

Autobiography of a Stamp

Carl Djerassi

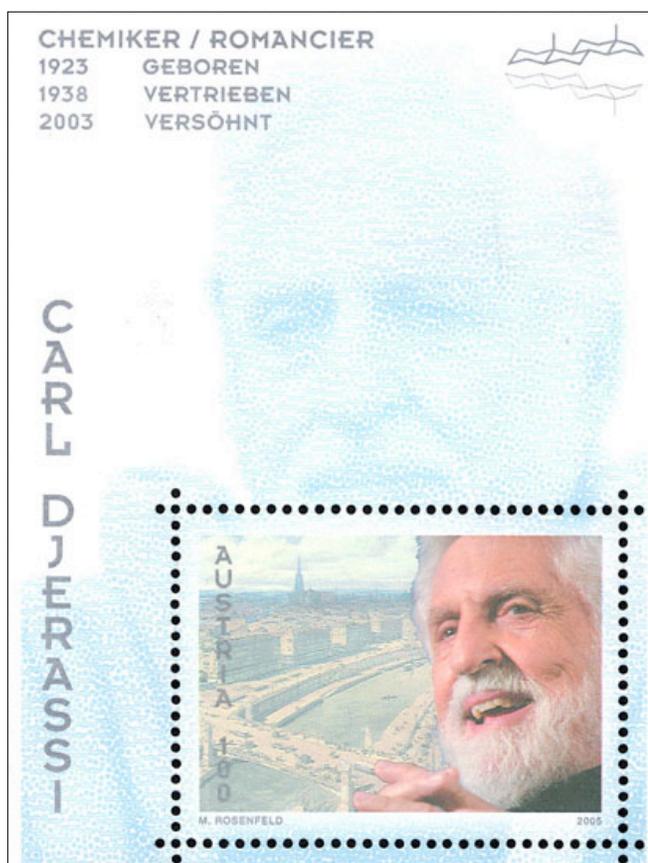
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Since March 8, 2005, people in Austria—by now in the thousands—have been licking the back of my head and presumably will continue doing so for quite a while. Unless, of course, there are 400,000 stamp collectors in the world who would not want this complicated stamp image to be marred by an impersonal post office franking machine in which case I shall remain unlicked. So how did I end up in that enviable position, which could never have happened to me in the USA where I would have had to be dead before people would have been prompted to stick out their tongue? Or did the Austrians know something about my life expectancy of which I was unaware?

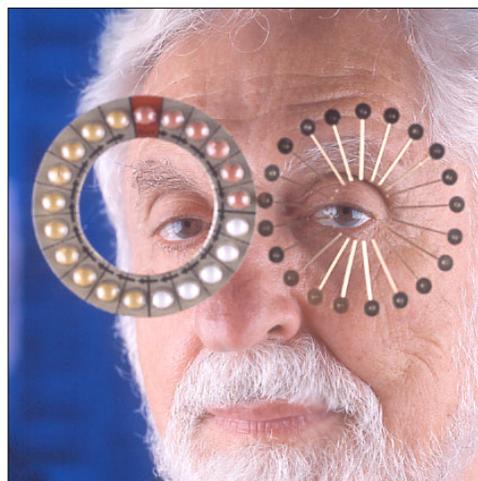


It all started on October 30, 2003, the day after my 80th birthday, when I received an E-mail message from a total stranger, Dr. Erich Haas, chief of the special issues department of the Austrian Post Office. He asked whether I had any objection to a special stamp being issued in an edition of 400,000, albeit belatedly, in my honor since the Austrian Government had offered me Austrian citizenship on the occasion of that birthday. The message had reached me in Bangkok,

where I was presenting a chemical plenary lecture. Kudo-happy scientists—an enormous group to which I also belong—usually are willing to accept honors at the drop of a hat, but this one seemed a bit complicated. After all, the offer came from the country that had driven me out as a Jewish teenager born in Vienna and educated there until the Nazi Anschluss of 1938. I proposed meeting in person in Vienna in late January 2004 prior to the day on which the Albertina—one of Austria’s great museums—was inaugurating the installation of an important kinetic outdoor sculpture by the American sculptor George Rickey that I had donated to the Albertina as a sign of reconciliation with the city of my birth.

