An Artist's View: Lisa Oettinger between 'Civilizations'

In the summer of 2013, I flew to London to meet two people whose mothers had converted to Islam in the Berlin mosque before the Second World War. At that time I was doing research on the Lahore-Ahmadiyya Muslim reform movement and its mission activities in interwar Europe.¹ Some group photographs that I had seen made me realize that the Ahmadiyya mission not only facilitated Indian–German marriages, but also catered to the children born of those relationships. My search for them was fuelled by the hope of finding material evidence that might throw light on the mission from a family perspective. This trip was going to mark my first encounter with any of the descendants.

As a matter of fact, the people I was going to see had Muslim names. Suhail Ahmad, born in 1949 in Karachi, was the son of the Berlin painter Lisa Oettinger and hotel proprietor Nazir Ahmad, who was a member of the Ahmadiyya in Lahore. Suhail's cousin Anisah Christina Rani, born in Berlin in 1933, was the daughter of Lisa's sister Susanna Oettinger and the Indian N.T. Gulrajani from Karachi, who in the 1930s ran an export business in Berlin. I had come across Lisa's and Susanna's names many times in the mosque archive and in registry office files. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, in 1930 their mother Emilia Oettinger co-founded the German–Muslim Society, the Lahore-Ahmadiyya mission's organization for converts. When Ahmadiyya elders alerted me to the fact that there were Oettinger descendants living in the vicinity of London, I did not think twice before visiting them.

Little was I prepared for what I found. Anisah was in the possession of papers that seemed to contain the story of the Oettinger family in a nutshell. Among them were documents proving her mother's and grandmother's conversion to Islam; her grandfather Friedrich Oettinger's papers showing that he converted to Christianity in 1885 and left the Jewish community in Berlin some time after that; the marriage contract between Friedrich's parents Louis Oettinger and Johanna Lewinsohn, which said a lot about Jewish marriage in Prussia in the late nineteenth century; and a document issued by the local Prussian administration in 1866 granting Louis permission to leave Marienwerder in

¹ Gerdien Jonker, *The Ahmadiyya Quest for Religious Progress: Missionizing Europe 1900–1965* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2016).

western Prussia, where he was registered as a member of the Jewish community. The Oettingers, these documents proved, were of Jewish descent and had relinquished their Judaism prior to their conversion to Islam.

At first, Suhail Ahmad presented me with the five photograph albums that his mother Lisa had put together in 1957 to explain to him her early life in Berlin, the life of her first husband Azeez Ur-Rahman Mirza, their social life in the Berlin mosque, their honeymoon in India, and her life in Lahore.² The next time I visited him he also showed me two large trunks, which had been padlocked in his mother's bedroom since 1957 and which he left untouched after she died in 2006. When we opened them they appeared to be filled with fragile things from Marienwerder, Berlin and Lahore, each item wrapped in tissue paper with a note from Lisa exhorting him to safeguard the contents – 'MUST remain in the family!' – and laid out in a jigsaw pattern in the trunks.

Talking to Suhail Ahmad and Anisah Christina Rani I realized that I had found two cousins trying to make sense of a religious legacy that in many ways was even more complicated than the jigsaw puzzle we uncovered in the trunks. Their own relationship with the Oettinger family was intense. As a child, Anisah had been hidden in Nazi Germany and the experience had left her with disturbing memories and a severed relationship with her mother, Susanna. From her perspective, being a young person in Germany had been traumatic, yet 'home'. From Suhail's viewpoint, the past took on a very different shape. Born in Karachi, he had lived with his mother until her death at the age of 98 and their life together had been peaceful. Lisa had painted, was proud of her Prussian and Jewish heritage, but urged her son to acknowledge the importance of having come from two wholly different backgrounds – German culture and Islamic civilization. Thus, with the sense of responsibility this brought him, he became the guardian of his mother's legacy.

Because their mothers had fallen out with each other after the war, the cousins had been unaware of the other's family treasures or memories, but my entry into their lives reunited the two sides. Seated in Anisah's drawing room, they examined each other's things, exchanged reminiscences, compared their experiences and looked at me for help whenever German history threatened to slip into incomprehensibility. This became my role in the proceedings. During those visits (I went back six times), I became involved in the memories and anecdotes of a family that was not mine, yet entrusted me with its family treasures, trusting that I would turn them into a story that would explain to them what it was all about. Together, we unravelled a religious history, which in

2 Private Oettinger archive containing 'Lisa's Berlin album'; 'Azeez's album'; and albums 'Mosque and Friends'; 'The journey to India'; and 'Lange Mandi (Lahore)'.

retrospect seemed strange yet appeared to have been quite commonplace at the time of it happening.

In the course of four generations, the Oettinger family had progressed from being traditional Jews to German Jews with a secular outlook; proved their German loyalty by baptizing their children; dabbled in life reform to express their individuality; experimented with Islam; become convinced Muslims; and produced Muslim children who in turn became Christians. In the end, I wrote a book in which I assigned each generation its role in the journey – great grandparents in Jewish Marienwerder, grandparents in Jewish secular Berlin, mothers Susanna and Lisa in the Lahore-Ahmadiyya mosque, and cousins in England puzzled by their religious past.³

The focus of this chapter is on Lisa Oettinger and her trunks. It starts with the supposition that the collection she bequeathed to her son in 1957 carries a meaning and that the items she selected were meant to serve as its carrier. I therefore ask, what kind of collection did she procure and why? In trying to find the answer, it became clear that there was more to it than meets the eye. Unlike the rest of the Oettinger archive, the contents of Lisa's trunks led towards the unravelling of not just one, but two family stories, which Lisa had knowingly joined – these were her own German–Jewish past and her husband's history rooted in reformist Islam.

