



# 'My ancestor was interned as an enemy alien'

Corinna Meiss found an Anglo-German relative after being given a cache of old postcards. Her search revealed a story of wartime suffering, as **Gail Dixon** discovers



During the First World War, Britain saw the rise of strong anti-German sentiment, also known as 'Germanophobia'. Stoked by propaganda, some UK citizens distrusted German people and this led to riots, looting and even attacks on Dachshunds. The atmosphere was very frightening for those Germans who had made the UK their home and raised their children as British citizens.

Corinna Meiss is a German genealogist and public relations manager who lives in Goslar, near Hanover. She had no idea that members of her extended family lived through Germanophobia in the UK until she made an astonishing discovery.

Initial clues came from a treasure trove of old family photos that her paternal grandmother, Hermine Meiss, kept in a leather trunk. "When I was a little girl in the early 1970s, if it rained and there wasn't much to watch on television, my grandmother would tell me the family history and show me the photos," Corinna explains. "She taught me how to decipher the old German script known as 'Kurrent'."

Hermine was married to Adolf Meiss, the son of general manager Adolf Meiss Senior and Auguste Ferdinandine Wiesener. Auguste was born in 1874 into the wealthy Wiesener family in Goslar, and she lived in the area until her death in 1947.

"I knew the names of several German Wieseners from the photographs in the trunk and that a branch of the family had emigrated to Australia. In 1992, I contacted them by simply calling the international operator. The name is so unusual in Sydney that they found them easily."

Corinna began a fresh search in 2009

that led to a mystery figure. "I was staying in the mountains near Goslar and it snowed so much that I couldn't get out for a few days. I read an intriguing book called *Treasures from the Attic: The Extraordinary Story of Anne Frank's Family* by Mirjam Pressler. The book detailed the family's correspondence dating back to the 1850s. It inspired me to ask my father if we had any old letters or postcards and it was very exciting when he handed me around 300 postcards collected by Auguste and her sister Marië. It was a hobby of young middle-class girls at the time to collect

Wiesener family members appeared, which was very exciting. Postcards from relatives who travelled to Vienna, London, Monaco, Rome and Turin helped me to build up a history of the Wieseners.

"There were three postcards sent from Scotland by Gustav Wiesener to his sister Anna. Everything began to fall into place. I compared the signature on the postcards with the Australian card that he signed and – eureka – they matched.

Corinna began teasing out more clues. "A mention on Ancestry gave Gustav's approximate birth date of 1870, in Goslar.

Unfortunately, the German civic records don't begin until 1874 so I searched for his baptism record in his parents' Goslarian parish. Gustav's father was Louis

Wiesener, the younger brother of Georg who was one of Gustav's godfathers. Therefore Gustav Georg was the first cousin of my great grandmother Auguste Wiesener who married Adolf Meiss."

## Between the lines

The postcards from Scotland became an important clue. "I checked the British newspapers online and promptly found an advertisement Gustav placed in the *Glasgow Herald* in 1899. It reads "a typist, expert operator, good speller, wanted immediately. Gustav Wiesener, 12 Waterloo, Glasgow". I'd found him.

Gustav married fellow German Annie Rabe in Wiesbaden in 1903 and between 1904 and 1908 they had four children: Gustav Junior, Gertrud, Beatrice and a child who was stillborn. Corinna contacted Peter Towey, vice-president of the Anglo-German Family History Society, to find

Who was this man? I had known the names of all Theodor Friedrich's family since childhood

postcards. I scanned them all and transcribed them."

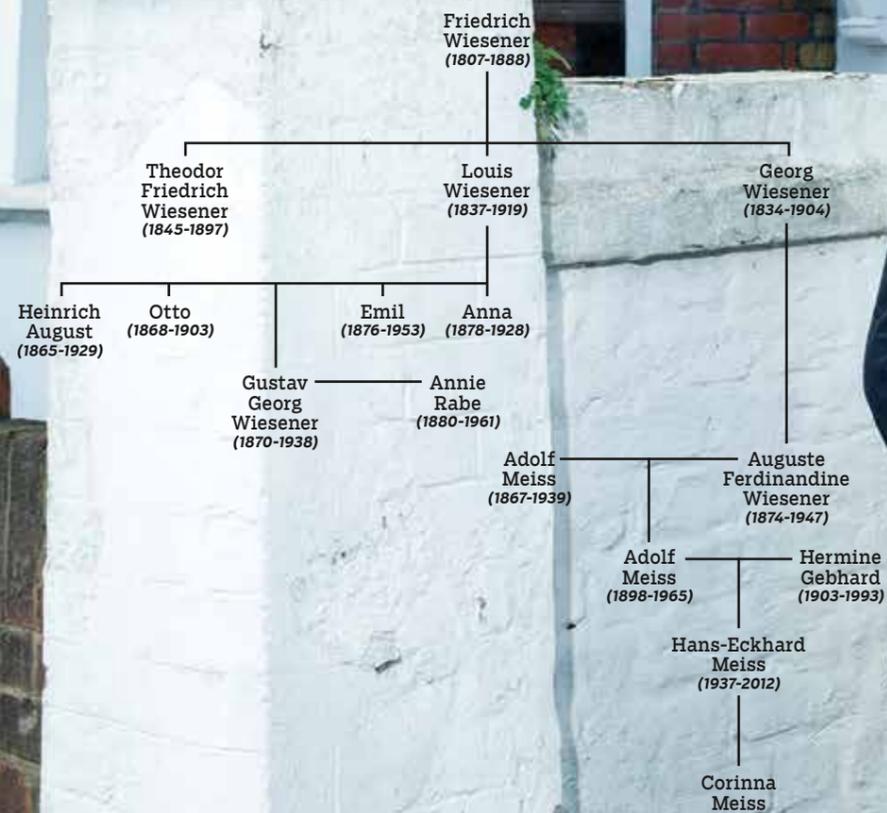
In her grandmother's trunk, Corinna found three Australian Christmas postcards dating from the 1890s. These had been written by the watchmaker and inventor Theodor Friedrich Wiesener to his oldest brother Georg, Auguste's father and Corinna's great great grandfather. One, dated from 1892, was signed Gustav Wiesener. "Who was this man? I had known the names of all of Theodor Friedrich's family since childhood. None of the Australian Wieseners knew of him either."

