



Alois Mailander

44

*Letters to  
Gustav Meyrink*



Alois Mailänder (1843 - 1905), a Christian mystic, was a personal guide in inner life for many artists from the Munich and Vienna milieu. Mailänder advocated a method that should awaken “the inner word” in those who accepted it. The letters from Mailänder presented here are a valuable personal testimony of a person about whom much is conjectured and yet so little is known.



Gustav Meyrink (1868 - 1932) visited Alois Mailänder several times between 1892 and 1905 and tested his mystical path. The letters published here report details from Meyrink's life- period in Prague, of which one could get little information so far, and speak of the dynamism that made the banker Gustav Meyer a writer.



*Illustration 1: Alois Mailänder 1896*

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# Content

- I. Gustav Meyrink and Alois Mailänder
- II. Letters: Alois Mailänder to Gustav Meyrink
  - 1. Letter dated April 10, 1893
  - 2. Letter dated September 23, 1893
  - 3. Letter dated January 13, 1894
  - 4. Letter dated January 18, 1894
  - 5. Letter dated February 15, 1894
  - 6. Letter dated March 22, 1894
  - 7. Letter dated April 20, 1894
  - 8. Letter dated December 27, 1894
  - 9. Letter dated July 20, 1895
  - 10. Letter dated August 1st, 1895
  - 11. Letter dated September 28, 1895
  - 12. Letter dated February 27, 1896
  - 13. Letter dated March 14, 1896
  - 14. Letter dated March 23, 1896
  - 15. Letter dated April 8, 1896
  - 16. \*\*Letter dated October 2, 1896
  - 17. Letter dated October 17, 1896
  - 18. Letter dated November 24, 1897
  - 19. Letter dated December 27, 1897
  - 20. Letter dated January 2, 1898
  - 21. Letter dated April 12, 1898
  - 22. Letter dated April 23, 1898
  - 23. Letter dated July 16, 1898
  - 24. Letter dated August 13, 1898
  - 25. Letter dated April 4, 1899
  - 26. Letter dated October 1st, 1899

27. \*Letter of October 7, 1899
28. Letter dated December 21, 1899
29. Letter dated January 3, 1900
30. Letter dated February 8, 1900
31. Letter dated April 14, 1900
32. Letter dated June 15th, 1900
33. Letter dated July 9, 1900
34. Letter dated October 13, 1900
35. Letter dated December 23, 1900
36. Letter dated May 18, 1901
37. Letter dated June 13, 1901
38. Letter dated September 10, 1901
39. Letter dated August 16, 1902
40. \*Letter dated September 12, 1902
41. \*Letter dated December 26, 1902
42. Letter dated April 19, 1903
43. Letter dated September 15, 1903
44. Letter dated September 21, 1903

#### Notes from Mailänder's

- III. Letters from Alois Mailänder to Hedwig Meyer
- IV. Letters from "Gabriele" to Gustav Meyrink
- V. Further letters and notes from the Home
- VI. Traces in the life of Gustav Meyrink
  2. "The Transformation of the Blood"
  3. Typescript dated August 7, 1930
- VII. Edition Report
  - Letters addressed to Gustav Meyrink
  - To the Letters addressed to Hedwig Meyer
  - Letters of "Gabriele"
  - Notes
  - Transcripts
- VIII. Directories
  - Directory of Persons

Sources of illustrations:  
Bibliography



# **I Gustav Meyrink and Alois Mailänder**

How did the banker Gustav Meyer in Prague become the writer Gustav Meyrink (1868 - 1932), who could captivate his audience with his stories and novels? Usually, you get the knowledge of a bestselling author by the work, for which he became famous. In this way, many are interested in Gustav Meyrink because of his mysterious, exciting novel "Golem" (1916).

To me, it was quite different. I dealt with the question of the hidden, often tortuous ways in which yoga came to Europe in the 19th century. In the course of my research, the name Gustav Meyrink appeared. That made me curious. I got to know him as one of the first to have seriously dealt with the theory and above all with the practice of yoga in the nineteenth century. In this way, I also became interested in the writer Gustav Meyrink. Meyrink was an important narrator and writer. But his insights into yoga are almost more substantial and one can learn much from them. The history of the discovery of yoga in Europe cannot be written without mentioning Meyrink. He practiced yoga with such perseverance and relentless persistence a reader shudders as much about it as about the mysteriously creepy scenes of his stories.

