

Case Study 4.4: Ida Dehmel's Archive Cabinet (Hamburg, 1901)

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Largely forgotten today, Richard Dehmel (1863–1920) was considered a literary prodigy in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Germany. He was hailed as a ‘new Goethe’ and very well connected in the literary world of his time. Before he met his second wife Ida (born Coblenz, 1870–1942) in 1895, he supposedly used to store his vast correspondence with many notable contemporaries simply in bags in his attic. It was Ida who made it her life's mission to gather and manage the famous poet's papers and preserve them for posterity. In 1901, the year of their marriage, she commissioned this impressive wooden archive cabinet which is more than two metres in height and made from oak, alder and pine. The upper part, covered by three lockable doors, consists of six vertical compartments of varying width with about one hundred adjustable shelves, labelled with names of individuals, groups, places or years. The centre is occupied by an additional compartment with a lockable flap. In a letter to her sister Alice Bensheimer of 18 March 1902, Ida sketches the layout of what she confidently refers to as ‘my archive cabinet’: poets are neatly separated from artists, friends and family, writers on art, and publishers. Letters grouped by year are awaiting entry into the registry. Apparently, the cabinet was not meant to store the materials permanently but rather support the organisation and classification of the author's archive while it was still growing and changing. Being able to easily rearrange the shelves was most likely a prerequisite. The lower part of the cabinet has nine drawers, three of them full-width and each of them equipped with a lock as well. Around 1912, a second cabinet with similar configurations was added and the first one slightly altered. The many locks with their many keys seem to indicate that, right from the start, Ida was well aware of the cultural (and economic) valuables she was keeping. After his death in 1920, the cabinets indeed became a site of pilgrimage for scholars and admirers of Richard Dehmel. In 1926, the archive was eventually purchased by the city of Hamburg, but remained in the custody of Dehmel's widow until September 1939 when most of the materials were removed for safekeeping. Persecuted by the Nazis as a Jew, but unable to part with the house and her duty as Richard's literary executor, Ida committed suicide in 1942. Today, Dehmel's papers are held at the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky. The two archive cabinets – once derelict and damaged, but thoroughly restored in 2015 – are displayed at the Dehmelhaus in Hamburg-Blankenese. Even without the original contents, the curious compartmentalisation, the many locks and keys as well as the inscriptions on the remaining shelves still offer a glimpse into Ida Dehmel's archival devotion and her idiosyncratic filing system.

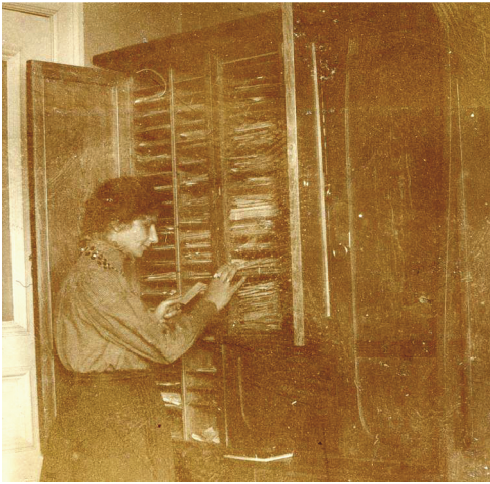


Fig. 1: Ida Dehmel in front of her archive cabinet (before 1912); courtesy of Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg.



Fig. 2: Ida Dehmel's archive cabinet after restoration; © Carolin Vogel.