

## OSKAR FRANKFURTER: A BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION

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**ABSTRACT**—This article reexamines the life of Dr Oskar Frankfurter (1852–1922), co-founder and president of the Siam Society from 1906 to 1917. Despite his impactful contributions to Thai studies and culture during his tenure as chief librarian of the Vajirañāṇa National Library, his life remains shrouded in obscurity. Drawing from recently discovered archival sources in Thailand, Germany, and the UK, the article explores Frankfurter's early years in Hamburg, his influential career in Siam from 1884 to 1918, and his role in establishing Thai Studies in Germany. The narrative is structured to cover key life phases, offering a glimpse into the fascinating legacy of this forgotten luminary.

**KEYWORDS:** Bangkok; Hamburg; Oskar (Oscar) Frankfurter; Siam Society; Thai Studies in Germany

### Introducing Oskar Frankfurter

In 2024, the Siam Society in Bangkok celebrates its 120th anniversary. Dr Oskar Frankfurter (alternatively spelled Oscar),<sup>2</sup> a once-renowned German scholar and co-founder, served as its president from 1906 until 1917, shaping the society's trajectory in its formative years more significantly than perhaps any other individual. Despite his profound influence,

Frankfurter has largely faded from public memory, remembered only by a small number of specialists.<sup>3</sup>

Frankfurter dedicated nearly half of his life to Siam (modern-day Thailand), serving the Siamese Government as the chief librarian of the Vajirañāṇa National Library from 1905 onwards. He authored numerous works on Thai (Siamese) language, culture, and history. However, details about his life remain elusive, with only a single, poor-quality portrait of him being published (Wright & Breakspear 1908: 251).

Drawing from newly unearthed material from archives in Thailand, Germany, and the United Kingdom, as well as private collections, this article seeks to reevaluate Dr Frankfurter's life (1852–1922). It traces

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<sup>2</sup> The earliest dated documents, such as Frankfurter's school certificate (1874), the documents pertaining to his doctorate (1878), including his signature under a handwritten *curriculum vitae*, as well as archival documents issued by German authorities (German Embassy, Foreign Office, etc.) write his name as "Oskar". Apparently, at some moment during his stay in Siam, Frankfurter changed the spelling of his first name to "Oscar", following English orthography, as testified in his marriage certificate (1910) and death certificate (1922).

<sup>3</sup> Some basic information on his life and work can be found in Stoffers 2012. An earlier short appreciation is given in Velder 1962: 52f.

his journey from his early years in Hamburg to his extended residency in Siam between 1884 and 1918, his struggles during Siam's declaration of war against Germany in July 1917, and his eventual passing in his hometown of Hamburg.

Of particular interest is Frankfurter's unexpected tenure as a Siamese language instructor at the newly established University of Hamburg, a role he held until his death on 1 October 1922. This discovery sheds light on his pivotal role in laying the groundwork for Thai Studies in Germany.

While this article focuses on reconstructing Frankfurter's life, his multifaceted contributions warrant a more comprehensive exploration. His founding role in the Siam Society, tenure as its secretary and president, and scholarly achievements merit further in-depth examination,<sup>4</sup> which will be undertaken in a subsequent issue of this journal.

### Childhood, Education and High School Years

Oskar Frankfurter was born 23 February 1852 in Hamburg, the youngest child of Dr Naphtali Frankfurter and Amalie Maier. Naphtali, his father, was born in 1810 in Oberdorf, Württemberg, southwestern Germany. He studied philosophy first in Heidelberg and thereafter in Tübingen where he earned a doctorate in 1833. After his marriage with Amalie, a young woman from Leimen, near Heidelberg, Naphtali took over a rabbinate near Heilbronn in December 1834 and moved with his young family to Hamburg in 1840. There he became the rabbi at the

New Israelite Temple in the Poolstraße, the center of the liberal Jewish reform church (Wilck 2004). He was closely connected to influential Jewish personalities of the day, including Dr Gabriel Riesser (1806–1863), a leading pioneer of Jewish emancipation who eventually became a *Oberlandesgerichtsrat* (councilor in a higher regional court) the first Jewish judge in Germany (Schoeps 2020: 45), and Salomon Heine, a banker and notable philanthropist from the Free and Hanseatic City (*Freie und Hansestadt*) of Hamburg (Steckmest 2017: 24). In 1848, Naphtali was elected to the Hamburg City Council (*Hamburger Konstituante*), a body of 188 members, which granted legal and economic equality to Hamburg's Jews in February 1849.

Oskar Frankfurter had several elder siblings. His sister Ida, nine years his senior, was of particular importance, not least because Oskar would later marry Ida's daughter, his niece, Amély Toni Lefeld, in 1910 (see below). Naphtali Frankfurter died on 11 April 1866 at the age of 56. Oskar was only 14 years old at the time. We do not know how the father's death impacted the well-being of the family. We may assume that Naphtali had taken precautionary measures so that his family could count on at least some financial and other support from the Jewish community. Based on contemporary address books for Hamburg (*Hamburger Adreßbuch*), we are able to identify the area where the widow, Amalie Frankfurter, lived with her children. While the Frankfurters had been living presumably in an official residence (*Dienstwohnung*) of the New Israelite Temple, at Poolstraße 12, from 1846 until 1866, they moved after Naphtali's death to a new residence at

<sup>4</sup> Brief mention of Frankfurter's work for the Siam Society can be found in Warren 2004: 10–12.



Johanneum und Speersort.

**FIGURE 1: The Johanneum high school in Speersort street, Hamburg, in mid-19th century © Kunsthalle Hamburg**

Hohe Bleichen 24, Terrasse 2, which, at that time, was a prominent address in the city.

In the mid-19th century, compulsory schooling did not yet exist in Hamburg; it was introduced only in 1871. The liberal Jewish community had its own school, the Hamburg Israelite Free School (*Israelitische Freischule*), founded in 1815. During Oskar Frankfurter's childhood and youth, this school enjoyed a good reputation under its director, Anton Rée, a reform educationist who transformed the school from a religious institution into an interdenominational school. We do not know for sure whether Oskar, who was a weak and ailing child, attended this school. However, there were only a number of prestigious private schools in Hamburg and wealthy parents usually organized private home schooling for their children as well, especially for their sons. His father Napthali had built an impressive library

during his rabbinate in Württemberg. That library contained not only theological books, but also the works of classical Roman writers, such as Seneca, Ovid, and Tacitus, as well as the German classics and works of philosophy. Thus, we may assume that, from early childhood, young Oskar had access to a huge body of knowledge through his father's books and, presumably, family discussions (Müller 1916: 76).

The earliest evidence of Oskar Frankfurter's school attendance is from 1872, when, at the age of 20, he enrolled in the humanist Johanneum Gymnasium (*Gelehrtenschule*; high school) near the mayor's office and the Petri Church [FIGURE 1]. Most of his peers in the *Unterprima* (Grade 12) were considerably younger than he was. His late enrolment was because the young Oskar had spent five years working in a trade before discovering his "love for books". In his handwritten *curriculum vitae*, in Latin,

which he submitted in 1878 with his doctorate to the University of Göttingen, he noted that he decided to devote himself to the study of the “literas”.<sup>5</sup>

Frankfurter received an excellent education at the Johanneum, the only higher education institution in Hamburg in those days. The school instilled strict discipline and routine in its students and teaching emphasized classical education, with Latin and ancient Greek as the major foreign languages. In addition, a broad range of subjects was taught, including German, French, English, History, Mathematics, and Physics. Frankfurter’s Latin teacher was a leading expert on Roman poet Horace. One of Frankfurter’s classmates, five years his junior, was Heinrich Rudolf Hertz (1857–1894), the famous German scientist who proved the existence of electromagnetic waves.<sup>6</sup> Werner von Melle, the later founder of the University of Hamburg and First Mayor of the Hanseatic city, who was also attending the same school, once remarked that the Johanneum emphasized individual freedom and creative thinking, in contrast to the Prussian traditional school system, which was based on regimentation and enforcement (Richter 2016: 48 ff). Nevertheless, the extent to which young Oskar’s education at the Johanneum profoundly influenced his development remains unknown.

