teichmann and Wong Mian were in fact married. As there were no antimiscegenation laws in New York – laws that banned interracial marriage under the threat of the US partner losing her or his citizenship – it would have been possible (as opposed to, for

example, California). Let us assume that it was the case. Between 1931 and 1938, there were 254 marriages with a Chinese groom in New York; only 26% of these marriages involved non-Chinese women (Hsu 2000, 102). Social pressure on these marriages was immense. Additionally, there was the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, massively restricting the rights and immigration possibilities of Chinese nationals between 1882 and 1943. The message was: "People from China are not welcome." Martha Teichmann did not let herself be influenced by this policy of exclusion. In 1952, Wong Mian was the person she was attached to most and to whom she wanted to pass on everything she owned (Figs. 7 and 8).

In 1963, Martha Teichmann began again, and this time systematically, to think about writing a new testament. Along with a preliminary testament draft, we find an undated page of *New York Journal American*. The page contains the column "Life begins at 40,"¹⁰ discussing testaments in order to guarantee "that your property will be distributed as you wish." To have a lawyer set it up in conformity with the law

New York Sept 3. 1952.

Everything I own, I leave to
my faithful husband Wang Mian
with my best wishes

Martha A. Teichmann.

Martha Mian (29 Oct 1919)

186 West End Ave

New York 23. N.Y.

Sept 3. 1952.

Fig. 7 One of Martha Teichmann's testaments, dated September 3, 1952

my last Will and
Testament.

Fig. 8 Envelope, dated September 3, 1952

¹⁰ The newspaper was published between 1937 and 1966; the column was written by Robert Peterson for 21 years and appeared five times a week http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20050620/news_1m20peterson.html (February 1, 2012).

cost only 25 dollars, the author said. Martha Teichmann was inspired, all the more so because Wong Mian had died in the meantime, as her drafts show.¹¹ On July 10 and 24, 1963, she took down names and addresses on two pages, in some cases with the intended amount of the bequest. There was no sole heir or heiress, but rather groups of people or institutions whose personal significance she wanted to underscore by allocating bequests: first and foremost, her relatives in Germany; then the Franciscan brothers of *St. Anthony's Guild*; the *Red Cross*; and two family members of her former employers, among them Peter Ludwig Ochs.¹² In memory of Wong Mian, she also intended to support the *Chinese Relief Fund* and a Chinese institution for the blind.¹³

Another record dealing with a testament is dated 1970. It is a *petition to determine interests in the estate* and relates to a desired change in the testament of Cecile B. Mack, the late employer of Martha Teichmann. This document tells us of the 15 persons considered in Cecile Mack's will, 9 of whom were close relatives. Martha Teichmann also received a bequest whose size is not known to us, however.

What are the conclusions we can draw from these testaments as regards the integration of Martha Teichmann in New York after a time when she had been living and working there for 40 years? Most German housemaids who came to the USA as solitary migrants (in 1900, there were 58,716 of them) swapped employment for marriage after a couple of years, most often with a German-American (Wehner-Franco 1994, 312). Unlike them, and unlike her friend Frieda whom she followed in 1909 (*List of Manifest of Alien Passengers*, New York, October 3, 1923), Martha Teichmann's life centered around the wealthy family of her employer, which shaped her work life, her social contacts, and even her love relationship. Although she shared an apartment in Brooklyn with her husband, she continued to work for this family. Accordingly, her employer considered her in her last will.

On the other hand, it was natural for Martha Teichmann to name Wong Mian as her sole heir in 1952. Their marriage made her part of multicultural New York, and yet she together with her husband remained attached to the family who also spoke German just like her. Probably the Brunswick family was the framework that enabled her to marry Wong Mian or to have a relationship with him in the first place, considering the legal and social anti-Chinese discrimination. When he died, Martha Teichmann also became involved in aiding Chinese migrants in the USA as a kind of legacy of her love.

¹¹ So far, we have not been able to research Wong Mian's date of death. The different testaments of Martha Teichmann indicate that he must have died before July 10, 1963, and after September 3, 1952.

¹² Another person, "*Leo Kearns, Reg. Park*" (probably: Regency Park), could not be identified at this stage of research.

¹³ This passage of her draft is not fully clear. She wrote: "*Chines Blind. Seeing Eye dy.*" We assume that the *Chinese Relief Fund* was established in order to help Chinese migrants in the USA. In 1937, after the outbreak of the Chinese-Japanese war, expatriate Chinese established the *China Relief Fund* with the aim of supporting China. Obviously these were two different institutions.

The testaments show the breadth of Martha Teichmann's emotional ties (if we assume such as a prerequisite for bequests): ties existed with her German relatives, with American and Chinese charity institutions, a religious institution, and her American employers. This multifaceted orientation was a product of her life and of her decisions.

When Martha Teichmann died in 1977 at the age of 89, this situation had changed. Part of the documents relating to the processing of her legacy between Brooklyn, East, and West Germany is a letter by her niece. It says that Martha Teichmann orally stated her "*last will*" to her employer that her material legacy be divided between the descendants of her siblings with whom she wrote letters until her death.

Her legacy of 4,062 dollars (split up between four persons) went back to the two Germanys. Still, we should absolutely refrain from concluding that her family of origin had again become her central point of reference. Rather, the radius of her relationships in the USA had decreased by the years. Her last will does not at all indicate a lack of integration into American society. On the contrary, it is evidence of how circumstances change with a person's old age.

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