

Letters, interviews

Library of Congress launches online trove of letters, interviews and other artifacts

The Washington Post · 1 Feb 2017 · BY TARA BAHRAMPOUR

and other personal artifacts from the Sigmund Freud Collection at the Library of Congress have been digitized for online viewing.



Sigmund Freud's pocket watch is part of the online archive at the Library of Congress. Freud experts say the material will open doors to more researchers, but the original material will no longer be accessible for scholars to touch.

all, let alone found a home at the Library of Congress, is "kind of a miracle," McAleer said. It did not occur to him until well into his career that such artifacts as original book manuscripts might be of interest to others, so he didn't keep them. And unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not retain carbon copies of the letters he sent, so they had to be located and retrieved from around the world.

At one point, while he was still casually tossing away notes and drafts, his apprentice and patient the Princess Marie Bonaparte, great-granddaughter of Napoleon's brother, intervened by begging his housekeeper not to dis-



In 1859, a Jewish wool and textile merchant from Moravia tried to immigrate to Leipzig, Germany, with his wife, toddler son and infant daughter. He carried with him a "good conduct certificate," or personal reference, in ornate script, from the mayor of their official home village. But it was not enough: A restriction barred Jews from settling in that part of Germany. So the family moved to Vienna, the toddler grew up to be the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, and the rest is history.

As of Wednesday, that history — including the certificate, with its calligraphic flourishes and teal-colored stamps — will for the first time be available to anyone in the world with an Internet connection. The Library of Congress has digitized much of its extensive Sigmund Freud Collection, 20,000 items in all, including letters, artifacts from his personal and professional life and hundreds of interviews with colleagues, family members, patients and even his housekeeper.

Digitization took a year and a half and was funded by the Polonsky Foundation, a cultural heritage nonprofit in the United Kingdom. People will be able to browse the collection and stumble upon things they hadn't known about, much like wandering through library stacks. They will also be able to download images of the material.

Freud experts welcomed the move, noting that online availability of the material could help kindle interest in Freud worldwide.

It will open doors to researchers whose travel funds are limited or for whose nationalities travel to the United States may become

more difficult, said Louis Rose, a history professor at Otterbein University in Ohio and executive director of the Sigmund Freud Archives, a private organization of psychoanalysts in New York.

"Whether a person from Iran is going to be able to come and see the materials in D.C. is in doubt for a number of old and new reasons," he said. "Now, there's the URL."

With a few exceptions, scholars will no longer be allowed access to the original material, a measure taken to protect it against deterioration. That means no more fingers stroking the ultrafeminine stationery of Freud's fiancée, Martha Bernays, its pages edged with cherubs and pink hearts and gilt curlicues. The couple wrote to each other daily, and sometimes twice a day, starting from when they met in 1882 to when they married in 1886.

In the voluminous cache of love letters, the young doctor already showed hints of where his interests lay.

"He started classifying her letters as either 'open' or 'concealed' . . . in which she opened herself to him or concealed herself," said Margaret McAleer, senior archives specialist at the Library of Congress.

Which letters garnered which classifications is lost to time, but their correspondence reveals Freud's early interests, including his fascination with cocaine and its various uses — its efficacy in managing pain, lifting depression and soothing his own anxiety in social situations. "The next time you see me you will see a big, wild man with cocaine in his body," he wrote to Bernays in 1884.

In fact, Freud believed that a much-anticipated visit to his sweetheart robbed him of an early cocaine-related triumph. Before setting off, "he shared with some of his colleagues who were ophthalmologists the thought that cocaine might be able to be used successfully to numb eyes in an operation," McAleer said.

While he was away, one of them, Carl Koller, tried it on animals and published his findings, catapulting him to fame and prompting a jab from Freud in a letter to his future sister-in-law: "The cocaine business has indeed brought me much honor, but the lion's share to others." However, he later wrote that he "bore no grudge" against his fiancée for the missed opportunity, and told her in one letter that he was sending her a vial of the drug.

"You really get a sense of him as this young, ambitious physician who wants to make a name for himself, and he had an idea of how to do it," McAleer said.

That Freud's papers survived at all, let alone found a home at the Library of Congress, is "kind of a miracle," McAleer said. It did not occur to him until well into his career that such artifacts as original book manuscripts might be of interest to others, so he didn't keep them. And unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not retain carbon copies of the letters he sent, so they had to be located and retrieved from around the world.

At one point, while he was still casually tossing away notes and drafts, his apprentice and patient the Princess Marie Bonaparte, great-granddaughter of Napoleon's brother, intervened by begging his housekeeper not to dispose of the contents of the wastepaper basket.

The collection began at the library in 1952 after the Sigmund Freud Archives donated the first batch of material. Further large troves were donated by his daughter Anna, in 1970 and again at her death in 1982. It is now one of the most frequently visited of the manuscript division's 11,900 collections, attracting scholars from around the world.

The online collection will include many interviews never before released as well as guest blogs from the still-active Sigmund Freud Archives.

The collection includes photos and postcards from Freud's sole trip to the United States, taken in 1909. Traveling by oceanliner with protege Carl Jung, the two icons of psychoanalysis passed the time by interpreting each other's dreams. It has prescriptions he wrote, his correspondence with Albert Einstein and letters to a fellow analyst and patient of his, Horace Frink, whose divorce and then marriage to Frink's patient Freud controversially egged on (the union quickly deteriorated).

It includes palm-size notebooks with miniature pencils attached that Freud carried around, his gold pocket watch, an oil portrait of him by Wilhelm Victor Krausz and a small terra cotta bust from Ancient Greece, one of many ancient figurines that adorned his desk.

The survival of so much material also takes on a miraculous sheen in light of the rise of Nazism toward the end of Freud's life. While he was aware of its dangers (he signed an antiwar petition in 1932), he did not seem to take seriously the menace to himself and his family until very late. In mid-March of 1938, he was still in Vienna and his journal entries were short but momentous: "Austria finished;" "Annexed by Germany;" "Hitler in Vienna."

Within days, the Gestapo raided his apartment. "They wanted to burn his books, but they didn't consider his papers to be valuable," McAleer said. A week later, his daughter Anna was taken in for questioning by the Gestapo and narrowly escaped deportation (three of his elderly sisters subsequently died in concentration camps).

By then, it was hard for Jews to leave Austria or find safe countries willing to accept them as refugees, even refugees who were 82, world-famous and seriously ill with cancer, as Freud was. Bonaparte sent telegrams to diplomats across Europe, who pressured the Nazi regime to let him and his family leave and persuaded the United Kingdom to accept them. Under the Gestapo's eye, Bonaparte retrieved Freud's papers from a safe-deposit box and spirited them to the Danish Embassy in Paris, where they remained for the duration of the war. "You belong to the history of human thought," Bonaparte told him in a letter.

The border crossings that bookended Freud's life were a theme in his life work and are particularly relevant today, said Diane O'Donoghue, a senior fellow for the humanities at Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University and a Freud scholar.

"I sense that there is a kind of return again to Freud in sort of new and interesting ways, so it feels to me that the moment of starting the online access is a very good one," she said.

Noting that his childhood experience as a new immigrant and religious minority was marked by poverty and displacement, she added, "Seeing Freud as a migratory subject under a very difficult regime, looking at his work as a cultural history and the issues of politics of Vienna, there is a way in which some aspects of Freud's work are quite timely."