<sup>5</sup> Oskar Frankfurter, “Auctor de vita sua”, in Archiv der Universität Göttingen, Philosophische Fakultät, Vol. 164, Folio 146, recto. The Latin original reads: “[...] quinque per annos rei mercatoriae operani dedi. Sed cum iam dudum literas singulari amore amplexus essem occasione data his me tam dedere constitui [...]”.

<sup>6</sup> “Student directory (Schülerverzeichnis) 1874” of the Johanneum, courtesy of the administration of the Johanneum, Hamburg.

Shortly before the Abitur (or *Matura*, final graduation), Frankfurter was forced to leave the Johanneum school because of serious health problems. He went to Kiel, a major industrial town and population center in Schleswig-Holstein, situated almost 100 kilometers north of Hamburg, on the shores of the Baltic Sea. His departure certificate (*Abgangszeugnis*) from the Johanneum, dated 20 October 1874, states: “Oskar Frankfurter has visited this school of high learning since 1872, starting with the *Unterprima* class and latterly, since Easter 1874, he attended the *Oberprima* class, but has to leave school because of his ailing health, to be in Kiel under the supervision of a medical doctor”.<sup>7</sup> According to Frankfurter’s *curriculum vitae*, this medical doctor was the renowned Prof. Karl Bartels (1822–1878), an internist and pathologist, known for research on kidney disorders. Though Frankfurter does not disclose any details about his illness, it is likely that it was somehow related to Bartels’ field of expertise.<sup>8</sup>

Frankfurter’s bad health in his final high school years may have affected his performance. The Johanneum certificate classifies his general attitude to learning as “good”. Oskar was said to be diligent and thoughtful and “he made every effort, although this was not consistently successful due to interruptions in school attendance and insufficient prior

<sup>7</sup> The German original reads: “Oskar Frankfurter hat die hiesige Gelehrtenschule seit 1872 von der Klasse Unterprima an besucht und war zuletzt, seit Ostern 1874 Schüler der Klasse Oberprima, aus welcher er jetzt ausscheidet, um infolge seines kränklichen Zustandes in Kiel unter Aufsicht seines Arztes zu sein” (my translation).

<sup>8</sup> For a biography of Karl Bartels, see Feiner 1970: 64–65.

knowledge".<sup>9</sup> It seems that diligence and perseverance were the most notable character traits of the young Frankfurter, whose attitude towards teachers and peers was considered positive. In spite of his rabbinic family background, he did not participate in the optional Hebrew language class and, due to his fragile health, he also did not participate in physical education. His knowledge of German language and literature was evaluated “between satisfactory and good”, while his Latin and Greek were considered “not very satisfactory”, and his performance in mathematics and physics “hardly satisfactory”. In the two modern foreign languages, English and French, Frankfurter’s achievements were deemed “not satisfactory”.

One may speculate whether Oskar Frankfurter suffered simply from a specific, temporary illness or rather from a general physical weakness. Later correspondence with Prof. Kuhn (see below) show that Frankfurter regularly spent several weeks in the spa towns of Bad Kissingen (letter dated 14 September 1895) and Karlsbad (letter dated 14 October 1902) during his frequent visits to Germany from Siam. In February 1902, he even arrived ill in Germany and had to undergo surgery in Berlin. The recuperation process lasted until June of that year. In Frankfurter’s own words, this “severe operation” was “a consequence of the tropical climate” and “took away all [he] saved”.<sup>10</sup> On 5 February 1908, the *Straits Budget* (Singapore)

noted that “Dr Frankfurter, attached to the Siamese Government, was recently reported to be in hospital in Berlin, suffering from Bangkok’s usual complaint—abscess of the liver” (p. 4).

### Student and Young Scholar

We have no documented evidence of where Oskar Frankfurter went to finish his final year of high school. He attended the *Kieler Gelehrtenschule*, which, at that time, was the only school to offer a comprehensive higher school education in Kiel. Frankfurter himself mentions “the highly educated Konrad Niemeyer”, who was director of the school from 1869 until 1890.<sup>11</sup> In 1874, Frankfurter completed high school with the *Abitur* (*Matura*) and embarked on his higher studies in comparative linguistics—with Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit—at the universities of Göttingen and Berlin under the Indologist Theodor Benfey (1819–1896) and the linguist August Fick (1833–1916), respectively. Frankfurter earned his doctorate in a very specialist topic of classical Greek philology: the phenomenon of epenthesis.<sup>12</sup> Epenthesis (“Insertion”) means the addition of one or more sounds to a word, especially at the beginning or end of a syllable, or between two syllabic sounds in a word. Prof. Benfey, a renowned linguist, and Sanskrit specialist at the time, wielded significant influence over the young

<sup>9</sup> The German original reads: “[Er war] nach Kräften bemüht, wenngleich er infolge der Unterbrechungen im Schulbesuch und mangelhafter Vorkenntnisse nicht immer im Erfolg beständig war” (my translation).

<sup>10</sup> Letter of Oscar Frankfurter to HRH King Vajiravudh, 13 June 1917. In National Archives of Thailand, ๑๓/11/18.

<sup>11</sup> Archiv der Universität Göttingen, Philosophische Fakultät, Vol. 164, Folio 146, recto. The Latin original reads: “cum iterum iterumque in mortem riderem ad cuniam Bartelsium configi atque ut auxilio eius uti possem Kiliae mansi, ibique gymnasium quod Konradus Niemeyer vir eruditissimus moderabatur adii”.

<sup>12</sup> Frankfurter, Oskar. *Über die epenthese von j (i) F (u) im griechischen*. Göttingen, 1879.

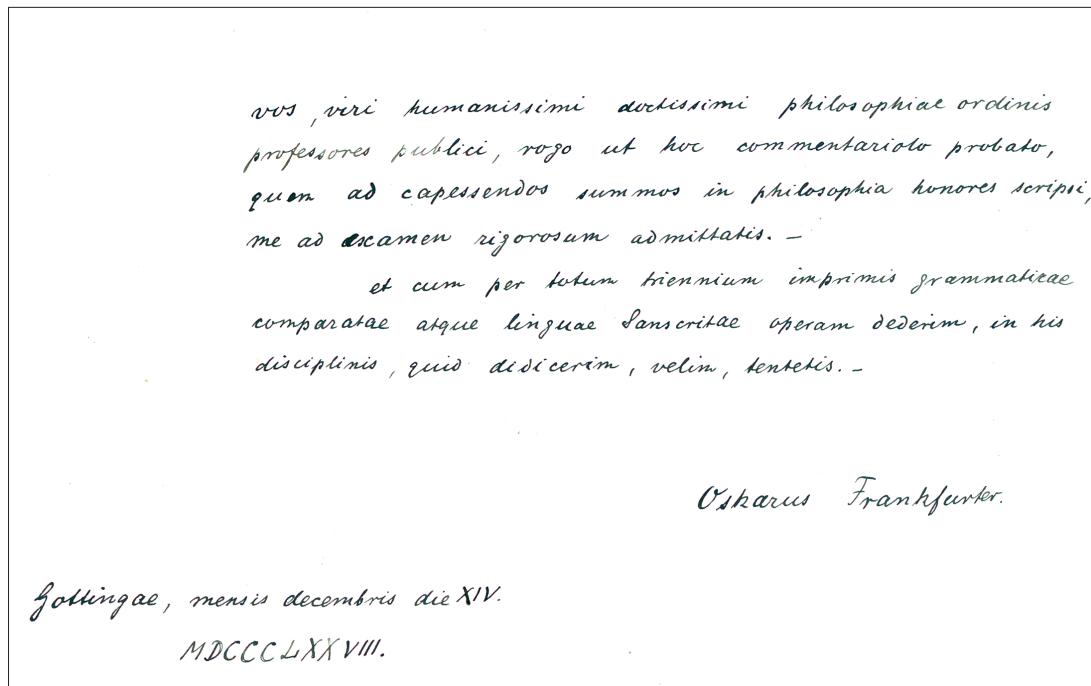


FIGURE 2: Handwritten cover letter in Latin requesting examination for his doctoral degree in comparative grammar and Sanskrit, Göttingen, dated 14 December 1878, and signed “Oskarus Frankfurter” © Universitätsarchiv Göttingen

Frankfurter (Bezzenberger 1902: 358). It was to Benfey that he dedicated his doctoral dissertation. Following an official request penned by Frankfurter in Latin [FIGURE 2], the oral examination took place on 19 December 1878.

