

Martha's Labyrinth

FRONT COVER

Martha and Joaquim Rodrigues dos
Santos Júnior, Estate of Monserrate, Sintra,
19 September 1935 (UL)

Martha's Marc Verschooris Love **Labyrinth** and betrayal in Ghent 1938–1944

LABYRINTH: a complicated irregular network of passages
or paths in which it is difficult to find one's way; a maze
(*Oxford English dictionary*)

This book, and the exhibitions that inspired it, came about as a result of my research to capture the life of a young female Viennese scientist Martha Geiringer (1912–1943). A history from the bottom-up, which begins with the local setting and then fits into a global scenario. The main pathways of her life run across world cities – Vienna, Lisbon, Ghent, Manila, Genoa, and Nice. I will be grateful if the book – doing justice to a tragically unfinished life – will continue to be relevant long after the exhibition doors have closed.

Marc Verschooris, May 2024
www.marcverschooris.be

Dedicated to my grandchildren
Hector, Titus, Bonnie and Thelma

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Foreword

As a young medical student in 1959 I first met Erich Geiringer, a newly arrived lecturer and researcher at the Otago Medical School who was teaching us clinical skills. I was inspired by his uncharacteristic way of challenging, not only students, but later the whole New Zealand medical establishment. After my graduation we married, set up a medical practice together in Wellington and raised a family of three. Erich's social and political activism and his subsequent work for nuclear disarmament, as I slowly learned, had roots going back to his childhood in Vienna, where, as a young boy he was picked up for spreading socialist pamphlets.

Erich spoke often of his Viennese family, and had clearly been very influenced by his older siblings. He had returned to Belgium after the war to find out what he could of Martha's disappearance, particularly so his mother would know what had happened to her. It is now through further research that we learn so much more about what happened during those years in Ghent. It is Marc's enormous tenacity in tracing Martha's trail starting from pre-war Vienna searching archives, documenting evidence of her movements, talking with family members and inspiring them to search their own archives, which has brought to light this remarkable story.

Thanks to the publication of this book, descendants of the Geiringer family dispersed throughout the globe have had the chance to come to Ghent on different occasions, to see where this story took place and to meet up with people. We envisage that this book will inspire Geiringer descendants to carry on the work of social and political engagement. As our current world faces wars, climate change, political decay, there is every reason for us to stand firm, with courage and determination, as these two women – Martha and Yvonne – did, against the forces that threaten to destroy our social fabric.

— DR. CAROL SHAND

After years of church, chapel, and prayer, any shreds of faith had left me by the age of 18. Carol and Erich tried their best to relieve my fragile mental state. They were generous with their friends – many that I found to be ‘exotic’ Europeans who had, like Erich, managed to escape the ravages of the war. I was hosted equally as generously by Trude and Fred in Palo Alto for a couple of months, and later with Alfred in London. There was advocaat at Christmas with Trude (teenager Fred playing the piano in the background) and visits to Stanford where she worked in a laboratory on a drug for cancer. And in London with Alfred, there were wonderful Sunday lunches with a roast, lots of talk and interesting friends. As I look back, I remember no mention of Martha or the holocaust or what they had gone through. As a naïve New Zealander, I probably never thought to ask.

In my 30s, now married and living in the Netherlands, I questioned my Mother-in-law about her experience of the hunger winter, the bombing of her house near Arnhem and evacuation to Rotterdam. But however I tried to engage my Father-in-law, who had been interned in Amersfoort for a period, I could get no word. The photos said a lot, but the silence was deafening.

The more I practiced as a psychotherapist, the more I became aware of the effects of trauma – the holes left behind in people’s psyches through the next generation and the next, and the one after that. The sins of the father, so the Bible says, follow three or four generations.

As I engaged with Marc on the editing of Martha’s Labyrinth it was first commas and colons that took my attention. As the English translation nearly comes to fruition I am left with the feeling of enormous gratitude – to the Geiringers – and to my own family, ancestors, and descendants. But above all to Marc for the respect and care he has given to Martha, Yvonne and all the people in this story. Words can heal – if they are wise and kind, they give the possibility of filling the holes left by the trauma of previous generations. I am thankful for his wisdom and hope that this story might help others to rework their own trauma with courage and strength.

— JILL VAN DER AA-SHAND

PART ONE

**Vienna between
light and darkness**

The Poison in the bloodstream of time

BLOOD ON THE RINGSTRASSE

The Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy of the Habsburg Empire of Emperor Franz Josef was founded in 1867. For Jews, this meant emancipation, civil equality, and the abolition of forced settlements in ghettos. The new empire encompassed an enormous area, had many peoples and languages, and aroused many patriotic sentiments, which ensured that the authority of Vienna was undermined. Around 1900, the old feudal order was weakening, and political tensions were like a ticking bomb that could explode at any moment. Not surprisingly, the empire counted no less than ten different populations. Tensions with neighbouring Serbia, which was becoming stronger, and the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908, led to two wars in the Balkans, in 1912 and 1913. A new smouldering Balkan conflict accompanied by ethnic cleansing hung in the air. After the assassination of the Habsburg Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife – on the eve of their planned annual holiday in Belgium – Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. It was Serbia that was suspected of having a hand in the murder. It was not a short campaign as was hoped but became a world conflict with much senseless slaughter. The First World War has also been called ‘a third Balkan war, which got out of hand’.

In 1918, the dual monarchy did not survive. The glorious chain of Habsburgs came to an end. In 1919, the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye regulated the structure of the new Republic of Austria. If the leadership of Austria’s Socialist Party before and after the First World War is a Jewish affair, then it strives to eliminate all reactionary tendencies, to get rid of ‘das Jüdische’ to make participation in the cultural life of the entire population as optimal as possible. Those who strive for an assimilated community – and even those who still opt for a Jewish educational tradition – are thus opposed to Hasidism, the ultra-Orthodox direction.