At this point in the narrative, a short biographical note may orient the reader. Born in 1908, Lisa Oettinger belonged to the very first generation of women to enter the Art Academy in Berlin. An independent artist, in 1929 she joined the quickly growing Lahore-Ahmadiyya community and in 1933 embraced Islam. She assumed the name Zubaidah and became engaged to the assistant imam Azeez Ur-Rahman Mirza, whom she married in 1937 in the Sarajevo mosque. From this city, the couple embarked on an extended journey to the Orient, with Lahore as their final destination. Tragically, Azeez died within weeks of their arrival there. In 1939, Lisa remarried, this time to an Ahmadiyya supporter and wealthy hotel owner named Nazir Ahmad. Having given birth to a child out of wedlock in 1949, she eventually travelled to England to pursue her son's education, leaving India and her husband behind. In 1956, mother and son settled in Woking in the vicinity of another Lahore-Ahmadiyya mosque and they remained together for the rest of her long life until, in 2006, Lisa Zubaidah Ahmad died peacefully in her sleep.

This chapter is divided into four stages. Since the objects Lisa selected from her mother's household in 1937 to prepare for life in Lahore relate to a

3 Gerdien Jonker, *'Etwas hoffen muß das Herz': Eine Familiengeschichte von Juden, Christen und Muslimen* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018).

discussion in the Lahore-Ahmadiyya mosque in Berlin at that time, the first stage is to recover that discussion and link it to an item in one of her trunks. The second stage entails examining the trunks she packed in Woking, England, 20 years later in 1957. Once that has been achieved, the items in the trunks are 'unwrapped' and their contents systematically ordered and traced back to the families for whom they serve as a memory – either the Oettinger family (with its links to a Jewish past) or the Ur-Rahman family (with its Mughal connection).

Lisa Oettinger's collection saved two families from being forgotten – the Oettingers from Marienwerder and the Ur-Rahmans from Lahore. The collection allows them not only to live on in their things, but also to join their family traditions in one box. For that reason, her collection is neither specifically Jewish nor specifically Muslim; it is in between. If anything, that has been Lisa's legacy to her son.

1 1937: Establishing a Muslim Household with Jewish Heirlooms

Lisa Oettinger was a painter with a long artistic legacy. Her father, grandfather and great-grandfather had all been businessmen who valued the beauty of things. Back in Marienwerder, the family had designed and produced lace artefacts and trimmings and, in Berlin, switched to art deco glassware. When it was her time to choose a profession, Lisa studied industrial design and specialized in interior decoration. Her choice was a timely one. When she entered the Berlin Art School in 1927, German interior designs were undergoing something of a revolution. Instead of the heavy furniture and draperies of the German colonial empire, the younger generation preferred white lacquer furnishings, which they combined with Oriental carpets and African art.⁴ Lisa's portfolio is filled with Chinese dragons, Japanese women, Egyptian sphinxes, apes, dancing mice, birds of paradise and flowers of every possible colour. They bear ample witness to the fact that she believed in, and catered to, a turn to the Orient as her contribution towards improving individual lifestyles.⁵

Lisa believed in the power of art and took *things* seriously – and in this she was not alone. In 1933, when she converted to Islam in the Ahmadiyya mosque in Berlin, she met a group of like-minded people who were also looking for ways of living like a Muslim and furnishing their homes accordingly. Their

4 Enno Kaufhold, *Berliner Interieurs 1910–1930: Photographien von Waldemar Titzenthaler* (Berlin: Nicolai, 2013).

5 Private Oettinger archive, Three Portfolios (Berlin 1927–1931).

animated discussions about the 'New Man' fired her imagination into finding ways of applying her art to certain traditions and expectations with which she was not yet familiar. To understand the objects that later ended up in the trunks beside her bed, we shall therefore have to make a little detour into that mosque and look at the trains of thought that entered the debate and her mind.

As explained before, when Germany realized it had lost the First World War and was branded the guilty party, the country was in turmoil. Berlin had become a centre for paramilitary organizations and uncontrolled street fighting. Food and fuel were scarce. People starved. Missionaries from around the globe were quick to notice that the German people were on their knees. As one of them noted, 'among all the countries of the world, there does not appear to be so much scope for the propagation of Islam as there is in Germany'.⁶ Christian, Muslim, Baha'i and Buddhist missionaries soon set up mission posts in Berlin and other German cities and many Germans, especially life reformers, but also Prussian officers with experience of the gas and the trenches, thankfully received them.

Missionaries from the Ahmadiyya reform movement in Lahore, British India, set up shop in Berlin in 1923. They preached a peaceful Islam that urged people to stay away from politics and start working on themselves if they wished to improve the world. The missionaries, who were highly cultured descendants of the landed gentry in northern India, embodied what they preached. The press marvelled at their 'elegance' and 'exotic flair'.⁷ In their version of Islam, good manners and a thorough knowledge of Sufi poetry took pride of place.

What the Ahmadiyya missionaries from Lahore sought was intellectual exchange and the establishment of an interface between up-to-date European thought and Muslim quests to modernize Islam. Towards that aim, they built a mosque in Berlin, itself a little marvel of Mughal art, and, on opening its doors, it offered a platform for forward-thinking discussions on the future of mankind. Reform-minded Germans, both Jews and Christians, attended the lectures in great numbers and the sympathetic public soon dubbed Islam a modern, democratic religion that was 'up with the times'. In the course of the mission's existence – it ended in 1939 when German armies invaded Poland

6 Abdul Sattar Khairi (1885–1944) founded the Berlin Islamic Community in 1922. The quotation is in Jonker, *The Ahmadiyya Quest*, 63. See also Suzanne L. Marchand, 'Eastern wisdom in an era of Western despair: Orientalism in 1920s central Europe', in Peter E. Gordon and John P. McCormick (eds) *Weimar Thought: A Contested Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 341–61.