While Prof. Fick examined Frankfurter in the field of comparative linguistics, Prof. Benfey continued the examination with Sanskrit, allowing the candidate to translate a hymn of the *Rgveda*.<sup>13</sup> Oskar Frankfurter subsequently took his official vows on 20 December 1878 [FIGURE 3].

Frankfurter’s dissertation was published as a monograph in spring 1879. Some time after 1879—not in 1874 as Otto Franke mistakenly claims in his

obituary (1922–1923: 153)—he went to Oxford to study with Prof. Max Müller (1823–1900), one of the greatest Sanskrit scholars of his time. When Frankfurter arrived at Oxford, Müller had already abandoned his professorship and devoted all his energies to research and publications. In Oxford, Frankfurter probably deepened his own studies and may have assisted Müller in his work. Robert Childers (1838–1876), another esteemed Pali and Buddhist scholar at Oxford University, had passed away prior to Frankfurter’s arrival, thus preventing the publication of his Pali Grammar, for which he had completed a draft version. It is possible that Müller employed Frankfurter to help conclude Childers’ unfinished projects. In any event, Frankfurter made Childers’

<sup>13</sup> Archiv der Universität Göttingen, Philosophische Fakultät, Vol. 164, Folio 144, recto and verso.

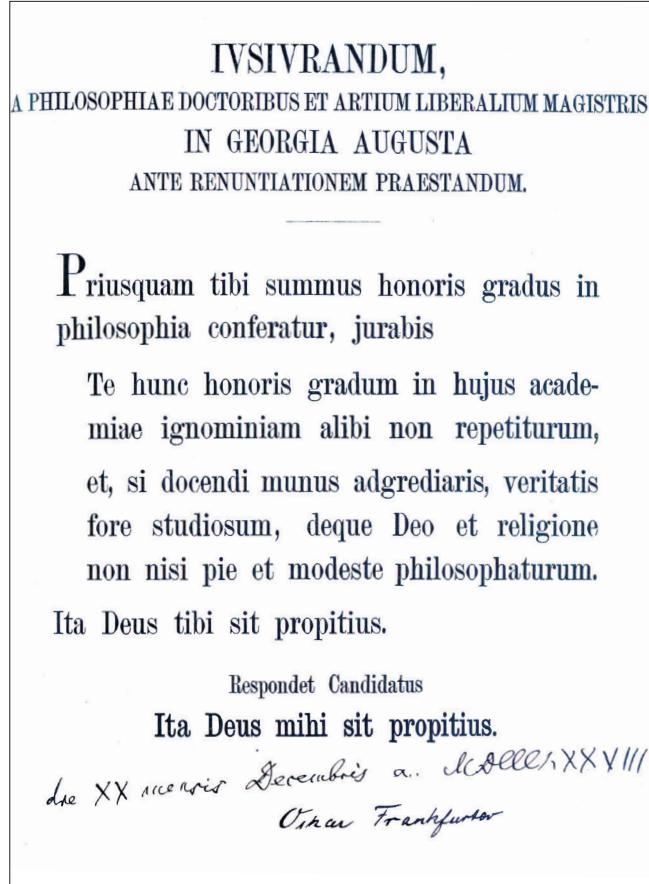


FIGURE 3: Oath taken by Oskar Frankfurter after submission of his doctoral dissertation, dated 20 December 1878 © Universitätsarchiv Göttingen

*Classified List of Pali Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library* ready for publication in 1880. Frankfurter also had contact with another Pali scholar, Thomas William Rhys Davids (1843–1922), Professor of Pali at the University of London from 1882 until 1904. In 1883, Frankfurter published his own *Handbook of Pali*. He dedicated his work—in friendship and respect—to Richard Morris, vice-president of the Philological Society, who devoted his later years to studying the Pali language and literature.

During the final year of his stay in Oxford, and during the subsequent two decades, Frankfurter had an occasional

correspondence with Ernst Wilhelm Adalbert Kuhn (1846–1920), Professor of Aryan philology and comparative Indo-European linguistics at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich since 1877. The fourteen extant letters that Frankfurter sent to Kuhn between February 1883 and December 1905 are part of Kuhn's estate, kept at the State Library of Munich. This most interesting exchange reveals that Frankfurter had already begun to learn the Siamese language while in Oxford. In a letter to Kuhn, dated 11 February 1883, Frankfurter claimed not only that his Pali Handbook would be ready for printing

“in about fourteen days”, but also that his study of the Siamese phonetic shift was “almost finished”. One month later, on 10 March 1883, Frankfurter lamented that, “because of manifold reasons”, Prof. (Albrecht) Weber (1825–1901), a German Indologist and historian, was unwilling to send Frankfurter’s study of the Siamese phonetic system to the Berlin Academy of Sciences for publication. Since it was written in English, Frankfurter should submit it to the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* published in London instead. In a letter dated 15 June 1883, Frankfurter offered Prof. Kuhn his expertise in “as far as the languages of Farther India (*Hinterindien*) are concerned”, mentioning in particular Siamese, Burmese, and Khmer (*Siamesisch, Birmanisch, Kambodisch*).

We may surmise that Frankfurter also made during this period the acquaintance of the Siamese diplomat Prince Prisdang (พระองค์เจ้าปฤกษาวงศ์; 1851–1935), who was appointed Siamese ambassador to England in 1881. Moreover, according to archives at the University of Oxford related to foreign students, Prince Svasti Sobhana (พระองค์เจ้าสวัสดิ์สโขณ; 1865–1935), the youngest son of King Mongkut (r. 1851–1868), was enrolled as a student at the Balliol College from 1883 until 1886.<sup>14</sup> Due to these obvious personal connections with Siamese princes at Oxford, and his at least basic knowledge of the Siamese language, Frankfurter may have been recruited, via the Siamese

Consulate-General in London, to the service of Prince Devawongse Varopakar (กรมพระยาเทวะวงศ์ฯ; 1858–1923), who shortly after became Minister of Foreign Affairs for Siam in 1885, a position he held until his death. We know from Frankfurter’s letter to Kuhn, dated 29 November 1883, that he had received Prince Devawongse’s offer that very same day. He planned to leave England in around fourteen days, would make a stopover in Hamburg for another two weeks, and then embark on a steamboat for the Far East. On 26 January 1884, the steamboat *Anadyr* reached the Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) capital Colombo, as we learn from another letter to Kuhn in which Frankfurter elaborates on the genetic relationship between Siamese and a number of other Asian languages (such as Khmer, Chinese, and Tibetan). In mid-February 1884, Frankfurter arrived in Singapore, as acknowledged by the *Strait Times* in a short announcement under the column “News of the Week”, on 16 February 1884: “Amongst the passengers by the last French Mail steamer was Dr Oscar Frankfurter, the author of the Pali grammar published last year by Messrs. Williams & Norgate. Dr Frankfurter is on his way to Bangkok, to take up an appointment under the Siamese Government”.

## Professional Career in Siam

Oskar Frankfurter had originally planned to stay in Siam only for a couple of years, aiming to study the Siamese language and culture *in situ*. In the end, he spent 34 years—half of his life—in that country. As Stoffers (2012) remarks, when working as an interpreter for Prince Devawongse, and as a translator for

<sup>14</sup> “Early Thai Students at Balliol College”, notes by Anna Sander, College archivist and curator of manuscripts, Oxford University, 2016. See: <https://balliolarchivist.wordpress.com/2016/10/06/early-thai-students-at-balliol-college/#:~:text=1871%3A%20As%20far%20as%20can,%5D%2C%20of%20Bangkok%2C%20Siam> (accessed 24 February 2024).

various German projects in Siam with a modest salary equivalent of US\$ 20 a month, Frankfurter was more interested in furthering his philological and historical studies. In 1885, after he had just settled in Siam, he sold a Buddhist manuscript to the (Ethnological) Museum für Völkerkunde of Dresden. It would be the only manuscript that Frankfurter reportedly sold to institutions in Germany.<sup>15</sup>