Gustav Meyrink was born in Vienna in 1868. As a child he lived in Munich, Hamburg and Prague, where he graduated from high school (1883). Then he attended the commercial academy there (1885-88) and became a co-owner of a Prague private bank.

According to his autobiographical essay, he wanted to end his life at the age of 23 "saturated with everything" and out

of "sorrows and other sentimentalities". The pistol was already on his desk. Then he heard a rustle and saw something white being pushed through under the door of his room. It was a prospectus from the bookseller. He began to read in it and found reports on spiritualism, hauntedness and occultism. *"The searing desire to see such things with my own eyes, to grasp them with my own hands, to check them for their correctness and to see through the secrets that had to underlie them, heated up in me that night to persistent white heat"*.<sup>1</sup>

From this point on (the Assumptions day of Mary in 1891) all of Gustav Meyrink's interest was in occultism, the study of paranormal phenomena, religion and mysticism. He sought contact with his friend Friedrich Eckstein from Vienna. Through him he received direct access to works of mysticism, to theosophical literature and to literary sources of yoga. Friedrich Eckstein also arranged a direct exchange with the then living German mystic Alois Mailänder.

Friedrich Eckstein (1861-1939) was an interesting person, a tireless "networker" in the cultural scene of Vienna, always well informed and curious to find out what was going on. His social environment was great. For more than fifty years, he maintained the most varied contacts with almost all major cultural institutions and persons in the city of Vienna and he was in his quarters every day, the literary Café Griensteidl (later in the Café Imperial), where others could observe him in conversation with the city's intellectuals and artists. He ran a real "exchange of ideas". Here one met industrialists, musicians, writers, politicians of all types, socialists, women's rights activists, conservative representatives of all classes, freemasons, enlightened theologians, doctors, psychologists and mathematicians. At the turn of the century, Vienna was a hub for all progressive ideas and Friedrich Eckstein was a catalyst. Early on he had also become acquainted with Madame Blavatsky's world of

Theosophy, which was very popular at the time; more than that, he had visited her personally in 1886. On the other side, he was also a personal friend of the German mystic Alois Mailänder.

Vienna was also a center of East Asian research in the nineteenth century alongside Berlin, Paris and London. The famous Indologist Georg Bühler taught here. Next to it Karl Eugen Neumann, who worked on the first German translation of the Buddhist Pali canon. The Chair for Indology (today: Institute for South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies) has existed in Vienna since 1845.

Gustav Meyrink learned what was found, speculated and enthusiastically passed on shortly afterwards through his listening post on site, Friedrich Eckstein. Fascinated by this, he read the first English translations of old venerable yoga texts and testified that he had practiced various yoga techniques himself up to eight hours a day<sup>2</sup>. If you wanted to deal with yoga in the nineteenth century, you could only do it on a self-taught basis. Today there are yoga classes at every community college. Gustav Meyrink had practiced this discipline independently, consistently and with tenacious will, because of his reading and in exchange with friends. His works tell of it - if you can read between the lines. From Vienna he received suggestions, references to interesting literature and study material. In Prague he met regularly with good friends and shared with them about questions and inner experiences in the circle called "Lodge to the Blue Star"<sup>3</sup>. People exchanged views on everything that was new and fascinating. In the years that Gustav Meyrink lived in Prague, Gustav Meyrink was a banker. He appeared externally as a bohemian and oddity.

But in his private life, however, Meyrink was filled with an irrepressible search for the meaning of life. He sought experiences in very different circles: with theosophists,

Freemasons, Illuminati - with true experts and with those who pretended to be true experts. In a satirical manner and with excellent words, he later unmasked the colorful milieu in which he was at the time<sup>4</sup>. Meyrink corresponded with the Viennese theosophist Carl Polykarp zu Leiningen-Billigheim (1860-1899) of the "Kerning Order", with the theosophist and explorer of Hermetics, GRS Mead, with William Wynn Westcott, one of the founders of the Golden Dawn, with A.E.Waite, the researcher of the Rosicrucian movement and with John Yarker who wanted to bring extinct Masonic orders back to life<sup>5</sup>. What was Meyrink looking for in these circles? He later formulated "... *that behind the drive for occultism there is a penchant for freedom in the human heart*"<sup>6</sup>. Traces of this search can be found everywhere in Meyrink's literary work. This is shown in the beautiful biography of Meyrink written by Hartmut Binder<sup>7</sup>.