7 Jonker, *The Ahmadiyya Quest*, 78–9.

and the last missionary left Berlin – 500 visitors actually embraced Islam and even more became 'friends of Islam', the official term for the supporters of the Ahmadiyya quest. In 1930, missionaries, their German friends and converts, and a number of Indian, Persian and Egyptian Muslims joined hands to form the German–Muslim Society (*Deutsch–Moslemische Gesellschaft*), a society for the propagation of Islam and creation of friendships between 'East and West' (Chapter 3).

When Lisa joined the Lahore-Ahmadiyya mosque, discussions about the 'New Man' held the German–Muslim Society in its grip. In Berlin in the 1920s and 1930s, a lot of people were talking about this imaginary figure, or ideal type imbued with every possible ideology. German followers of the life reform movement, for instance, believed in the individual fashioning of the self through bodily exercise. Consequently, they saw the body as 'a holy temple', to which they assigned 'the holy duty' of remedying 'the social disturbances that we and the whole world experience at present'. From their perspective, to rescue the world, one needed to return to an 'original, healthy state'. Once that stage was reached, they believed, mankind's current problems would disappear in no time at all.⁸

The Nazis' 'New Man' also bore a bodily aspect. On addressing German youths in Nuremberg in 1935, Adolf Hitler unfolded his vision that they should be 'as nimble as greyhounds, as tough as leather and as hard as Krupp's steel'.⁹ Moreover, he invited them to become the 'living tools of the Führer', ready at all times to prove their 'manliness, courage and firmness'.¹⁰ In the reality of the war that followed, these youngsters were thrown in as suicide fighters and sacrificed for his aims.

Between these two extremes, the missionary wing of the Lahore-Ahmadiyya constructed an ideal 'New Man' that borrowed from both, yet differed in decisive ways from the speculations of the others.¹¹ Most German converts to Islam were life reformers. However, although embracing physical exercise, they strove to alter their lives through experience of the divine, an exercise in which the body was treated as the main gateway to God. Hugo Marcus, president of the German–Muslim Society and himself of Jewish descent, suggested that one start by centring on the body. Writing in 1930, in the tumultuous political

8 Bernd Wedemeyer-Kolwe, *Der neue Mensch: Körperkultur im Kaiserreich und in der Weimarer Republik* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004) 13–4.

9 <http://www.dw.com/de/flink-wie-windhunde-zäh-wie-leder-hart-wie-kruppstahl/a-16373027>.

10 Franz Albert Heinen, *Ordensburg Vogelsang: The History of the NS-Elite Training Centre in the Eifel* (Berlin: CH Links, 2014), 53.

11 Jonker, *The Ahmadiyya Quest*, 111–3.

and societal climate leading up to National Socialism, he observed that 'in the present situation' the best one can do is keep a sober head and an objective mind. Only those with the courage to hold onto both, Marcus postulated, are properly prepared to encounter the sacred. From his perspective, the 'New Man' was going to be 'a sober man with a glowing heart' who did not eschew the challenge of 'fusing' the extremes in his soul and shaping them into something new. Hinting at 'the sacred experience of eroticism', Marcus suggested that having sex was *the* place to accomplish the impossible.¹²

Although this infuriated the German-Muslim Society, many responded by offering alternatives to their president's provocative suggestion. Among them was Omar Rolf von Ehrenfels, a young baron from Austria who had just been appointed editor of the *Moslemische Revue*, the Ahmadiyya mission's journal edited in Berlin. Instead of eroticism, he recommended looking at how German Muslims moved their bodies, dressed themselves and furnished their homes. Ehrenfels saw the Oriental way of living on the floor as a way to progress. First, he argued, this was an expression of solidarity with nature and thus a feature of advanced civilization – more natural and therefore better than European culture. Instead of putting chairs and tables in their houses, the baron urged, German Muslims should consider sitting, sleeping and praying on the floor, and also serving their meals there. Second, or so he thought, 'the floor perspective' was the way to enhance the beauty of daily life. Only those who master the view 'from below', he wrote, are able 'to design their homes from top to toe in artistic beauty' and through this 'live in beauty'.¹³

With its direct implications for modern interior design, his words went straight to Lisa's heart. In 1937, when she and Azeez Ur-Rahman Mirza, assistant imam of the Berlin mosque,¹⁴ got engaged to be married and the two of them prepared to travel to Lahore in British India, she singled out an abundant amount of lace from the family collection. There were handmade table settings, all kinds of trimmings, lace and various fabrics, some of which were large enough to cover a room. To this she added the family album containing photographs dating back to Jewish Marienwerder in the nineteenth-century; landscape paintings that used to hang in the dining room at home; much thumbed German poetry and song books; Schubert's *Earlkönig* as the apotheosis of German culture; a greasy, hand-written book of recipes; her grandmother's

12 Hugo Marcus, 'Die Religion und der Mensch der Zukunft', *Moslemische Revue*, 2 (1930), 65–74; *Moslemische Revue*, 3 (1930), 94–8; and *Moslemische Revue*, 1 (1931), 24–31. Quotations on pp. 68, 69, 74 and 97.

13 Baron Omar R. Ehrenfels, 'Der Islam und die junge Generation in Europa', *Moslemische Revue*, 3 (1931), 81–91. Quotations on p. 85; cf. Jonker, *The Ahmadiyya Quest*, 111.

14 Jonker, *The Ahmadiyya Quest*, 60–1.

collection of Romantic poetry; ivory carvings of Goethe and Schiller; her mother's German song books containing piano pieces for four hands; albums filled with postcards for cultured conversation; her father's first tooth, hair lock and worn leather baby shoes; and many more smallish things with a family story.