Frankfurter was unpretentious, modest, and a mediator; he was a networker in the best sense of the word. These character traits are reflected in an incident that occurred in the early years of his stay in Siam. In April 1888, a significant incident unfolded near the Lotus Gardens (*lan bua*; ลานบัว) of Prince Svasti, eventually escalating into a diplomatic crisis involving German Ambassador Peter Kempermann (1845–1900), who held the title of minister resident, and Siamese officials. The wives of both Kempermann and a German merchant in Siam were brought to Prince Svasti by the police for unlawfully plucking flowers in the lotus garden. Following a brief inquiry, they were allowed to leave. The German ambassador, angered not only by the disrespectful treatment of the women by the police, but also highly critical of how the Siamese officials handled the situation, expressed his dissatisfaction to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prince Devawongse. Oskar Frankfurter, serving as the secretary to Prince Devawongse

at the time, played a pivotal role in mediating between the parties involved. He demonstrated diplomatic sensitivity and worked diligently to de-escalate the tense situation between HE Kempermann and Prince Devawongse. This effort was later acknowledged by Kempermann in his letter, dated 15 June 1888, to German chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898): “Dr Frankfurter is a capable philologist and a good German; he has done his utmost to mediate between me and the princes”.<sup>16</sup> The English translation of an article published in a Siamese newspaper, done by Frankfurter himself, was severely criticized by Mr Gould, the British Embassy’s official translator, who argued that Frankfurter had wrongly rendered the Siamese word *phuying* (ຜູ້ທຸງ) as “lady”, instead of translating it, correctly, as “woman”, insinuating that the German scholar intentionally obscured the deprecating description of the two German women in the Siamese newspaper article (*ibid.*). Arguably, Frankfurter’s mediation skills rather deserved a note of praise.

In 1895, the general advisor to King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910), the Belgian lawyer Gustave Rolin-Jaequemyns (1835–1902), invited Frankfurter to become his general secretary. One of the key tasks that the Siamese Government expected of its foreign advisor, as David Neuhäuser (2019) states in his doctoral dissertation on the role of foreign advisors and experts

<sup>15</sup> This fairly large manuscript comprised 399 palm leaves and contained a Pali grammar text titled *Culasaddanitipakaraṇam* written in Khom script, a Khmer-derived script still widely used at that time for the writing of religious texts in central and southern Thailand. See Terwiel 2017: 17.

<sup>16</sup> The original in German reads in full length as follows: “Dr Frankfurter ist ein tüchtiger Philologe und ein guter Deutscher, er hat sein Möglichstes gethan, zwischen mir und den Prinzen zu vermitteln, seine Übersetzung kann aber schon deshalb auf Wörlichkeit keinen Anspruch machen, weil sie zur Veröffentlichung in einer englischen Zeitung bestimmt war, mithin von der Genauigkeit mangels der Form geopfert werden müßte” (my translation). In Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, R901/2510, No. 33 (RZ 602/251033).

in implementing King Chulalongkorn's program of reform, was managing relations with the press. When the monarch discovered, on return from his first journey to Europe in 1897, that the Siamese press had reported details of the king's travel route, he asked Frankfurter to thoroughly inspect all press reports about royal activities from then on. Rolin-Jaequemyns persuaded the king to step back from this idea, arguing that the government could be made responsible for the contents of press reports in the future. Thus, the press remained free, and Frankfurter was spared the role of censor (Neuhäuser 2019: 154–155).

When Rolin-Jaequemyns resigned from his position in 1901, Frankfurter was employed by the Ministry of Interior under Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (กรมพระยาดำรง ราชานุภาพ; 1862–1943), who had a personal interest in various academic fields, such as history, archeology, literature, and languages. In 1902, Frankfurter was sent as King Chulalongkorn's delegate to the International Congress of Orientalists in Hamburg.<sup>17</sup> Prior to this, he had undergone an urgent surgery in Berlin in February of the same year as mentioned above.

The most significant step in Frankfurter's career in Siam was his appointment as chief librarian of the newly founded Vajirañāṇa National Library (หอสมุดพระวชิรulan), precursor of the modern National Library of Thailand, by royal decree of 12 October 1905. Frankfurter belonged to a group of seven personalities who formed the National

Library's leadership: His Royal Highness the Crown Prince (and later King) Vajiravudh was the Library's president accompanied by a supervisory council of four princes and high-ranking dignitaries, with Prince Damrong Rajanubhab as its most prominent figure. Thus, Frankfurter became the person responsible for the strategic planning of the acquisition of manuscripts, books, and other printed records to be acquired by the Vajirañāṇa National Library. He was assisted by a Siamese librarian, Phra[ya] Vichit Dharma Parivatr (พระ[ยา] วิจิตรธรรมปริวัตร).<sup>18</sup> Within a decade, Dr Frankfurter contributed decisively to the creation of an internationally respected institution [FIGURE 4].

This accomplishment was well expressed in Otto Franke's obituary, which summarizes Frankfurter's work, from his perspective, and probably based on information provided by his widow:

The Library, which originally was designed to contain the whole of the native literature, was completely alienated from that aim, if it ever did anything for it. It had become a club-house in which young people played billiards and read European newspapers. The book-shelves were filled with literary trash from Europe; scholarly works on Siam were very scanty in number; scholarly works on Siam were non-existent. After Prince Damrong took over the superintendence

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Oskar Frankfurter to Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, dated 13 June 1917. In National Archives of Thailand, ศธ 11/18.

<sup>18</sup> "National Library for Siam Established by the King", in *The Bangkok Times*, 14 October 1905.



**FIGURE 4: Sahathai Society Building, the seat of the National Library in the Royal Palace, in approx. 1905–1916 © National Archives of Thailand**

in 1905 and had obtained the German scholar as director of the institution, Frankfurter formed the Siamese National Library out of this utterly neglected lumber room; everything in the national literature that still remained to be hunted out was brought together and classified. At the same time Frankfurter was at great pains to bring together also all-important European works on Siam and on India, the motherland of Siamese culture. So began a scholarly institution which did not have its equal in East Asia, apart perhaps from the great Japanese libraries.<sup>19</sup>

On Sunday, 8 February 1914, Dr O. Frankfurter celebrated the 30th

anniversary of his entry into Siamese Government service, a period that the Singapore press praised as “unique for one man from the West”.<sup>20</sup> Half a year later, in September 1914, German emperor William II (r. 1888–1918) conferred the Fourth Class of the Red Eagle on him. This prestigious award was not only recognized by the press in Frankfurter’s hometown, Hamburg, but also by the Western community in Bangkok,<sup>21</sup> even though World War I had just started in Europe. During the following two and a half years, Frankfurter continued his responsibilities as chief librarian of the Vajirañāna National Library and a month before his 65th birthday received the highest order that could be bestowed on a foreigner by the Siamese king at the time. Frankfurter’s life-time merits in the service of Siam were recognized by King Vajiravudh or Rama VI (r. 1910–

<sup>19</sup> See Franke 1922–1923 for the German original. The English translation appeared in *Bangkok Times*, 12 June 1923.

<sup>20</sup> *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 14 February 1914.

<sup>21</sup> *Straits Echo*, 24 September 1914.

1925) with the Third-Class Order of the White Elephant.<sup>22</sup> On 13 June 1917, Frankfurter asked for retirement, which was granted to him. His letter of resignation addressed to Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and intended to be forwarded to King Vajiravudh is worth quoting in its entirety:

I think the moment has come where I should place my resignation before Your Royal Highness [Prince Damrong Rajanubhab] with the request to very kindly submit same to His Majesty the King. I may add that I had the intention of doing so already some time ago when I hoped I might close my career in Siam with the installation of the Reference-Library. As the fulfilment of this hope, however, was prevented by the outbreak of the war, I feel it incumbent on me to submit my resignation to your Royal Highness now.

Your Royal Highness will readily understand that it is impossible for me to leave Siam as long as the war is raging, and I trust that I am not ap-

proaching Your Royal Highness in vain in asking Your Royal Highness to allow me to continue my active service as heretofore until the end of the war.

It is my intention to settle in the University of Leipzig, the chief market for the international book-trade, in the hope that it will be possible for me in this way to assist in the acquisition of a Reference-Library which it was long in the intention of Your Royal Highness to form. I would, therefore, consider it a special favor if, after my departure, I would be allowed to use my leave, which has now accumulated during seven years for this purpose.

