

Otto Hahn (1879-1968). Concerning the Digitization of the Private Estate of a Nobel Prize Winner

Joachim KEMPER

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The name of the German chemist Otto Hahn is closely associated with the discovery of nuclear fission of uranium in 1938, through which Hahn and his co-workers laid the foundation for the usage of nuclear power as well as nuclear weapons. Hahn himself was interned in England after the war, but was awarded the Nobel Prize in chemistry retroactively for the year of 1944¹.

Hahn was working as president of the Max Planck Society after the war, which is one of the biggest institutions for fundamental research in Germany to date. He firmly opposed nuclear weapons and died in Göttingen in 1968. His scientific estate went to the Max Planck Society, which is situated in Berlin. There it is made available to research along with, for example, the estates of fellow Nobel Prize Winners the Institute has produced such as Carl Bosch and Fritz Haber².

The difficulty of separating the private estate from professional or scientific papers is a matter of common (archival) knowledge. Therefore the discovery of Hahn's private estate by his family and its arrival in the city archives³ through a Frankfurt Foundation was unsurprising: Otto Hahn was a native of Frankfurt.

The Grunelius Foundation⁴, a Frankfurt Foundation that supports a lot of cultural projects, were able to acquire the estate in 2002. They handed it over to the Institute for the History of Frankfurt as a permanent deposit in 2010. The Institute has an employee in the department of collections, who is responsible for all of the approximately 500 estates stored there⁵.

What does the estate contain? Its scope measures about 40 meters of shelf space, half of which consists of Otto Hahn's former private library. Further 10 meters include objects such as household items, vases, pictures, even the tail-coat Hahn wore to the Nobel Prize awards ceremony. The objects provide a good insight into the higher standard of living of a Nobel Prize winner; however for scientific research the actual written documents and photographs are of most value. Worth mentioning here are the many hundred letter correspondences; emphasis can be put on the First World War, where Hahn cooperated in the uses of toxic gas at the western front, and

¹ https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto_Hahn

² <https://www.archiv-berlin.mpg.de/>

³ <http://www.stadtgeschichte-ffm.de/>

⁴ <http://www.grunelius-stiftung.de/>

⁵ <http://www.stadtgeschichte-ffm.de/de/archivbesuch/bestaendeuebersicht/sammlungen>; this article reflects the project-status of the year 2017.

letters written after the end of World War Two. There are over 1,000 existing letters written by Hahn himself in the estate as well as twice as many letters addressed to him.

Also of importance are the awards, photographs and photo albums located in the estate.

The estate was described according to archival criteria before the beginning of 2015. There was no deeper indexing performed. For the estate's usage a written application was agreed upon. However after completing the indexing the estate never ended up being used on-site in the reading room. Instead the foundation approached the archive with the suggestion to digitize the majority of the written estate and to consequently only make it available to researchers digitally. In principle this was done following the example set by other foundation archives and to ultimately to be able to index the estate more deeply (letter by letter) and then release it piece by piece online. An example from a different foundation archive: At the foundation of the big German weekly newspaper "Die ZEIT" the estate of their founder Gerd Bucerus is presented digitally; the estate consists of approximately 50 running meters and has been partly digitized. Research through finding aids as well as access to the digital copies is possible after being given a clearance password by the foundation archivist. The foundation is thereby able to control the usage while still allowing use not limited to the reading room⁶.

To us as an archive, the foundation's suggestion was initially a lucky chance. A digitization of the estate would not have been prioritized by us, despite Otto Hahn's celebrity status. The reasons were: the estate does not belong to us, it is a deposit. Some usage was certainly to be expected for the future, but more limited to specific research groups.

A digitization through our own means would have taken months. Alternatively we could have worked out an application to digitize the estate at a scientific organization in Germany, meaning third-party-funding: the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Research Foundation). A new program intends to support the digitization of holdings from the 19th and 20th century, and projects have to meet specific criteria. Certainly, the maximum quote of successful applications is still uncertain⁷.

We however had the opportunity to have an important estate be digitized with external funds and without application. The project, which we have been talking to the foundation about since the start of 2016 has now (2017) arrived its implementation phase.

Over the course of 2016, reaching an understanding about the contents of digitization as well as terms was in focus. Additionally, talks about being able to present the estate digitally together with other estates were held. The digitization of the estate started in the middle of January 2017. The contractor we decided to hire had to bring staff and scanners to the institute. The digital copies will receive discreet

⁶ <https://www.zeit-stiftung.de/stiftung/diestifter/dernachlassvongerdubucus/>

⁷ http://www.dfg.de/foerderung/programme/infrastruktur/lis/lis_foerderangebote/archivalische_quellen/index.html

“watermarks” in the future, which will not interfere with the legibility of the texts. The University Library Frankfurt is then going to make the digital copies available as part of a cooperation project in their own presentation module, the so-called Visual Library⁸, which allows for an appealing and relatively modern display and presentation. There Otto Hahn’s estate will be in the good company of, for example, the philosophers Max Horkheimer and Arthur Schopenhauer.

⁸ See for instance <http://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/>