These were the things with which Lisa Oettinger planned to adorn her future home. The collection suggests that she planned to live on the floor, to cover it with her grandmother's lace and thus adapt to Oriental culture in a manner that she deemed civilized. The collection also intimates that she considered herself a bearer of German culture and was planning to exhibit that knowledge in Lahore. Other German women in the Ahmadiyya mosque confirmed her vision. Some even wrote in the mission journal that 'out there' was a task waiting for the 'European woman', namely to mix with other civilizations and religious traditions yet uphold and spread European, more specifically German, culture.¹⁵

Comparing the contents of Lisa's suitcases with the lists of household goods that other migrants from Germany drew up before the war, there seems to have been an absence of the more conservative objects. Even when taking into account that, during her move from Lahore to London in 1954, she must have left some of her possessions behind,¹⁶ and that the sizes of the two trunks she rearranged for her son in 1957 imposed certain restrictions, their contents amply demonstrated that her artistic understanding of 'Muslim life' governed her original choices.¹⁷

In her path-breaking essay, 'Beyond words', Leora Auslander suggests that there is an interplay between objects of the past and the narratives that accompany them.¹⁸ Words may express what happened in the past, but only things can hand on the feeling of what that past was like. Things are never mute, for they serve as tools in many different communications. Their presence in the home for instance enforces certain routines. Things are exhibited, polished and admired, hated, broken and thrown away. They get lost and are found

15 Jonker, *The Ahmadiyya Quest*, 113–9; Latifa A. Roessler, 'Ein Arbeitsfeld für die muslimische Europäerin', *Moslemische Revue*, 1 (1934), 13–6; Hildegard Scharf, Irma Gohl und Huda J. Schneider, 'Drei Europäerinnen bekennen sich zum Islam', *Moslemische Revue*, 1 (1931), 53–9.

16 Suhail Ahmad recalled that there had been a notebook in which his mother had written down the things that were left behind or sold, each with a short description and date. Although never thrown away, the notebook remained mislaid throughout the time of my research.

17 Johannes E. Everlein, 'Erste Dinge – Reisegepäck im Exil: Eine phänomenologische Lektüre', in Doerte Bischoff and Joachim Schlör (eds) *Dinge des Exils* (Munich: edition text + kritik, 2013), 23–35.

18 Leora Auslander, 'Beyond words', *American Historical Review*, 110 (4) 2005, 1015–45.

again. The very sight of them arouses images, memories and emotions. In our daily dealings with them, things become associated with the memories they embody. They are considered to be spirited objects that are thought to bring the past back to life.

When Lisa chose things from her mother's household in Berlin, she did not yet know what the future held in store. Indeed, shortly after their arrival in Lahore, her husband died and she was left alone in a totally foreign family. We may assume that, in her new surroundings, the lace and trimmings, Friedrich's shoes and her grandmother's cookery book took on different roles, speaking to her from the past in moments of despair and encouraging her to regain her bearings and become independent, thereby triggering the interplay about which Auslander speaks. In the life reform language of her time, Lisa strove to restore the relationship between art, aesthetics and religion in Muslim Lahore, and she believed that things – both old and new – could help her establish that relationship. In the end, she managed. That too is the legacy she wanted to convey to her son.

2 1957: Looking Back

In spring 1957, exactly 20 years after she had left Berlin, Lisa Oettinger, now living as Mrs Louise Zubeidah Ahmad in the vicinity of the Lahore-Ahmadiyya mosque in Woking, England, took stock of her life. Among other things, she filled two large trunks with objects that were meaningful to her, wrapped them in tissue paper and plastic bags, and attached little slips of papers to each on which she explained which of her grandmothers had stitched which piece of lace, where they had been in the family home in Berlin, and which things she had picked up in India, and why. Below, she invariably wrote 'MUST remain in the family!' To these she added the books and music sheets that had originally been bequeathed to her as a girl and that she now bequeathed to him. She put the breakable things in boxes and metal caskets locked with a key. Then, she arranged everything into a pattern that assigned each thing its place in the trunks. Finally, on 8 April 1957, trusting that he would only read it much later in life, she wrote a letter to her son explaining what had gone wrong in the past and why. She placed the sealed envelope on top of the collection. She had created an archive of things. Once she was ready, she padlocked the trunks and put them next to her bed where they remained until her death in 2006 (Figure 4.1).

When the trunks were opened in 2014, the 'reading' of their contents began. However, an archive of things is not a chronological table. Lisa's trunks were

FIGURE 4.1 Lisa's trunks in Woking

filled with objects that pointed in a number of geographical directions, covered different cultural traditions and informed us about historical periods that were sometimes far apart from one another. Forms, textures and smells may have hinted at their origin, but without the story behind them, it was impossible to associate the objects with their original bearers, let alone disclose the memories they encapsulated.

The written instructions that Lisa left behind provided us with minimal information, but nonetheless showed the way. Some of the words she used captured family relations – *Muttchen* (mother), *Großmuttchen* (grandmother),

Großvater, (grandfather), 'your great grandmother', 'auntie', and so forth. Place names like Berlin, Lahore, Karachi and Woking established geographical relationships. It was enough to make a first ordering in which the things initially became separated again: Germany and the Jewish family on the one side, Lahore and the Muslim family on the other.

Where the trunks fell silent on the Oettinger past, Anisah's stack of family documents came to the rescue. Taking my lead from those, I travelled to Marienwerder, now Kwidzyn in Poland, to establish their origins. I then proceeded to visit cemeteries and archives to trace the family history to Berlin.

The political situation in Pakistan proved too precarious at the time of research to conduct a comparable family search there. To gain knowledge about the Ur-Rahman family, I therefore consulted the photograph albums that Suhail Ahmad still keeps. The album, titled 'Lange Mandi'¹⁹ contained about 300 photographs of home interiors, festive occasions, picnics, hikes and boat outings on the Ravi river near Lahore, the bungalow in which Lisa had established her independent life and in which her second husband, Nazir Ahmad, the hotel proprietor, had become Suhail's adoptive father. Lisa had painstakingly given each of these photographs an explanatory caption. Here, words like *amajee* (mother), *abajee* (father), 'my brothers', 'my sisters', helped to disentangle the intricate web of relationships. In addition, Ahmadiyya elders provided me with background information. Where everything else failed, there was still the letter she wrote to her son.