As Your Royal Highness is aware, it was not possible for me to make any savings as a severe operation which I had to undergo in 1902 and which according to the view of the physicians was a consequence of the tropical climate took away all I had saved. My salary was only such that it was sufficient for living and the present war demanded from everyone he could spare.

It is known to your Royal Highness that I married in the year 1910 and I consider it my duty, as far as it is in my power, to provide for the support of my wife after my death. I trust, considering the kind consideration Your Royal Highness always had towards me, not to appeal in vain to Your Royal Highness if I ask Your Royal

<sup>22</sup> Among the other German experts present in Siam, only Luis Weiler (1863–1918), Director General of the Royal State Railways had since held a higher-ranking order, namely, the Second Class of the White Elephant. See *South China Morning Post*, 11 August 1916; also *Hamburger Correspondent*, 7 March 1917. It is interesting to note that the Siamese Government had originally proposed the order of the Fourth Class of the White Elephant of Siam to Frankfurter. See “Letter from HE Phya Nond Buri, Siamese Minister in Berlin, to HE Baron Marshall von Bieberstein, Minister for Foreign Affairs in Berlin, dated April 5, 1892”. In National Archives of Thailand, ဂຕ 41/74, ເອກສາຣສດຖານທຸກໃນຍອຮັນນ, ກລັວງ 3. The classes I to IV of the White Elephant Order were introduced in Siam by royal decree of 1869 (Suphot 2017: 103).

Highness to submit to His Majesty the King my humble request that besides the pension due to me by law and by the will of His Majesty, a further remuneration should be granted to me for the support of my wife at my death. [...]

I have the honor to remain Your Royal Highness' most humble and most obedient servant. O. Frankfurter.<sup>23</sup>

It is interesting to note from this letter that Frankfurter had the intention to return to Germany and attain a position at the prestigious University of Leipzig to further his own historical and philological studies. At the same time, he could still assist the Siamese Government from afar in building up a “reference library”, since Leipzig had been the main center of printing and publishing in Germany until 1945 and the location of one of the largest annual book fairs in Germany and Europe. However, shortly after sending the above letter, Siam declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary on 22 July 1917, and the life of Frankfurter took a dramatic turn, as we will see below.

### Private Life

Little is known about Oskar Frankfurter's private life in Siam. One valuable source is the diary of Dr Friedrich Schäfer (1868–1914), a German surgeon who served in the Siamese army between 1909 and 1914. Schäfer's diary, covering the period 1909–1912, describes Frankfurter as a man anyone interested in Bangkok

<sup>23</sup> “Letter from Oscar Frankfurter to King Rama VI”, dated 13 June 1917. In the National Archives of Thailand, MS 11/18, 2453 BE (1910 CE).

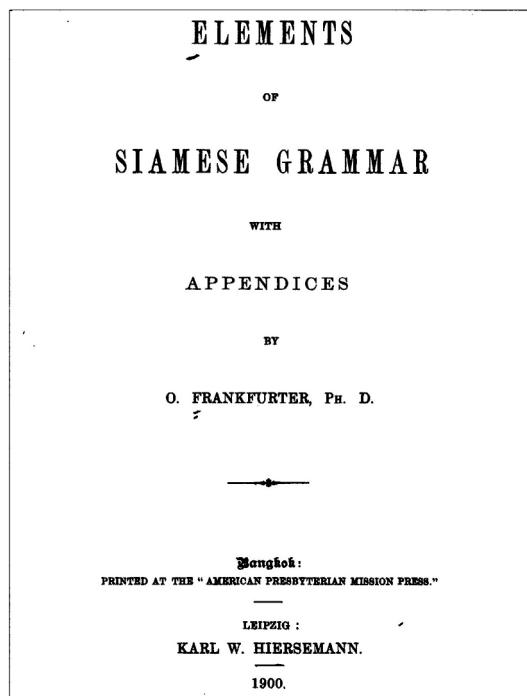


FIGURE 5: Front cover of *Elements of Siamese Grammar*, 1900 © Open Source

ought to know. It seems that it was him who introduced the newly arrived German medical doctor to the social life in the Siamese capital. After 25 years in Bangkok, Frankfurter had become “an integral part” (*ein integrierender Bestandteil*) of the city. Schäfer praises Frankfurter as a “thoroughly learned scholar” (*ein grundgelehrtes Haus*) who knows the old scriptures “like the back of his hand” (*wie seine Westentasche*) and “reads the most difficult texts in Pali and Sanskrit language books”. However, though Frankfurter had authored “a very valuable essay on Siamese grammar” [FIGURE 5], his fluency in colloquial Thai is described as less impressive. Frankfurter “had matured to someone who must be called a magnificent elderly scholar. In any case it is justified to treat him with great esteem”.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The original in German reads: “Er hat sich nach und



**FIGURE 6: Oskar and Amély Toni Frankfurter after their marriage, circa 1910**  
© National Archives of Thailand

On 3 November 1910, Oskar Frankfurter married his niece Amély Toni Lefeld, 22 years his junior, in their hometown Hamburg. Frankfurter was already 58 years old. Witnesses to the marriage were Amély Toni's brother Max Lefeld and the German Consul-General for Siam, the merchant Martin Ernst Pickenpack from Hamburg. Frankfurter's marriage had caught the European community in Bangkok by surprise. Two portrait photos, one of which we illustrate here [FIGURE 6], showing the couple together were probably taken in a photo studio shortly after the couple's return to Bangkok.<sup>25</sup> Schäfer writes in his diary in an entry dated 9 July 1911:

In the last year, he was in Europe and there he married, to our general surprise, one of his nieces. Mrs Frankfurter is also very clever, even almost erudite, and gifted. She speaks quite a number of foreign languages, though she might not have gone that deeply like her husband. After the expectation of a child, following the initial rush of delight, has proved to be premature, Mrs Frankfurter has decided to

*nach zu dem ausgewachsen, was man einen prächtigen alten Gelehrten zu nennen pflegt. Jedenfalls ist man berechtigt ihn mit grosser Hochachtung zu behandeln*” (Schäfer 1991: 85; my translation).

<sup>25</sup> The photos are kept at the National Archives of Thailand under “persons unknown”, suggesting that the archivists were unable to identify Oskar Frankfurter and his wife, which seems rather strange given his prominent role in establishing the Royal Library situated next to the Archives.

<sup>26</sup> The original in German reads: “Im vergangenen Jahr war er in Europa und da hat er sich plötzlich zur allgemeinen Überraschung verheiratet, und zwar mit einer

search the purpose of life in the support of her husband in his profession, and thus she has now become his secretary.<sup>26</sup>

Schäfer emphasizes that the Frankfurters were sociable and their spacious residence a place of “good cuisine and impeccable wine” (Schäfer 1991: 277). In a photograph provided by members of the Lefeld family, we see the Frankfurters in a familiar environment, sitting in the garden of their residence in Bangkok, which was situated at Sa Pathum Road (now Rama I Road) [FIGURE 7].<sup>27</sup> Dr Frankfurter's house must have been well known among the community of Western expatriates living in the Siamese capital at the time. In March 1909, Frankfurter's spacious residence was the scene of a “daylight murder” when a young Swiss resident, Maximilian Kaiser, who worked for a German-Siamese trading company, was attacked and stabbed by some thieves who had entered the servants' quarters of the residence.<sup>28</sup>

The Frankfurters were likely among the few German expatriate residents in Siam who had been living there the longest when the German Club (*Deutscher Klub*) commemorated its 25th anni-

*seiner Nichten. Frau Frankfurter ist gleichfalls sehr klug, ja beinahe gelehrt und begabt. Sie spricht allerhand fremde Sprachen, wobei sie freilich durchaus nicht so in die Tiefe gegangen zu sein scheint, wie ihr Gatte. Nachdem die im ersten Rausch des Entzückens aufgetauchte Aussicht auf ein Kind sich als verfrüht erwiesen hat, hat Frau Frankfurter beschlossen, in der Unterstützung ihres Mannes in seinem Berufe ihren Lebenszweck zu suchen und so ist sie jetzt seine Sekretärin*” (Schäfer 1991: 276; my translation).

<sup>27</sup> Photo courtesy of Sandra and Guilherme Cruz, São Paulo, Brazil, whose support is gladly acknowledged here.

<sup>28</sup> See “Daylight Murder”, in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 19 March 1909.