By the time I arrived in Vienna in January, I had already committed the first faux pas, which was deflected diplomatically with Viennese politeness: instead of waiting for their proposed design, I had sent them an amusing but also slightly mad photograph of me (herewith depicted) that showed my face looking through

glasses made out of contraceptive Pills. On the day of our January appointment, I was met by Dr. Haas as well as his colleague, Dr. Reinhart Gausterer, who, I discovered to my surprise, was not just in charge of all stamp printing operations, but had also been a chemist. And not just an ordinary chemist, but one who had actually read some of my papers. He took me completely by surprise by suggesting that my stamp (I already started to feel proprietary about it) ought to feature a three-dimensional



conformational depiction of a steroid and its mirror image, since he was familiar with my earlier research on optical rotatory dispersion and circular dichroism. Clearly, I had underestimated the intellectual height to which the Austrian Post Office aspired. From then on, I was putty in their hands.

I promised to deliver a camera-ready design of the two steroid mirror image representations, which eventually found their place in the upper right corner of the stamp block, by enlisting the help of one of my oldest chemical friends from the early 1950s, Prof. Andre

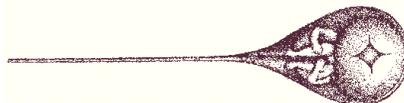
Dreiding, now Professor emeritus at the University of Zurich. In addition, Dr. Gausterer suggested as background some excerpt from a chemical paper of mine. But which one? As someone who has been accused of having published much too much in my chemical career, selecting a paragraph or two out of twelve-hundred articles seemed hopeless. But as I had turned in my sixties into a novelist and in my mid-seventies into a playwright, I proceeded on the slippery slope of literary self-promotion by suggesting that we pick a brief excerpt from my latest play, EGO—itself an appropriately self-critical title. Dr. Haas countered with the suggestion that I provide an image from some favorite Paul Klee work from my large Klee collection, which had been shown for some months in Austria. In the end, the only reference to my current “artistic” persona was the word “romancier” on the stamp that I found to possess phonetic euphony as well as the proper sugary Viennese touch compared to the brusque “novelist” or “author.”

The inscription on the stamp’s left upper corner is almost a verbatim translation of the English text that can be found on the base of the Rickey sculpture that is sited just outside the Albertina. When I made that donation to the museum, I had proposed that instead of German the plaque be written in the language of the country that had accepted me after my forced emigration from Austria, but I had used the somewhat euphemistic expression “1938 exiled.” I would like to give credit to the Austrian Post Office for substituting the more honest “1938 vertrieben” on the stamp as that German word means “expelled.”

A few months later, I was presented by e-mail with the first complete design of the stamp block. It resembled the final version, except that my face within the perforated stamp was superimposed on a mountain landscape. When I inquired about its significance, I was told that the stamp designer had read my autobiography (*The Pill, Pygmy Chimps, and Degas’ Horse*) and had noticed that as a child I had skied in the Rax and Schneeberg mountains that supposedly were reproduced on that stamp. I countered that this was a piece of esoterica that nobody would recognize without a lengthy geographical explanation. I proposed instead the current image, which many Viennese would recognize immediately and which also had a deep personal meaning. The view is based on an 1897 drawing by one of Austria’s most important Jugendstil architects, Otto Wagner, that I had first seen at a major Jugendstil exhibition at the New York

Museum of Modern Art. It represented his proposal for the reconstruction of the quay around the “Aspernbrücke,” a bridge crossing the Donau Canal, at whose northeast corner my Viennese home was situated: the spot now covered by the crossed fingers of my hand on the stamp.

Originally, Dr. Gausterer had speculated about printing the two steroid images on the right upper hand corner holographically. But that proved to be fatal for the budget allocated to the production of the stamp. Instead, he came up with an extraordinary alternative—according to him unique in world stamp production—that the second larger background image of my face would be composed entirely of microscopic steroid structures! Considering that I had spent decades of my life as a chemist synthesizing steroids, seeing my face now synthesized out of steroids was the ultimate homage of the Austrian Post Office. Even though one needs a good magnifying glass to really appreciate the complicated chemical designs created by these enantiomeric images of the cyclopentanoperhydrophenanthrene skeleton, it should now be obvious to stamp collectors or stamp lickers why I am loath to see any franking mark that chemical construction. In other words, collect the stamp, but don't use it to send letters—not even love letters—unless they are addressed to me.



Notes from the Editor:

1. For a biographical sketch of Prof. Djerassi, see: <http://www.djerassi.com/bio/bio2.html>.
2. An interesting interview with Prof. Djerassi appears in István Hargittai's “Candid Science: Conversations with Famous Chemists” (Imperial College Press: London, 2000).