In the trunks we also found traces of Azeez Ur-Rahman Mirza, Lisa's first love and legitimate husband. Although their relationship was short-lived, the five years in which they got to know each other, fall in love and eventually marry affected her further life deeply. The memories of him that she treasured were almost all of a textual nature – his declarations of love, the books and dedications he presented to her, his notes on a *Hafiz* translation, his collection of aphorisms of German poets, and the lectures he gave in the Berlin mosque. Besides, there was his prayer mat and the medals and badges he acquired in Berlin. These things, together with the photograph albums she filled with his pictures, were enough to grasp the nature of their friendship. They also explain her decision to join their respective families in one and the same collection.

I shall now attempt to order the contents of the trunks with a view to figuring out how they were put to use. For good measure, I start with the oldest layer containing the Oettinger family treasures, which were chosen in Berlin. They

19 *Mandi* means market in Urdu. *Lange Mandi* is a Muslim bazaar within the city walls of old Lahore. The Ur-Rahman (Baksch) family lived in one of its ancient merchant palaces (*havalis*).

are followed by Azeez's possessions and his gifts to Lisa, which tell us something about their life in Berlin and the nature of their friendship. Then, to end, I look over the things she collected in Lahore, which reveal her emotional ties to the Ur-Rahman family and a deeply felt respect for the beauty of traditional Mughal handicrafts.

3 Links with the Jewish Past

On putting together all the things chosen in Berlin in 1937, it becomes abundantly clear that they originate from three different households. When great-grandmother Bertha Oettinger died in Berlin in 1906, her things, or at least some of them, found their way into the home of her son Louis and his wife Johanna. When Johanna died in 1914, her son Friedrich, who lived with his parents until he was 34, would have chosen things that were either dear to him, were still useful, or that embodied a family memory. Whatever there may have been among all that stuff – gold-rimmed porcelain crockery, fruit bowls with copper adornments, porcelain dogs and shepherds, plaster and ebony figures from far-flung countries, mantelpiece clocks, silver salt sprinklers, sunset paintings and other knick-knacks that cluttered up the Prussian house and appear in some of the family photographs – Lisa took none of that, not even her father's art deco glass collection. Instead, when it was her turn to choose, she focused exclusively on artefacts from the family's lace producing days and things that came from her father's family that encapsulated their view of German culture.

Remarkably, none of these objects came from the Läwen family, the family of Lisa's mother. In fact, if ever there were a story attached to this branch of the family, it was never recorded or even mentioned. The things that Lisa packed unerringly bore the markings of German–Jewish culture through three generations of Oettinger women. The list contains:

- at least one suitcase filled with lace and trimmings;²⁰
- a suitcase of tablecloths and napkins;
- the family photograph album (1871–1914);
- the handwritten family cookery book (1871–1957);
- five albums filled with postcards (1880s–1937);
- several framed colour photographs of landscapes near Berlin (c.1910);
- several framed colour prints of Berlin streets (c.1850);

20 Suhail Ahmad remembers that, when settling in England after the war, his mother had sold a whole suitcase of lace to British museums to cover their expenses.

- books from the family library;
- sheet music with pieces of famous German composers;
- carved profiles of Goethe and Schiller (c.1850)
- a padlocked box containing family jewellery; and
- baby Friedrich's hair lock, milk teeth and shoes.

How she intended using these objects has already been clarified. She chose the lace, tablecloth and napkins to prepare for a life amid beauty on the floor. She selected the postcards, landscapes, Goethe and Schiller, books and music to sustain her knowledge of German culture. She took the family photograph album to bear witness to her cultured origins and the cookery book would remind her of home and of all the pleasant hours she had spent in the kitchen; it would also encourage her to continue the family tradition of trying out new recipes. Friedrich's baby things were what probably personified her family recollections. Back in Berlin, the future of the departing couple was still unconfirmed, but the hint at Lisa's own fertility seems to have been straightforward enough.

All this can be established with some certainty. What is practically impossible to find out, however, is how these things were actually put to use. A study of the family pictures in the 'Lange Mandi' album yields some idea of how the Ur-Rahman family lived and how Lisa, once she had gained her independence, furnished her own home.

The very first pictures in the album tell us that the Ur-Rahman family routinely lived on the floor and covered the reception rooms with white sheets to receive the couple. In daily life, however, the floors were covered with a non-descript brownish material. None of the photographs show the lace that Lisa had brought, but then only five weeks after their rapturous reception, Azeez died of appendicitis; the family photographs then show Lisa visibly losing weight. Her brothers in law, Khalid, Hamid and Habib surrounded her with loving care and, probably in an attempt to make her eat something at all, carried a table and chairs to the roof so that they could eat 'European-style'.

In the summer of 1938, a year after her arrival, Khalid Ur-Rahman arranged for Lisa to move into a bungalow where she could live on her own and teach at the near-by Islamia high school for girls. There are a number of photographs of the family in the bungalow garden, where they can be seen chatting and spreading a tablecloth on the grass to prepare for the inevitable picnic. Meanwhile, wicker chairs on the veranda show that Lisa, when alone, took refuge in a more comfortable seating position and two pictures of her painting studio confirm this. After her marriage to Nazir Ahmad in July 1939, a studio was built on the side of the bungalow. The photographs, captioned 'THE STUDIO HOUSE-WARMING PARTY', show a big studio table and some low comfortable chairs.

Apart from these glimpses, how Lisa put the Oettinger family treasures to use – the lace, books and music – remains largely unknown. Nonetheless, many of the objects in the trunks show telling signs of wear, thus demonstrating that she actually did surround herself with them. Four examples have been singled out to explain this.