So far, however, one topic has not found the status it deserves: Meyrink's long standing relationship with Alois Mailänder, Meyrink's spiritual companion during his time in Prague from 1892. Who was Alois Mailänder? Meyrink was contacted by Friedrich Eckstein, who already knew Alois Mailänder at that time.

Visiting Alois Mailänder was an insider tip that was passed on in the theosophical milieu and in the artistic circles of Vienna and Munich. There, Joseph Görres' treatises on Christian and Oriental mysticism<sup>8</sup> was read, people were interested in the stigmatization of Catherine Emmerich, they discussed clairvoyance and precognition in dreams, and shuddered when listening to haunted stories. If you really wanted to research these things in those times, you could join the Psychologische Gesellschaft, get in touch with the "Ghost Baron" Schrenck-Notzing in Munich or join a theosophical circle together with friends, where these themes were discussed. Meyrink's interest in occultism

continued. In 1920 his participation in psychological-occult experiments was noted in the reports of the "Psychologische Gesellschaft".<sup>9</sup>

Alois Mailänder (1843-1905) was a simple man who laboriously earned his living as a foreman in a mechanical weaving mill in Kempten in the Allgäu in the south of Germany on the border with Austria. He could hardly read or write, but was visited by many artists and theosophists from the Munich milieu between 1885 and 1905 because of his mystical talent. Around Alois Mailänder and his family gathered a group of people who were allowed to share the life of the house community at times. This community attracted more and more people, so that their community life was more and more disturbed by outsiders. This may be one reason why the house community in Kempten in the Allgäu was moved to a distant place in the Hessian village of Dreieichenhain near Frankfurt am Main. The community lived largely undisturbed here, although it was sometimes viewed with suspicion by the village population because of the many strangers that emerged from unknown places, then after a while left again. The house community in Dreieichenhain was financially supported by wealthy patrons through a foundation, so that the exhausting factory work could be given up. From then on, only individual students were invited who were allowed to participate in the spiritual life of the community for days or even weeks and were mentored and accompanied by Alois Mailänder. For a long time, Mailänder advised those he had accepted as his "pupils". However, he didn't accept everyone as a student. Anyone who came out of curiosity and had no deeper motivation, such as the fashion painter Fidus, was turned away by Mailänder.

Those who were accepted as pupils remained loyal to Mailänder for years. They regularly reported to the spiritual "leader" about their inner life, about progress and setbacks,

about inner experiences, life crises and their life circumstances. If possible, Mailänder was visited at longer intervals or at least kept in touch with by letter. From the time that Gustav Meyrink was a student of Alois Mailänder, 44 letters were preserved that Mailänder dictated for Gustav Meyrink. The associated letters from Meyrink to Mailänder have been lost.

Mailänder was a person who was greatly appreciated by his students. He called himself "Brother Johannes". No one spoke about him publicly. On the contrary, everyone who was accepted as a student by this man had to promise to remain silent about it in public. All his students adhered to this iron rule during his lifetime. Only after his death did one or the other speak about him, but then only in an anonymizing manner and always in silence about Mailänder's real name. In this way, he was shielded by his students from the public by the silence requirement. Whoever wanted to be his student had to vow not to tell anyone about him or his teaching. Mailänder's affluent patrons also endeavored to have their teacher completely "for themselves" in order to be exclusively advised by him. There was also a danger that Mailänder could have been overwhelmed by biting criticism in public. This was observed using the example of the stigmatized farmer Catherine Emmerich. The aim was to protect Mailänder and his associates from the negative curiosity and the intellectual addiction to criticism. He should have the opportunity to calmly go his own inner way and to accompany his students in peace.