**FIGURE 7: Oskar and Amély Toni Frankfurter sitting in the garden of their home in Bangkok, circa 1910**  
© Sandra & Guilherme Cruz

versary in 1916. However, the booklet documenting the founding and development of the German Club makes no mention of Oskar Frankfurter, neither as one of the forty founding members—though by April 1891, Frankfurter had already been living in Bangkok for seven years—nor as a member of the Club’s board in any of the years between 1891 and 1916.<sup>29</sup> Thus, on the one hand, regrettably we are confronted with a lack of documentary evidence regarding Frankfurter’s membership of the German Club and of his participation in the Club’s activities, either as member or guest. On the other hand, there is no evidence that he was

<sup>29</sup> See Deutscher Klub Bangkok 1916. As for the founding of the German Club, see also Catthiyakorn 2012: 24f.

isolated within the German community because of his Jewish background. Indeed, at some moment between 1878 and 1910, Frankfurter must have converted from the Jewish faith to Christianity, since his marriage certificate of 3 November 1910 identifies both Oskar Frankfurter and his wife Amély Toni as being of “Lutheran faith”.<sup>30</sup> However, religion does not seem to have played a dominant role in Frankfurter’s life. The fact that the Frankfurter couple insisted on cremation in their last will, which was anathema to any faithful Jew and still rare among Christians, shows that the Frankfurters may have opened themselves, at least in a cultural sense, to Buddhist ideas and practices during their long stay in Siam. In any case, far from being isolated from the German community, O. Frankfurter was occasionally consulted by the German Embassy to help open communication channels to the Siamese authorities and to give advice in matters related to his knowledge of the Siamese language.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, he oriented himself more towards the wider Western community in Bangkok, as evidenced by his prominent role in the Siam Society, the founding of which he very much promoted and inaugurated at a gathering at the Oriental Hotel on 26 February 1904 (Warren 2004: 1).

### Internment and Return to Hamburg

The quiet and serene life of the Frankfurters in Siam ended abruptly in July 1917. This was also the case for hundreds of other

<sup>30</sup> Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 332-5 Standesämter.

<sup>31</sup> For example, Frankfurter’s academic advice was sought whenever the German Embassy was in search for a new translator.



**FIGURE 8: Central Building (Mittelbau) in Bangkok where Germans and Austro-Hungarians were interned in late 1917 © Sandra & Guilherme Cruz**

German and Austro-Hungarian citizens. After Siam's declaration of war against the central powers (*Mittelmächte*), these individuals became "citizens of enemy nations" (*khon chonchat sattru*; คณชนชาติศัตรู). Men, women, and children were interned overnight. Little is known about internment in Bangkok. German government sources from November 1917 estimate the total number of German citizens registered in the lists of the German Embassy in Bangkok at 229, 37 of whom were women and 42 children. Together with German evacuees from China and Japan, as well as members of ships' companies, the total number of Germans amounted to roughly 300.<sup>32</sup>

The internment of German and Austro-Hungarian citizens was carried out in a planned and organized manner within a couple of days. While the roughly 300 men (190 Germans and some 100 Austro-Hungarians) were

detained in two internment camps, in Bangkok [FIGURE 8] and Ayutthaya, under difficult but nevertheless tolerable conditions, according to Stefan Hell (2017: 99), the 101 enemy women and children, among them 22 from Austria-Hungary, were interned at the German Club and three adjacent buildings on Surawong Road. Thus, the Frankfurter couple was separately interned, sharing their fate with other German and Austro-Hungarian couples. The Dutch Ambassador Domela Nieuwenhuis, who took over the representation of German and Austro-Hungarian interests in Bangkok, informed the Siamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs about Dr Frankfurter's deteriorating health, which made it an urgent task to allow him "to leave the internment camp to be treated by his wife" (cited in Hell 2017: 98).

In several letters sent by Max Lefeld [e.g., FIGURE 9], Amély Toni Frankfurter's brother and owner of a food wholesale company in Hamburg, to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Auswärtiges Amt*),<sup>33</sup> he referenced excerpts from correspondence received from his sister in Bangkok. In these letters, she conveyed her wish for individuals aged over sixty to be granted release and repatriated to Germany. Hell concludes that the Siamese Government was inclined "to allow Frankfurter and his wife to leave Siam for Germany out of respect for his contributions to Siamese culture, but the British legation objected, thereby providing another striking example of the sway it held over Siam's foreign ministry" (2017: 98). Hell's claim about a

<sup>32</sup> Letter from German Embassy in Stockholm to Chancellor (Reichskanzler) Georg von Hertling, dated 19 November 1917. In Bundesarchiv, R 901/83626, No. 183.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Letter of Max Lefeld to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dated 2 February 1918. In Bundesarchiv, R 901/83626, No. 183.

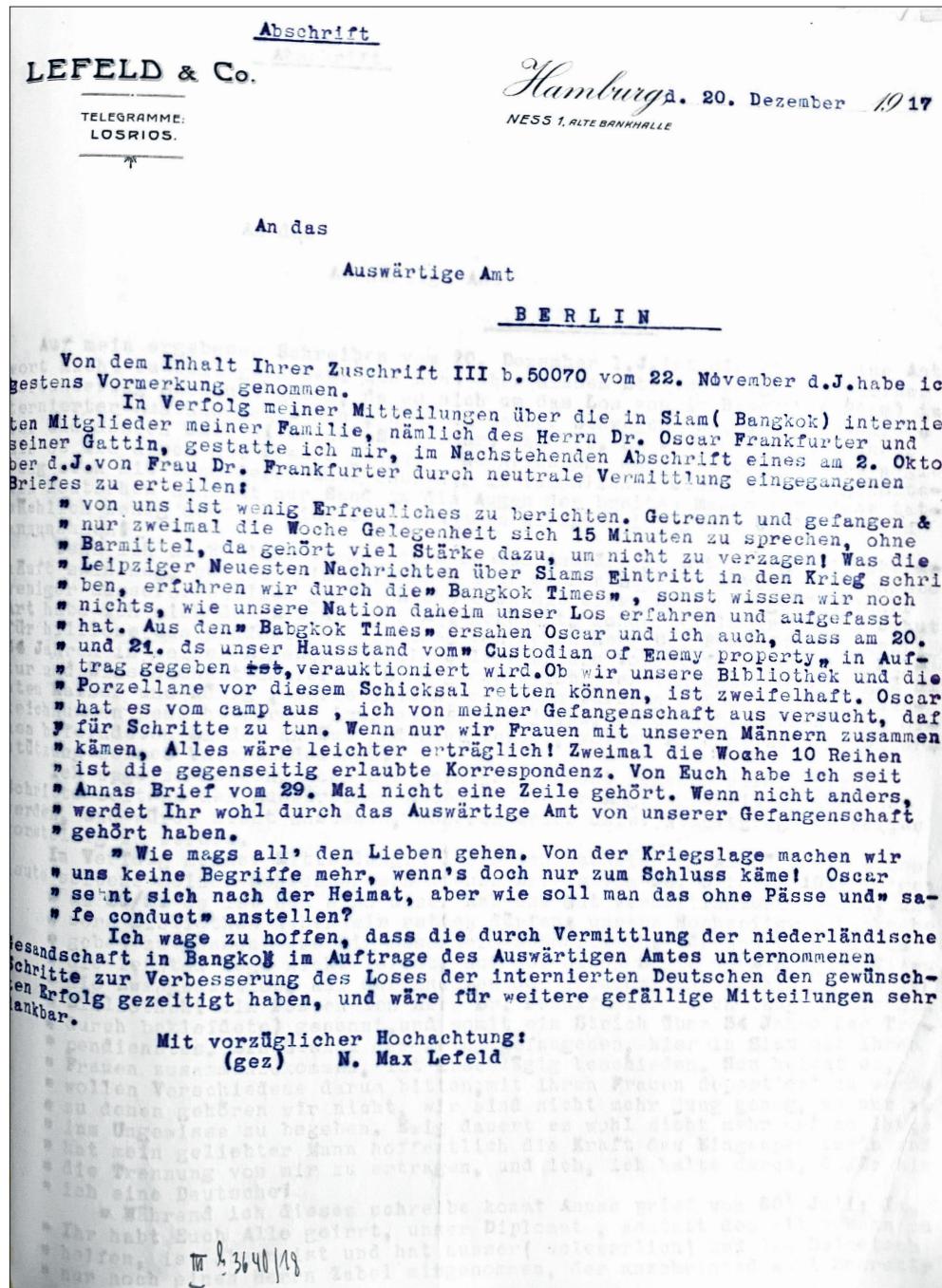


FIGURE 9: Letter of Max Lefeld to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Auswärtiges Amt), dated 20 December 1917 © Volker Grabowsky

fundamentally positive attitude of the Siamese authorities towards Oskar Frankfurter seems to be supported by a letter from the secretary of the