The first one is a heavy package containing large photographs in gold frames tied together with string. On an attached slip of paper, she had written: 'Mum's home country. Pictures of walks and lakes in and around Berlin. Coloured photographic prints dated around 1900, which hung in our dining room and were taken by me to India, where I put them into the present frames. Mum'.

The second consists of numerous plastic bags, each with a little slip of paper in a corner saying 'For Suhail only' or 'MUST remain in the family', containing the stiff linen napkins, tablecloths and handkerchiefs that once made up the stock of her household and that are so beautifully sewn with fine filet inlay work and embroidered rims. Other plastic bags contain specimens of embroidery and bone lace. Their accompanying messages read: 'Done by your great great grandmother', 'This was made by *Urgrossmutterchen*', '*Grossmutterchen* made these embroideries and designed them also!' or simply, 'MUST remain in the family!' Clearly, this was the part of her heritage that Lisa treasured the most.

The cookery book shows especially many signs of wear and tear. Begun by Lisa's grandmother Johanna in 1871, it collects recipes from around the world. Instead of following the Jewish tradition of *kashrut*, the kosher kitchen that forbids pork, shellfish and the combination of meat and milk, Johanna entered 'hash of wild boar', 'goose-liver paté' and 'stuffed crab', thus reaching out to a universe far beyond that of her ancestors.²¹ Lisa's mother Emilia continued the tradition and also used the booklet to teach her daughters how to cook. In India, Lisa added kebabs, chutneys and chappatis, in Woking scones and lemon curd. The many grease stains on the pages speak a language of their own.

The only item in the trunks to cover all the Oettingers since they came to settle in Marienwerder in 1836, is the family photograph album – a brown leather case with copper feet, a heavy copper lock, and copper corners to shield the pages. Johanna Lewinsohn started it in 1871 with studio photographs of family members in stilted poses on the occasion of her marriage to Louis Oettinger. Pride of place is given to the engagement photographs of Isidor Oettinger and Bertha Lewinsohn (who married in 1838), followed by the wedding pictures of Louis Oettinger and Johanna Lewinsohn (who married in 1871), and then those of Friedrich Oettinger and Emilia Lāwen (who married in 1907). Pictures of their siblings, children and cousins make it perfectly plain that this

21 Gerdien Jonker, *Setting the Table in Prussia and Lahore: A Jewish Recipe Book in Exile*, www.non-lieux de l'exil/DisplacedObjects, 2015.

was a wealthy family with an appetite for luxurious things and the latest fashion. This album was once an expensive article, a source of family pride and meant to stand on a separate table to be shown to visitors on festive occasions. When Johanna died in 1914, that tradition was discontinued, but after a gap of almost 40 years we once again discern a baby. It is a studio portrait of Suhail on a bearskin taken in Karachi in 1949.

From a combination of the snapshots of the Ur-Rahman family and the objects introduced above, we get a sense of Lisa's life in Lahore. First, the Ur-Rahman family cared for Lisa in her distress, surrounded her with love and found a way of allowing her to live an independent 'European' life yet remain part of the family. For her part, as many of the captions in the 'Lange Mandi' album show, Lisa loved her husband's family dearly and received them whenever she could. When she set up her own household in Lahore, she unpacked her suitcases, reframed the pictures of Berlin and hung them on her walls, put her grandmother's cookery book to intensive use, probably (though this is just a guess) spread her great grandmother's lace on the dining table, certainly used the tablecloth and napkins for the many picnics she organized, and almost certainly would open her family photograph album to show the Ur-Rahmans from whence she had come, to explain who was who and to show them what they looked like.

4 Links with the Mughal Past

To understand how the Oettinger family became entangled with the Ur-Rahman family at all, we have to return to the Oettinger home in Berlin. Lisa's mother Emilia was a cultured woman of from a Jewish family that had already converted a hundred years ago. She was moreover a declared 'agnostic' and a dedicated follower of the life reform movement. Moreover, she was a woman with money to spare, which she gladly spent on the biodynamic foodstuffs grown in the life reform garden plots around Berlin and on nature outings with her daughters. However, in 1923, after having lost his money in the crash, her husband fell seriously ill and, while he was recovering in hospital, Emilia had to reorganize their lives to protect what little was left of the family income. Like many bourgeois families, she let rooms to students, who tended to be in possession of ample foreign currency. Susanna, not yet out of school, taught them German, while Lisa sold her designs to studios specializing in interior decoration.²²

²² Jonker, *The Ahmadiyya Quest*, 63–85, 113–9.

Once on that track, a quick succession of events took their lives in a new direction. In 1928, Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah, the newly appointed imam at the Ahmadiyya mosque in Berlin, rented a room in the Oettingers' flat. Susanna taught him German and her mother Emilia took him on hikes in the woods around Berlin. The family got to know his Indian colleagues at the mosque and, by the next year, all three Oettinger women were celebrating Eid al-Fitr at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan.²³ Then, in 1930, when converts and 'friends of Islam' founded the German–Muslim Society, Emilia joined its board as a non-Muslim member.

On observing these events from his hospital bed, Friedrich was more than supportive. Since it was the aim of the German–Muslim Society 'to stimulate an understanding of Islam ... through lectures, intensive community life ... and nurturing friendships between Muslims and their friends in Europe',²⁴ the Muslim connection seemed to fit nicely with his own experience of side-stepping his Jewish roots. In his time, Friedrich had also been a life reformer and converting to another religion suited his way of thinking well. Besides, the mosque seemed to offer the right kind of environment for his daughters to find suitable husbands. The Indian Muslim elites who supported the Ahmadiyya reform movement and had come to Berlin to further their studies usually belonged to the zamindar, the landed gentry of northern India. As cosmopolitans with a culture of their own, their understanding of Islam was rational and highly internalized, so thus refined their inner selves.