Today there would be nothing left of Alois Mailänder unless some of his students had reported about him after his death. From now on they felt relieved of their silence. We owe the first descriptions of life and the kind of spiritual guidance that Mailänder gave to his students Gustav Meyrink and Karl Weinfurter. They started talking about him

around 1930. However, in their descriptions, they did not yet dare to say Mailänder's name. The spiritual teacher, of whom Meyrink and Weinfurter now reported, only got a face in 1956 when letters from the Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden estate were found that identified the anonymous “teacher” with the citizen Alois Mailänder from Dreieichenhain. The theosophist Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden was a student of Mailänder. Letters and notes relating to the person of Alois Mailänder were found in his estate. It should therefore be understood that the historical source material for Alois Mailänder was only gradually uncovered. What is shown in our presentation about Mailänder is based on the following sources:

In the “Ortssippenbuch” made up from parish registers of Dreieichenhain, Mailänder's last place of residence, you can find card entries about him and about the members of his household in Dreieichenhain<sup>10</sup>. Relationships and life data can be found in these entries.

## Alois Mailänder

♂ 1843 - 1905 (61 Jahre)

 <b>Person</b>	 Familie	 Vorfahren	 Nachkommen	 Verwandtschaft
Angaben zur Person   Notizen   Alles   PDF				
Name	Alois Mailänder			
Geboren	25 Mrz 1843	Fidazhofen b. Weißenau/Donaukreis 		
				
Geschlecht	männlich			
Religion	kath.			
Gestorben	25 Jan 1905	Dreieichenhain 		
				

Illustration 2: Excerpt from Dreieichenhain's “Ortssippenbuch”

The following certificates have been obtained from Alois

Mailänder himself:

- First there are the 44 letters of Alois Mailänder to Gustav Meyrink from the period between 1892 and 1903, which we present in the present collection<sup>11</sup>.
- Then there are transcripts from the meetings of the house community, in which Mailänder gave edifying speeches<sup>12</sup>:
- Individual statements of Mailänder were summarized, authorized by Mailänder and then handwritten among his students as a collection entitled “Seelenlehre” (Lectures on the Soul). Technically, the process was such that the students were given a copy, which they were then allowed to copy by hand before they had to return it. Mailänder sometimes instructed them to pass the collection on to another student. In the letter of April 11, 1893, Meyrink was instructed by “Gabriele” to send Mailänder's “Lectures on the Soul” to a student in Hamburg (Bernhard Hubo?). A copy of this text in the bequest of Wilhelm Hübbe- Schleiden has been preserved<sup>13</sup>.
- Another collection of Mailänder authorship records was given the title “Formenlehre” (Lectures on Forms). This is a collection of enigmatic terms to which a certain symbolism has been ascribed<sup>14</sup>.
- 1885: A first announcement about the spiritual household of Mailänder<sup>15</sup>, given by the theosophist Franz Hartmann.
- 1886: “An Interview with a German”<sup>16</sup> (Alois Mailänder), as well written by Hartmann.



<u>2. Briefe aus dem Kreis einer pietist. Brüdergemeinde</u>	
<u>Schreiber:</u>	<u>Adressat:</u>
eBU Gabriele (Geistl. Schwesternname) (6) = Frau Mailänder	Dreieichenhain 1893-1897 an Ruben (Geistl.Brüdername, d.i.Meyrink, Gustav)
B mit Johannes (Geistl.Brüdername) Leiter d. Gemeindehauses)(40)	Dreieichenhain 1893-1905
e.U. = Mailänder, Alois 1894-1905	an Ruben-Juda (Geistl.Br.N., d.i.Meyrink, Gustav)
BU Johannes (Geistl.Br.N.) Leiter des Gemeindehauses) = Mailänder, Alois	(3) Dreieichenhain 1896-1901 an Maria (Geistl.Schw.N., d.i. Meyrink, Mena)
eBU Ruth (Geistl.Schw.N.)	(3) 1894 an Maria (Geistl.Schw.N.) d.i. Meyrink, Mena)
Ohne Unterschrift und Adresse	(2) [Dreieichehhain] 1895-97

*Illustration 3: Excerpt from the inventory of Gustav Meyrink's estate.  
TheThe  
names of persons given here are sometimes incorrect. ("Gabriele" means  
Crescentia  
Gabele, instead of "Mena" it has to be "Hedwig Aloysia Meyer").*

- 1886: An essay by Hartmann on the way in which Mailänder worked: "Occultism in Germany"<sup>17</sup>
- 1900: Biographical information about Hartmann's relationship with Mailänder and his household, as well as "extracts from various letters" from Mailänder<sup>18</sup>.