Vajirañāna National Library to the Ministry of Interior, arguing that the Library Council, led by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, expressed reservations

about urging the retrieval of the royal decoration from Dr Frankfurter, an individual deemed an enemy national currently held in confinement. The secretary suggested an alternative approach, proposing that Frankfurter be subjected to separate control.<sup>34</sup> This intervention was to no avail and Frankfurter had to return his Third-Class Order of the White Elephant medal like all other German experts did.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, in January 1918, Oskar and Amély Toni Frankfurter were deported to Sholapur (Solapur), in the region of Maharashtra, in western India, where they could live together as a couple under tolerable conditions. This is confirmed in a letter Mrs Frankfurter sent to a female friend in Bangkok, who forwarded it to the *Bangkok Times*: “I am glad to report I am again with my husband, and we are having a very pleasant time together. We are allowed to go everywhere we want, without police or military supervision. The only thing is: When shall we Huns be free?” (9 April 1918). This is also confirmed in several letters Amély Toni Frankfurter sent to her brother Max Lefeld in Hamburg, who reported their content verbatim to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We reproduce here one such example from this correspondence:

[Quoted from Amély Toni Frankfurter] "In February of this year, German men and women were separately deported. On the 16th we were in Singapore, and on the 26th in Madras. Finally, on the 28th we arrived here (in Sholapur). Fortunately, Oscar and I are here reunited. We live in a small house and our old friends Mr and Mrs Bremer live next door. [...] Almost all of us have arrived here like beggars. Our money and property are now with the Custodian in Bangkok. [...] We are here in good and just hands, are adequately nourished, and finally enjoy good treatment. Therefore, do not worry about us" (Her emphasis).<sup>36</sup>

In June 1918, while still in internment in India, and five months prior to the end of the war, Dr Frankfurter filed a claim against the Siamese Government for the outstanding balance of pay owed to him for July through October 1917, along with additional expenses. The specifics of these claims are outlined in the subsequent list:

<sup>34</sup> Secretary of Vajirañāṇa National Library to the Ministry of Interior, dated 6 August 1917. In National Archives of Thailand, ศธ 070/28/1. The original, in Thai reads: กรรมการหอสมุดมีความเข้าใจว่าจะไปรบกวนเครื่องราชอิริยาบถ ที่ออกเดอร์แฟรงก์ເගෝร์ເංඩ්รේเป็นชนชาติศรั้งอยู่ในที่ซึ่งเสนาও่วยในปัจจุบันเป็นเอกเทศ.

<sup>35</sup> As for a list of German experts in the service of the Siamese government who were obliged to return their titles and decorations, see "Siam in the War. Titles and Decorations Gone", in *South China Morning Post*, 11 August 1917.

<sup>36</sup> Letter sent by Max Lefeld to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dated 30 May 1918. In Bundesarchiv, R 901/83626, No. 183. The original German text reads: "Am 12. Februar a.c. wurden deutsche Männer und Frauen getrennt deportiert. Am 16. waren wir in Singapore, und am 26. in Madras. Endlich am 28. kamen wir hier an. Zum Glück sind Oscar und ich hier wieder zusammen. Wir bewohnen ein kleines Haus und nebenan wohnen unsere alten Freunde Herr und Frau Brehmer. [...] Wir sind fast [a]lle wie Bettler hier angekommen. Unser Geld und Eigentum liegt beim Custodian in Bangkok. [...] Wir sind hier in guten, gerechten Händen, werden anständig ernährt, und geniessen endlich gute Behandlung. Also sorgt Euch nicht um uns".

@1,000 ticals a month	4,000
10% house rent	400
Confiscated money in S.C.B. [Siam Commercial Bank]	550
Confiscated fixed deposit & interest thereon up to October 1917	624
Books sold to the National Library	599
Value of books intended for the Princess [sic] Damrong	
in hands of Custodian of Enemy Prop[erty]	100
Value of horses sold by Custodian	161
Amounts due to me by Dr O. Schneider, L. Weiler, and A. Gerber in hands of Custodian	220
20 shares in <i>Bangkok Times</i> , deposited in S.C.B.	1,000
18 shares in <i>Mekhong Rly. do. do. do.</i>	1,800
Inventory of house property confiscated against my wish	7,000
Value of confiscated library	8,000
Curiosities	1,000
Value of manuscripts confiscated	2,000
Compensation of the value of pictures handed over to Rob. Lenz & Co. Bangkok for sale which were confiscated by the Siamese Government on [the] outbreak of war	1,500
Pay during leave of fourteen months. Tic. 1,000 per month plus 10% house rent. Compensation	15,400
Compensation of return journey £100	1,308
<b>Total</b>	<b>45,662</b>

SOURCE: “From J.E.C. Jukes Esq. to the Government of India, Home Dept. Bombay Castle, 7 June 1918, Enclosure No. 2”. In National Archives of Thailand,  
กต 65.6/10 กล่อง 2 คำร้องของหนอแฟรงฟ์เตอร์และกัปตันกอตเซร์ว่า  
รัฐบาลทรัพย์และ ร้องขอเบี้ยบำนาญ

Most important were the claims to pensions—1,000 ticals (or baht) per month—which the Siamese Government had already promised after Frankfurter had asked for his retirement in April 1917, two months after his 65th birthday.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> The amount of Frankfurter's monthly salary is confirmed in a letter to Prince Damrong, dated 16 June 1917, just a few weeks before the Siamese declaration of war on Germany. In National Archives of Thailand, ศร 11/18, ดอกเตอร์แฟรงค์เฟอร์เตอร์จะขอลาออกจากราชการ [Dr Frankfurter asks for retirement from office].

Among the total claims of more than 45,000 ticals were 8,000 ticals that he estimated to be the value of his personal library. Frankfurter's library must have been impressive indeed. According to a diary entry of Major Erik Seidenfaden (1881–1958), one of his colleagues at the Siam Society, Dr Frankfurter is described as a “little white-haired and amiable Jew” and “an excellent philologist”, who “has a good library on Siam”.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Erik Seidenfaden's diary, dated 8 September 1914. I am grateful to Søren Ivarsson for directing my attention to and translating this entry from Danish

As Germany and Siam had not yet restored their diplomatic relations (this happened in 1925), Germans living in Siam had to file their claims with the Siamese Embassy in Copenhagen. The internal communication among various Siamese Government agencies show that direct compensation was rejected on the grounds that Frankfurter, along with other interned Germans, having left India on 29 December 1919, had not yet arrived in Germany by 10 January 1920, the day when the Treaty of Versailles came into force, and thus a Siamese caretaker or Custodian (*phu phitak sap chonchat sattru*; ผู้พิทักษ์ทรัพย์ชนชาติศัตรุ) had to receive the compensation for the citizens of the former enemy countries.<sup>39</sup>

In a rather lengthy process, it was finally decided that Frankfurter could no longer be compensated for his library, which had counted more than 1,400 volumes, because these books were already sold. The only compensation that was acknowledged were 31,177 baht and 42 salueng—a salary and a pension, respectively, for the period 22 July 1917 until his death on 1 October 1922. This final decision was made on 12 March 1923, almost half a year after Dr Frankfurter's death.<sup>40</sup> There is no

for me. On Seidenfaden, see Ivarsson & Sing 2022.

<sup>39</sup> See “Extract of Resolution of Meetings of Controllers of Allied Clearing Offices”. In National Archives of Thailand, กต 65.6/10 กล่อง 2, คำร้องของหม妞แพร่งฟูร์เตอร์และกัปตันกอตเซว่ารัฐบาลทรัพย์และร้องขอเงินบำนาญ [Request by Dr Frankfurter and Captain Göttsche to ask the Siamese Government for a pension].