In this cultured environment, replete with potential, Lisa soon met her future husband. Azeez Ur-Rahman Mirza (1906–1937) came from the Bakhsh line of Muslim saints and scholars who, since the twelfth century, had left their stamp on Lahore.²⁵ Originally, he was sent to Berlin to pursue his studies in physics, for the Berlin faculty was considered among the best in the world, but after receiving his degree in 1935, he lingered on as assistant imam, gave lectures on Islam in several institutions, accepted a part in a movie being made in the Babelsberg film studios, was frequently seen on the tennis courts, acquired a journalist's badge with which to cover the Berlin Olympics in 1936, and trained as a volunteer fireman for the Nazi organization, *Luftschutz tut not* (air protection is needed), which prepared Germans for future firebomb attacks.²⁶

23 Private Oettinger archive, Emilia Oettinger's photograph collection 1928–1939.

24 Statute of the *Deutsch–Moslemische Gesellschaft* and Protocol No. 1, Register Office Berlin-Charlottenburg, VR No. 8769, 10 April 1930.

25 Mirza means nobleman in Persian and points to a high lineage.

26 Anon, 'Dr Azeez Mirza', *Moslemische Revue*, 1 (1938), 1–3.

Azeez was waiting, no doubt, to marry his 'Lischen', a wait beset with problems, for which he eventually found the winning solution.

The badges suggest that he did not shy away from associating with the Nazi regime. Azeez was an admirer of the Olympic Games, which the Nazis organized, and the press badge that he acquired from the British Embassy allowed him to visit on a daily basis. The reason why he volunteered to train as a fireman was in case the mosque and adjacent mission house were bombed in the war that everyone was expecting. These acts speak of a resolute and pragmatic attitude, of compliance with, rather than disgust for, the German government. Like other Muslims in Berlin, Azeez looked at the Germans with curiosity, as they were expected to help Indians and other colonized peoples to gain their independence. That Lisa held onto his badges suggests that he must have been proud of them.

The things of his that Lisa brought to Lahore, including his books, badges, presents, texts, prayer mat and the photograph album documenting his role in the mosque, together paint a picture of this young Indian intellectual. With his little beard and dark complexion, always solemnly rising to the occasion wearing a tuxedo for lectures, a multi-coloured turban for ritual occasions, or a camel hair mantle with silk cloth for forages into nature, he must have stood out as the proverbial stranger in Nazi Berlin. What did this young man do to smooth the differences and explain Islam as their common ground?

During their courtship, Azeez gave Lisa delicate little treasures, including a pearl necklace, small green jade bowl, and a star pendant with Quartz inlay, which formed part of the Ur-Rahman heritage and was returned to that family after her death.²⁷ Also, as soon as he arrived, he started to buy books that marked his forays into European culture. Among his first purchases was Max Henning's translation of the Quran, which he dedicated to Lisa, noting, 'Important things are never considered enough. Goethe. Azeez, 23 March 1933'. His curiosity led him to Goethe's *Faust*, Rousseau's *Emile*, Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, Greek and Roman culture, European philosophy, and the 'New Man' debate in the mosque. His own views on the matter were documented in two speeches he gave in the mosque in 1933, in which he condemned the ideal of an iron hard, inhuman super hero, whose body must express his power. Instead, he recommended jihad as a way of obtaining inner refinement. Ahmadiyya teachings maintain that the more people speak of war, the more they commit barbarous acts, so advocated looking in on oneself and focusing on 'polishing' one's soul. Azeez too made an effort to be a good person and 'breathe' a cultured

27 Private Oettinger archive, 'Family heirlooms belonging to Suhail Ahmad, August 2006', unpublished document.

atmosphere. Because of his criticism of Nazi ideology, those speeches were never published. But Lisa held onto two copies, typewritten on long (no longer standard-sized) sheets of paper, tied together with an official looking coloured band and two iron stitches, bearing witness to the mosque's treatment of texts it considered central to its mission.

Azeez took seriously the attempt to bring together European and Muslim 'civilizations' in the things and attitudes of daily life. Taking Lisa's infatuation with the German Romantic poets as an entry point, he made her multiple presents of Sufi poetry, among them al-Hallaj, Rumi, the *Rubaiyat*, and the songs of Mirza Schaffy. They seem to have touched a nerve in her religious feelings, which she shared with large parts of the Berlin mosque community.²⁸ Seen from a Muslim viewpoint, German Romanticism prepared the way for Sufi love poetry, just as Sufi poetry prepared the way for the core tenets of Islam. Indeed, Romantic Germans do not seem to have had much trouble understanding them. For the German-Indian couples in the mosque, Azeez and Lisa included, poetry functioned as a bridge between Eastern and Western mentalities, preparing the ground for a meeting rooted in aesthetics and emotions rather than in religious rule and theology.

In the trunks, we also found his prayer mat. One can easily imagine that Lisa used it after his death. If so, it provided a continued, emotional communion between the lovers, which only came to an end when she added the mat to her collection of things.

Incidentally, selecting the prayer mat, perhaps more than any of the other objects, points to her state of mind in 1957 when she was compiling the collection for her son. In 1957, she had settled in England for good and, looking ahead into a fast changing future, was trying to find ways of combining her painting with earning money and providing her son with a proper British education. At that time, the mosque in Woking still offered her a rich community life (this ended in 1965 when Pakistani migrants seized control of it), but times were already changing. In the near future, Lisa with Suhail in toe would attend yoga classes and venture into meditation. Although she remained a Muslim and was eventually buried in the Muslim cemetery in Woking, the ideology of the life reform movement continued to inform her attitude towards religion. To her, religion meant experiment and synthesis, rather than holding onto one tradition.

28 By the mid 1930s, Hossein Kazemzadeh Iranschär (1884–1962), Berlin's most popular speaker on Eastern mysticism, was regularly invited to speak to packed audiences in the mosque. His books and speeches synthesize Sufi poetry with Romantic poetry and Christian suffering, see Chapter 3.