Two other students of Alois Mailänder also provided detailed information in terms of content: Gustav Meyrink and Karl Weinfurter. You can see from Meyrink and Weinfurter treatises that these two students must have been very close to their teacher. What was said later about Mailänder is second hand.

- The writer Gustav Meyrink has included his comments on Mailänder in a very personal biographical sketch found in his estate<sup>19</sup>, in which he described his own inner career. Here he described the importance of Mailänder for him.

- 1930: The German-Czech writer Karl Weinfurter, who described himself as one of the last students of Mailänder, has reported on him in great detail. In his book, “Man's Highest Purpose”, Weinfurter described important biographical details as well as the type of training that Mailänder ran with his students<sup>20</sup>.
- 1956: The literature often refers to statements by Emil Bock, a priest of the Christian Community. In a longer chapter, Bock honored Alois Mailänder as a Christian mystic in his “The Life and Times of Rudolf Steiner” and emphasized that some of Mailänder students became particularly committed anthroposophists after Mailänder died. Bock's essay stands out because it reveals the real names of Alois Mailänder and Nikolaus Gabele. - Bock had taken a look at the bequest of Hübbe-Schleiden<sup>21</sup>. However, Bock's research was limited. Bock missed some important facts; among other things, that there is a copy of Mailänders’s “Lectures on the Soul” in the Hübbe-Schleiden estate.
- 1961: Herbert Hahn, a Waldorf teacher from Stuttgart, also mentioned Alois Mailänder in his Steiner biography along with his name. He described Mailänder as a companion of many who later became followers of Rudolf Steiner<sup>22</sup>.
- 1990: A literary source of a very different kind can be found in the work of Roger Heil<sup>23</sup>. Testimonials from the Dreieich Local History Society were collected here: observations and details from Dreieich as well as oral reports from residents of the village. Because these reports are based on oral communication, the spellings of names need to be revised.

Based on the source material listed here, you can get a preliminary idea of who Alois Mailänder was and the significance he had for his students.

Alois Mailänder was born in 1843 as an illegitimate child in a suburb of Ravensburg in the hinterland of Lake Constance. His mother was a seasonal worker from Tyrol in Austria, who later found work in a mechanical weaving mill in Kempten in the Allgäu. Her son Alois also worked there later, first as a simple weaver, then as a foreman on mechanical looms. The work was exhausting. A worker spent ten hours in the noise of the looms, which he had to watch, wait and feed carefully. If the yarn ran out or a mistake occurred, he had to act immediately. Growing up as an only child of a single worker was a tough fate. Alois was never able to go to school. He was probably used helping out at his mother's workplace from an early age.

According to available information, Mailänder suffered a deep life crisis as a young adult. This crisis may be related to the fact that a weaving factory burnt down completely in 1876. This resulted in sudden unemployment for hundreds of people. Mailänder also seems to have tragically lost his first wife during this period<sup>24</sup>. We do not have exact facts about these events. One thing, however, was passed down with certainty: Mailänder later recounted that a simple man, a carpenter named Prestel, approached him of his own accord and gave him spiritual support when he was in this deepest crisis. It is no longer possible to find out who this "Prestel" was. Many people still live in Kempten with the name "Prestel".

The relationships between the Mailänder and Gabele couples were very close. Alois Mailänder and his brother-in-law Nikolaus Gabele were both widowed. At the age of 27, Mailänder married in his second marriage, the sister of Nikolaus Gabele. A year later, Nikolaus Gabele married the sister of Mailänder's late wife.

When Mailänder was 33 years old (1876), he had a religious revival experience. From that point on, everyone in

the family called themselves “brother and sister in the Lord”. Biblical names were also used for each other. Alois Mailänder was called “Brother Johannes”, his wife Karoline received the “spirit name” “Ruth”, his brother-in-law Nikolaus Gabele, “Solomon”, and his sister-in-law Crescentia Gabele, “Gabriele”. This behavior was maintained and later all students of Mailänder were given biblical “spirit names” with which they were addressed. Gustav Meyrink, for example, initially received the name “Ruben”, which was later expanded to “Ruben Juda”. The family household community was transformed into a “home” in which other people were included for reading the scriptures, for common prayer or for meditation of individual mantras.