Gustav remained a puzzle to Corinna for many years. "I had Hermine's photograph collection, so I began matching people to the postcards and researching them in 2009.

"My big breakthrough came in 2010 when I found and then got in touch with a non-Wiesener-related person who had Gustav's sister's postcard collection. Other



CORINNA MEISS



Corinna outside the house in Chiswick which was once owned by Gustav Wiesener

UNP / TERI PINGILLEY

BACKGROUND

INTERNMENT CAMPS



Internees at an English camp during WW1

The internment of enemy civilians (mostly men of military age and suspected spies) began as soon as war broke out in 1914. They were held in unused army camps, on merchant ships, even in a former holiday camp. In May 1915, following Zeppelin raids, submarine warfare and a vicious press campaign, a more general internment began.

Old workhouses, disused factories, hospitals, and schools were taken over and new hutted camps built. The biggest was at Knockaloe on the Isle of Man which held 20,000. Internees were guarded by soldiers, usually older men, and camps ringed with barbed wire. Prisoners had freedom within the camps during daylight hours. They ran their own kitchens, libraries, lectures and classes, usually a theatre, as well as bands and orchestras. They organised themselves, did the basic work within the camps and even elected their own representatives. Neutral diplomats inspected the camps regularly.

If you had contacts and money, life for an internee could be materially quite pleasant. For most though, despite their efforts to entertain themselves, the military discipline, communal latrine and washing facilities, rationed food and censorship of correspondence, with no prospect of release, created psychological pressures. They must have been great, especially knowing their wives, many of whom had been born British, faced hostility without them at home. As the war went on, coal and food shortages made conditions harsher. There were constant complaints about cold and the "Englishness" of the food.

After the Armistice the majority of men were deported to Germany and not allowed back until 1923.

**Phil Tomaselli** is a military family history expert

out more. "The society does a great job for people in the UK with German ancestors. Through their help I got information about Gustav and his children. Later I discovered that Gustav was an active member of the German Lutheran Church and a cashier at the German Club in Glasgow.

Gustav had three brothers, Heinrich August, Otto and Emil, who Corinna was able to trace. They worked for a financial union of 257 societies called Creditreform Association, which was founded in the German town of Mainz in 1879 to protect members against bad debts. Heinrich August was commissioned to expand the company and he and his younger brothers became managing directors in Glasgow, Belfast, London and Goslar during the late 19th century. This led to a major revelation.

"An online search revealed that there were documents on the Creditreform Association at The National Archives at Kew. I travel between Germany and the UK regularly, so I was able to visit in person.

Sealed records

"Since the name of Wiesener is so rare, I quickly discovered a file on Gustav and his wife Annie. Intriguingly, it was marked "closed until 2050". The oldest daughter, Gertrud, is rumoured to have spied for MI5, so I assumed it was to do with her. Naturally, I was very curious to know more so I emailed The National Archives and asked them to open it because I'm a relative. In October 2015, they agreed and I came over to Kew.

"I was glad that I was sitting down when they handed me the file because it was astonishingly large. It contained almost 200



documents about Gustav and Annie. I felt thrilled to have hit such a jackpot.

"There were pictures of Gustav and Annie, travel visas dated right up to his death in 1938 and letters from the Home Office sent during the First World War and afterwards. The photos really gave me the wow factor, because these were the first images I'd seen of the couple. I spent two days at Kew reading through the documents and photographing them."

The file brought both joy and sadness to Corinna. "Peter Towey at the Anglo-German Family History Society had told me that Gustav had been interned and I found his index card on the homepage of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Reading the official documents in the file was something else – it was very touching."