Lisa's own synthesis bore the name Bo Yin Ra.²⁹ For the rest of her life, she held onto a slim volume in linen, *Das Buch vom Glück* (The Book of Happiness), decorated with art deco vignettes and set in Gothic German script. It tells the story of returning to nature, of deep romantic feelings and the power to create from scratch. On the front page she noted, 'this book is a very great talisman and a *mysterious treasure*. ... Please respect it as irreplaceable'. More than the translation of the Quran, more even than the language of the Sufi poets, this was her understanding of what religion was about, and another legacy for her son.

5 How Memory Creates a Family

Knowledge, according to the historian Peter Burke, is 'cooked'. It is processed, codified, tested, interpreted, handed down, heightened to capture the essence of one's tradition and sense of 'who one is' and, eventually, forgotten.³⁰ In the case of the Oettingers, they gathered the knowledge they needed for their upward mobility through the arts of needlework (designing and making fashionable clothes and home furnishings), cooking (which involved extending their horizons), reading and performing music (which gave them an individual route into German culture), as well as through the art of conversion (which allowed them to escape the constrictions of their social position). From Marienwerder to Berlin, a host of family belongings carried this knowledge down the generations, with the lace, linen, embroidery, cookery book, photograph album, postcard collections, sheet music and poetry books serving as its vehicle.

Rummaging through Lisa's trunks, we also came across a number of objects belonging to the cultural tradition of Mughal northern India, which conveyed a knowledge that was very different from that of the European German-Jewish tradition. From these treasures, Lisa seems to have gleaned the kind of knowledge that helped her sustain life in a foreign country. Among these were some of the things that she had worn (saris, Indian blouses, mantillas, straw shoes and Mughal jewellery) and the things with which she had adorned her home (precious glassware, ingeniously crafted toys, masks and thin paper cuts with intricate patterns). Prior to their storage in the trunks, the saris had been

29 Bo Yin Ra was the pen name of the Austrian painter Josef Anton Schneiderfranken (1876–1943), who taught that happiness lay in the use of one's ability to create with one's own hands.

30 Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5.

carefully folded, wrapped in cotton and tied with string. The accompanying explanatory note states: 'Saris, gold blouse *Gharara*, petticoats & other blouses worn by Mum in Lahore'.

In Lahore, Lisa became Zubeidah Begum. She acquired the title not only on the strength of having been the wife of a nobleman, *Mirza*, but also because she had become a genuine Muslim, adapting herself to an Oriental way of life and siding with the Muslims against the colonial government. Being highly respected for her wisdom and someone from whom people sought advice, she in turn tried to live up to their expectations by dressing elegantly in Indian saris. Although none of her elaborate Mughal jewellery has survived, her photographs nonetheless convey her status. They show a distinguished woman with excellent posture, straight-backed and standing apart from the others. In England, her memory lingered on. When she died in Woking a good sixty years later, Ahmadis from all over the country gathered at her graveside to pay their respects.³¹

She carefully placed the things with which she used to decorate her bungalow in Lahore in straw baskets prior to assigning them a place in the trunks. This time, there was no accompanying note explaining their function, but from looking at those tender little clay figures, glass bottles, wooden masks and paper cuts, it is evident that Lisa was deeply interested in and drew inspiration from Mughal crafts and patterns. One photograph in the 'Lange Mandi' album shows her at work in her studio in Murree, a mountain hill station where rich Lahoris sought refuge from the summer heat. She is painting a pattern on the fringe of a tablecloth, much as she used to do for industrial cloth production in Berlin. The difference is in the quality of the pattern, which is no longer 'Oriental' but an exquisite graphic design reminiscent of traditional Mughal art.

Things are never mute, yet they cannot speak. The knowledge that Lisa acquired in Lahore enabled her to survive and it showed in the way she dressed, lived up to societal expectations, adapted her art to a different culture, yet managed to live on her own in a country where women were not expected to do so. In this respect, the Lahore collection was not unlike the German Jewish collection handed down through the Oettinger family. It was this knowledge that she wanted to pass on to her son. However, when he came to receive the archive of things that she had assembled for him, his insights were his own and not hers, so they triggered memories other than the ones that Lisa had meant them to conserve.

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31 Interview with Nasir Ahmad, an elder of the Lahore-Ahmadiyya community in England and himself a *Lahori Ahmadi* (15 September 2016).

History is unpredictable. In the sealed letter Lisa placed on top of the collection before closing her archive, she explained to her son how very lonely she had been in Lahore and how much she had longed for her mother. Yet, when she went to look for her family after the war, they refused to return to India with her because she had fallen in love with a much younger marine officer from Karachi who was working in the Woking mosque and they somewhat rashly had a child together, Suhail. Unfortunately, the marine officer had been promised to her sister Susanna to ease her entry into India (which by then had become Pakistan). Understandably, Susanna felt that Lisa had 'betrayed' her and the sisters quarrelled. In the end, Lisa had to return to India alone. Her husband Nazir Ahmad graciously took her back, adopted the child as his own and protected her against slander. However, his family objected and in the end they both agreed that Lisa would be better off in England, so that is where she took her son in 1954. Sadly, the rift between the two sisters was never healed and it was only when they had both died, Susanna in 2005, Lisa a year later, that their children got together to contemplate the heritage that their mothers had left behind. The trunks and the documents provided them with a key, but the memories that the objects and descriptions aroused in the cousins differed significantly from the messages they were once meant to convey. From the perspective of the heirs, the memories they stirred were of unhappy childhoods, endless quarrels between the two sisters whom they remembered most for their biting arrogance, rejection of fat or unhappy people, and obsession with German culture. Thus, Lisa's legacy, through which she intended to pass on the precious knowledge of how to survive and which, heavily infused with emotion, conveyed generations of Oettinger experience and a cultural knowledge of northern India, had finally reached its end.