



BERLIN & BEYOND

LETTERS FROM HER BERLIN-BASED GRANDMOTHER DURING THE 1960S AND '70S HAVE PROFOUNDLY INFLUENCED GABRIELE WOODBINE'S PATH.

By Meryl Hancock, photography Ken Brass

"I was excited when I received mail from her, although I couldn't understand what she'd written," Gabriele Woodbine recalls of her grandmother's correspondence. "It was the stamps on the letters that were important," she says from her immaculately organised office in the Sydney beachside suburb of Cronulla. Myriad folders are tidily shelved, surfaces are clear and a gigantic skylight shines light over her elongated workspace. Her face is equally bright and animated. Numerous pairs of glasses and tweezers are at hand, two essential tools of the philatelist, Gabriele's chosen profession for more than 50 years.

Her earliest recollection of a stamp fetish is aged four when she was unpopular with neighbours, particularly on pension day. Magnetically drawn to the tiny squares, she would steal mail, rip the stamps off the envelopes and discard the remains. Living in Greenacre with many other migrant families meant a large catchment of mail from interesting destinations. "I felt I could learn a lot from stamps. By the time I got to school, I used stamps for all my projects," she explains. "People would give me stamps and I felt like I'd won the lottery. I set up a stamp club so I could swap stamps with other kids." 



By the time she was 12, she'd secured a part-time job packing parcels at a stamp shop in Bankstown. She describes the joy at her first find—a rare halfpenny kangaroo stamp from Australia dated 1913 that didn't have the usual perforations at the base. It was something her boss had missed and with her bonus, she bought a pair of long leather boots.

At 21, she worked as an apprentice for Max and Muriel Cohen, renowned top-shelf collectors and dealers, who operated from old-world premises in the city. High ceilings, lead lights and old-fashioned service reinforced the historic perspective of her passion. "I like to chat and I like people but stamps have been my teacher," Gabriele says. "There is not only a stamp produced to mark every significant occasion, but also a centenary stamp printed one hundred years later."

It was while working there that her *Sliding Doors* moment occurred. Unbeknownst to Gabriele, her biological father, from whom she was separated at the age of two, would often push his face against the shop window to indulge his stamp obsession. It was not until she was 30 when she rekindled her relationship with him that she uncovered the source of her own mania.

Gabriele encounters many fascinating and unusual characters on a daily basis; a vast array of serious collectors who are often private individuals. Her theory is that stamp collecting is a form of communication. Rural towns are often a hotbed of stamp collecting, unearthing significant finds. "I have looked at collections worth millions of dollars and handled albums worth hundreds of thousands," she says. "One young man brought in a block of stamps that he found in his granny's Bible that was worth a few thousand dollars... quite an expensive bookmark."



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:

The stamp savante strums a few chords on the ukulele in her downtime; a letter from 1933; a glimpse of her Australiana collection; she particularly loves stamps from Berlin.





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Originating in England in the 1840s, stamps were first printed using engraving plates. The results hailed exquisite miniature artworks but the process was lengthy and costly. Post World War II, mass migration increased the need for letter writing and hence faster techniques such as flatbed and rotary recess printing were devised due to industry demand. Nowadays, printing has declined due to technological advances in communication, which Gabriele admits augurs well for the stamp collector given the industry is driven by supply and demand.

Bearing this in mind, and with support from family and friends, in particular mentor Ken Baker and his wife, Mona, Gabriele established her own business more than 25 years ago. Her daughter, Nic, helps out part-time and her son-in-law, Steve, handles all IT glitches. Stamps have become an investable asset so trading has escalated from the days of simply swapping with a friend. “The world has become so small with the internet and communication is so easy,” she says. “I have never been busier and I learn something new almost daily, so stamp collecting provides a lifetime of education. There are no rules. I collect stamps that Australia Post has mutilated from 100 years ago and I particularly love stamps from Berlin. If you like frangipanis or are a Mercedes-Benz fan, you could collect the appropriate stamps.”

Strumming her ukulele in between intense sessions valuing stamps affords Gabriele a sense of calm. She has a fixation for all things Hawaiian so is one minute the doyen of philately, the next, the instigator of a luau. I’m immediately fantasising about cocktails served in coconuts. Clearly, the future of stamp collecting is in good hands. “My old boss, Max Cohen, died at his desk sorting stock to list for an advertisement,” she says. “And that is the way I’d like to go.”



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:

An old four-cent Christmas stamp from 1966 now worth \$15,000; Gabriele has achieved what many dream of — turning a hobby into a livelihood; her whole collection is immaculately organised.