The districts of Kempten and Ravensburg belonged politically to the state of Württemberg and were administered by the church from Stuttgart. The religious atmosphere in these enclaves was strictly evangelical, pietistic, often shaped by the “Korntal Reform”. The soul's personal relationship with God was cultivated more than going to church. Private revelations played a major role in this milieu. The names of Jakob Boehme (1575-1624), Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) and Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling (1740-1817) are mentioned. The Catholic environment of the Protestant enclave was also very pious, it was shaped by the “Allgäu revival movement”, which goes back to the charismatic theologian Michael Sailer (1753-1832) and to the mystic Jakob Lorber (1800-1860). A letter written by Mailänder's sister-in-law Crescentia Gabele to Gustav Meyrink (letter of June 25<sup>th</sup> , 1897) mentions Jakob Boehme's followers in the Philadelphian Society of England, John Pordage and Jane Leade.

How it came about that Mailänder was perceived beyond the small area of Kempten is unclear. Theosophist Franz Hartmann [1885/86 / 87-1900] gave early evidence of Mailänder as an important mystic. Hartmann was born in

Donauwörth and grew up in Kempten. Hartmann's father practiced there as a doctor. As Hartmann became acquainted with Nikolaus Gabele and some time later with Alois Mailänder, Hartmann reported in the following words:

*"In the spring of 1885 I traveled to Naples with H. P. Blavatsky and soon after I became acquainted with a small family of Christian mystics who formed a circle among themselves that was concerned with the promotion of inner life."*<sup>25</sup> He continues: *"The family of S. [Solomon] was not entirely foreign to me; my parents had had relationships with them twenty years ago"*<sup>26</sup>.

If you go through the list of Mailänder students, you will find some of them in the Munich area. Hartmann's sister, Baroness Caroline von Spreti, and her husband Adolf Graf von Spreti also lived there. According to Emil Bock's testimony, the then President of the German Theosophical Society, Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden, had access to the circle around Alois Mailänder through Baron and Baroness von Spreti<sup>27</sup>. They had contacts with the artistic milieu, in which the artist Gabriel von Max played a major role as an important painter, who shaped the romantic concept of art of his time. Gabriel von Max held a chair at the Munich Art Academy. He became known for paintings with religious content, which often took up motifs from popular piety. One of his paintings, which is still known today, is Catharine Emmerich from Dülmen, the simple peasant woman who had become the focus of intense social controversy because of her visions. Jesus' stigmata had appeared on her hands and forehead. The romantics spread this life story widely; what could be observed here mobilized a whole spectrum of questions in connection with the different states of consciousness which the soul occupies in dreams, precognition, clairvoyance and somnambulism. Gabriel von Max was also open to spiritualism. He was friends with the

private scholar Carl Freiherr du Prel (1839-1899), who founded a “Psychological Society” for the scientific study of these phenomena.

The “ghost baron” Albert von Schrenck- Notzing (1862-1929) also played a role here. His seances were visited by Thomas Mann and Gustav Meyrink. Gabriel von Max and Carl du Prel, both became members of the Theosophical Society Germania, founded in 1884, which celebrated its second general meeting in the painter's house in Ambach near the lake of Starnberg.<sup>28</sup>

Open-minded and searching people from this milieu became known to the simple weaver journeyman Alois Mailänder in an as yet unknown way. Mailänder people were curiously eyed, marveled at, derogated, and even revered by some of the city rulers. The fact that he became more and more the focus of curious people who made a pilgrimage from the capital to the countryside led his closest admirers to “pull him out of circulation”. They wanted to shield him from the gawkers who were looking for sensation. One wanted to avoid having the same fate as Catherine Emmerich, who had become so much the focus of prying eyes that she could no longer rest.

Mailänder's patron, Marie Gebhard L'Estrange from Elberfeld, became active in this sense. First she tried to persuade Mailänder to move near Elberfeld. This plan failed. Mailänder, who spoke a broad Swabian language, had difficulties with the mentality and dialect of the Elberfeld area. So they looked for other options and finally found a place that had a rural atmosphere and at the same time was within easy reach of the important traffic hub Frankfurt / Main lay. From Frankfurt you could travel by train to Munich, Hamburg, Berlin and Prague. Elberfeld was also within easy reach. In Dreieichenhain Mailänder could be allowed a quiet existence in relative anonymity. It so happened that Alois