Gustav Wiesener, pictured with his family, was interned in the UK during the First World War

In 1914, the British government began interning 'enemy aliens' and all German and Austrian men in the UK aged between 17 and 45 were detained. Around 30,000 German and Austrian male civilians were interned until 1919. "The file documents Gustav's internment precisely, which was a stroke of luck because so many similar records were destroyed during the war.

"I traced the path of his suffering; he had locomotor ataxia, a condition that results in a failure of muscular coordination. Gustav was interned for more than two years in four camps including Stratford, Wakefield, the German Hospital in Dalston and Alexandra Palace, which must have been so hard given his health problems. He wrote letters appealing to be moved to a hospital, which he offered to pay for himself, and in 1917 he was transferred to the German Hospital.

"During the Second World War, Creditreform was closed down, which meant that 50 English employees lost their jobs.



Annie Wiesener was not allowed to return to the UK until 1947

Gustav and Annie owned two homes, in Glasgow and Chiswick, and the file revealed that Annie sub-letted in order to keep the family afloat during the war.

"Internment is a very emotive subject. Many of the internees had lived in Britain for decades and considered themselves to be loyal subjects. Conditions could be harsh and food was poor. 'Barbed wire fever' afflicted many and some men attempted suicide. I've read about one internee who killed himself after he found out that his three children died of malnutrition during his imprisonment.

"Wives and children were allowed to visit the men, however it involved running the gauntlet because people threw stones and spat at them. Plundering of German flats was a daily occurrence. Some families even anglicised their names during the war to avoid Germanophobia."

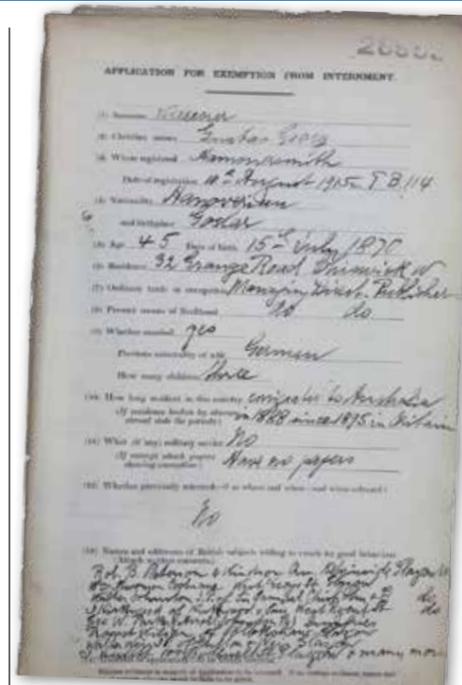
After the war

Gustav was released in December 1917 and was forced to spend several years in Goslar before he was allowed to return to his family in the UK in 1923. He lived there until his death in 1938. After Gustav's death, Annie went to Wiesbaden in 1938, and was forced to stay there until 1947, as she was still a German subject when World War Two broke out. She died in 1961 in Isleworth.

"The file has given me an insight into Gustav's character. He was clearly an ambitious man. However, he was also kind and caring because when his brother Otto died in 1903, leaving a widow and five children, Gustav helped to support the family for many years.

"I suspect that he may have been a broken man after his internment. In photos where he is aged 48 he looks like an old man." During his captivity, Gustav lost his German nationality. It was not until 1933 that he became a Goslar citizen and thus a German subject. In between, he was stateless.

"In the Kew file, he describes himself as a 'convinced Briton' and I'm sure that after 50 years in the British Empire he felt more British than German.



Gustav's health suffered during his wartime internment and he applied for an exemption

"I'm very proud of the Wieseners. My research revealed a strong sense of social commitment in them. Through the Lutheran church, they donated money to help orphans and people suffering persecution overseas. After Gustav's brother Otto died, he helped to support his nephew, Lewis Wiesener. Lewis became a pastor and lived in a military bus for ten years giving pastoral care to people who had fled Communist East Germany. Emil Wiesener, Gustav's youngest brother, publicly opposed the Nazis and was arrested and lost his business as a result. "Genealogy is always a journey into yourself and I have discovered so much about where the traits in my modern day family stem from."

YOUR STORY

Share your family story with us and you could appear in the magazine

Please write to the address on page 3 or email [claire.vaughan@immediate.co.uk](mailto:claire.vaughan@immediate.co.uk)

KEY SOURCES

GLASGOW ARCHIVES

There has long been a thriving German community in Glasgow and membership details and the minutes of the German Club are on the Glasgow University site ([gla.ac.uk/services/archives](http://gla.ac.uk/services/archives)).

UK GERMAN ANCESTORS

The Anglo German Family History Society ([agfhs.org](http://agfhs.org)) has a useful name index that can be searched for ancestors of interest or other connections. It also has some census details

for the German Hospital in Hackney, London.

THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Trace German ancestors at [nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://nationalarchives.gov.uk). It has details of 'alien arrivals',

registration cards, passenger lists and internees.

RED CROSS ARCHIVES

Details of First World War POWs and internees can be found at [grandeguerrre.icrc.org](http://grandeguerrre.icrc.org).

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