<sup>40</sup> The document says: ด้วยได้รับหนังสือที่ ๒๓๔/๒๓๕๔๖ ลงวันที่ ๔ เดือนนี้ว่า ทรงพระกรุณาโปรดเกล้าฯ พระราชทานพระบรมราชานุญาตให้กรุงเทพมหานครจัดจ่ายเงินเบี้ยบำนาญหม妞แพร่งฟูร์เตอร์ ดังแต่วันที่ ๒๒ กรกฎาคม พ.ศ. ๒๔๖๐ ถึงวันที่ ๑ ตุลาคม ๒๔๖๕ รวมเป็นเงิน ๓๐๗๗ บาท ๔๘ สตางค์ ให้ผู้พิทักษ์ศัตรุแล้วนั้น ได้ทราบแล้ว. See National Archives of

documentary evidence of whether or not compensation was later paid to his widow, Amély Toni Frankfurter, née Lefeld. There is no doubt that the loss of his personal library greatly affected Oskar, as Otto Franke makes clear in his obituary. “Frankfurter remained convinced that whatever might happen to his other property, this library must be his inviolable”. Franke continues: “This loss was for him absolutely unimaginable; he would not for a moment believe in the deceitful reservations of the Siamese”.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, half a year after his return to Hamburg, Dr Frankfurter urged the Siamese authorities to return his personal library, a rather “unique collection of Siamese literature, the historic literature of Siam and Buddhism”, he had “collected with great care” and the possession of which was “a necessity” to continue his studies during the rest of his life.<sup>42</sup>

Another disappointment was what Frankfurter perceived as treachery—in the words of Otto Franke—by his successor as chief librarian of the Vajirañāṇa National Library. Shortly before his retirement, in summer 1917, a 31-year-old fellow of the École française d'Extrême-Orient received instructions

Thailand, *ibid*. The settling of the liquidation proceeds of the confiscated private German properties in Siam was finalized only in 1925 following tedious negotiations between the German and Siamese governments. For details, see Catthiyakorn 2012: 36–43.

<sup>41</sup> See Franke 1922–1923: 155 (in German). For the English translation, see *Bangkok Times*, 12 June 1923.

<sup>42</sup> “Letter from Dr O. Frankfurter, 19, Innocentia Strasse, Hamburg, to His Excellency Phya Visan Botchanakit, His Majesty's Minister in Copenhagen, dated July 18th., and received July 23rd., 1920”. In National Archives of Thailand, กต 65.6/10 กล่อง 2.



**FIGURE 10:** Postcard showing the main building of the Universität Hamburg, opposite Dammtor Station, 1922 © Gaby von Malottki

regarding the organization of the Library. “In unsuspecting confidence, Dr Frankfurter gave all the information asked for despite friendly warnings, and was friendly and helpful to the Frenchman” (Franke 1922–23: 155). This young Frenchman was none other than George Coëdès (1886–1969), who became Frankfurter’s successor in January 1918 and may have profited greatly from the elderly German scholar’s gentle advice.

### The Final Journey

The Frankfurters were, therefore, registered in Hamburg once again, from 16 February 1920, at Innocentiastraße 19, the home of Oskar’s brother-in-law, Max Lefeld. Frankfurter’s route from his home in the urban district of Harvestehude, to the university near Dammtor

station [FIGURE 10], was rather short. On 28 August of that year, the Frankfurters drew up a joint last will, which, as mentioned above, stipulated that both wanted to be cremated. The will also states that Ms Frankfurter’s sister (Ida) should receive an amount of 20,000 marks and that other relatives should be given the rest of the money.<sup>43</sup> It is difficult to say how much this was in terms of present-day spending power. In any case, it was a substantial amount of money at the time. This is even more surprising since the Frankfurters had to leave their belongings behind in Bangkok and were “practically without means” when they

<sup>43</sup> “Testament von Dr Oscar Frankfurter und seiner Ehefrau Amélie” [Last will of Dr Oscar Frankfurter and his spouse Amély], opened on 4 November 1922. Found in Archives of the Amtsgericht Hamburg.

returned to their hometown, Hamburg.<sup>44</sup> However, it is possible that the Frankfurters still owned property in Germany and may also have received material support from Frankfurter's nephew and brother-in-law, Max Lefeld.

Beginning in spring 1921, Dr Frankfurter taught the Siamese language at the Universität Hamburg, which had just been founded in 1919, immediately after the end of World War I. The course catalogue (*Vorlesungsverzeichnis*) for the "Seminar for the Language and Culture of China" (*Seminar für Sprache und Kultur Chinas*) included the teaching of "Siamese for Beginners" (*Siamesisch für Anfänger*) and "Siamese for Advanced Learners" (*Siamesisch für Fortgeschrittene*) taught twice weekly in a private environment, presumably in Frankfurter's home. We do not know who studied Siamese with him at that time, but it was certainly a small and exclusive group of students. Oskar Frankfurter's death on 1 October 1922 put an end to this first attempt of Siamese teaching at a German university.<sup>45</sup>

Following his last instruction, Frankfurter was cremated. Hamburg had a crematorium since 1891, one of the first three in Germany. There was a small cemetery where his remains found final rest. The crematorium still

exists, but the building is no longer used for its original purpose. Today, it houses a kindergarten. The cemetery has been abandoned too, but urns may still remain underground. The fact that the cemetery has long been abandoned makes it difficult to locate Frankfurter's grave. However, we (i.e., the author and Gaby von Malottki) succeeded following the traces left by his widow, who survived her late husband by eight years. Amély Toni Frankfurter spent the last years of her life in Berlin, where she died of suicide on 19 December 1930. In her own last will, she once again emphasized her wish to be cremated. Her last resting place was directly next to her husband.<sup>46</sup> Through the number assigned to her grave, it was possible to obtain confirmation that Oskar Frankfurter's ashes were once lying there as well.

## Scholarship and Legacy

Dr Oskar Frankfurter, a prominent and long-serving German expert in the Siamese Government during the reigns of Kings Chulalongkorn and Vajiravudh, left an enduring legacy that transcended his national and cultural background. Despite his German nationality and Jewish heritage, these aspects were not central to his reputation among the Siamese elite or the European expatriate community in Siam. Instead, he was widely regarded as an international scholar, a renowned philologist, and

<sup>44</sup> See source above in note 42.

<sup>45</sup> The teaching of the Thai language at the University of Hamburg resumed only in 1958, when Oscar Benl, Chair of Japanese Studies invited Luang Kee Kirati Widjolar, who had been Siamese language instructor at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin (now HUB) during the late 1920s and the 1930s under Prof. Walter Trittel. At the same time the lawyer Klaus Wenk began his second academic career in the field of Thai philology at Hamburg.

<sup>46</sup> Archives of Amtsgericht Berlin, Aktenzeichen 60/6VB82/1931: Nachlaß Amély Toni Frankfurter. I am most grateful to Gaby von Malottki for having initiated the search for the remains of the Frankfurters.

historian who chose to publish the majority of his academic work in English rather than his native language.

Beyond his academic achievements, Frankfurter was a skilled “networker”, adept at bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds for shared endeavors. His instrumental role in founding The Siam Society underscores his commitment to fostering intellectual collaboration. A more in-depth examination of his presidency at the society warrants a separate article.

The tragic turn of events in 1917, Frankfurter’s final year in Siam, highlights the interconnectedness of an individual’s life with the fate of their homeland. Despite limited knowledge of Frankfurter’s political leanings, his minimal involvement in the German Club suggests a lack of narrow-minded nationalist ideologies. Intended to depart Siam after his retirement in the

latter half of 1917, his plans to take a position as a librarian at the University of Leipzig, the center of German book production at that time, to help build up a reference library in Bangkok, were disrupted by World War I. Forced to return to Germany under unexpected circumstances, he left behind his private library, the destiny of which remains unexplored. Frankfurter’s life concluded in Hamburg, his native city, where he pioneered the introduction of Siamese language instruction at a German university.

The obituary published in the *Bangkok Times* on 1 November 1922, aptly encapsulates Dr Frankfurter’s legacy. Described as “essentially a scholar” who had gained the friendship of influential individuals, his passing was mourned not only for his scholarly contributions but also for the loss of a cherished friend.

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