Since the beginning of the century – which heralded a new order – the social democratic party of Doctor Victor Adler had been defending the interests of the proletariat. It was not a revolutionary gang – as was long feared – but enforced progress in a humane way. In 1920, after a brief stint in government, the Austrian socialists of the SDAPÖ

disappeared into the opposition benches. Nevertheless, thanks to the new constitution, they were able to push through their reform ideas in the independent province of Vienna, where they found a political majority. With socialism came an eight-hour working day, unemployment benefits, and the realisation of all kinds of cultural projects. The antagonism between Catholics and Socialists often degenerated into demonstrations, with fatalities in 1927. And in-between were the German nationals, those who – with unbridled aggression – envisaged a Greater Germany. Corps students would hunt down their Slavic and Jewish fellow students in ‘Burschenschaften’ (student fraternities) and exchange blows on the Ringstrasse.

‘THE ROAD INTO THE OPEN’ AND ANTI-SEMITISM

Since the crash of the Vienna Stock Exchange in 1873, a wave of anti-Semitism had swept through Austria-Hungary. This movement was given a political translation in the person of Karl Lueger, who became mayor of the Habsburg capital Vienna, in 1896. He chaired a populist, clerical, anti-liberal, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic city council. The nationalists who wanted part of the Habsburg Empire to join the German Empire placed emphasis on ‘the foreigner’. German speakers boasted of their dominant position. Jews from Bohemia and other new ‘washed up’ citizens from the annexed areas were suddenly spoken of with contempt.

It seems that only Arthur Schnitzler, a writer of the liberal Jewish bourgeoisie, succeeded in analysing decadent and bourgeois Vienna. As a physician, and member of the group Jung Wien, he wrote about love and death, but especially after 1880 also about the anti-Semitism that he saw rising which affected Jewish artists and intellectuals. The Jewish Viennese made up nine percent of the total city population. They turned their political powerlessness around by excelling in cultural activities and thus shaping the ‘liberal intelligentsia’. This was purely out of necessity, given the social restrictions imposed on them by the anti-Semitism of the Austrian nobility and upper-middle class. Jews have long sought refuge in the world of art because it is, in the words of Hannah Arendt, ‘impervious to social or political intervention’.

The Jewish elite equally put its stamp on the innovative movements that manifested themselves in just about every field of art at that time: architecture, the visual arts, literature, and science. The rise of this liberal Jewish middle class brought about a new cultural flowering that identified itself with German culture. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Vienna made an enormous contribution to European intellectual and cultural history. Paris, for centuries the exciting cultural centre of intellectual life, was even briefly surpassed by Vienna.

Karl Kraus, a leading figure in the literary world, was sometimes called 'a Jewish anti-Semite', but above all an uncompromising satirist and opponent of 'journalism', known for its language degradation. He kicked out wildly at all institutions. Few writers found favour in his eyes, but even more, he focused his sight on the liberal, quality newspaper, the *Neue Freie Presse* (NFP) of Moritz Benedikt, where the young Stefan Zweig had seen his first texts appear. Benedikt, who had been one of the Emperor's close confidants, was for Kraus the paramount of evil in Austria.

Kraus turned away from the liberal, Jewish middle class. With his one-man magazine *Die Fackel* (The Torch), he wanted to create his own completely independent medium. For and against, no Zionism and no anti-Semitism (Zionism is giving in to anti-Semitism); the only solution to the 'Jewish problem' is complete assimilation. Kraus attacked anti-Semites and acted mercilessly towards Jews. Searching for a non-Jewish identity, he left Judaism and entered the Roman Catholic Church, which he also promptly left. He glorified women but was against emancipation. According to Kraus, changing one's point of view is inherent to human dignity.

'Austria, in which a young Jew could free himself from the shackles which had kept Jewry in bondage for centuries. It was this Austria which allowed him to study, to become an officer, to accomplish in a single lifetime the enormous transition from Jew of the ghetto to a respected citizen of Vienna, the most glamorous capital on the whole continent.' (George Clare)

Stefan Zweig wrote about the eternal paradoxes of Jewish destiny, the ascent to a spiritual ideal from which a disproportionate occupation of intellectual professions emerged. The cultural boom was certainly a product of the Jewish emancipation and assimilation process. By the turn of the century, most Viennese lawyers were Jewish, and half the population of Viennese physicians was of Jewish origin. By 1910, one in three Viennese gymnasium (grammar school) students was of Jewish origin, and at the Viennese university one in four. Jewish intellectuals were registered as teachers (although not of the highest rank) and active in the fields of law, medical sciences, and, increasingly, humanities. More and more Jewish doctors were opening successful practices in Vienna and other Austrian cities.

'Jews by 1910 had become a protean nucleus even among the university's teaching faculty (although rarely at the exalted rank of professor), most especially in the law and medical schools, but also, increasingly, in the humanities.' (Howard Sachar)

If Jews and non-Jews continue to shut themselves away in their own world, the road to freedom may become blocked on all sides, was Schnitzler's conclusion. Despite his waning interest in medicine, knowledge of the human psyche was an asset to his literary work. Countless poems and plays by Schnitzler, whose life had many parallels with that of his contemporary Freud, have been preserved.

Freud noticed how Schnitzler from 'Jung-Wien' – out of intuition – gave literary shape to what he himself had discovered along the way of science and laborious analysis. The emotional life of women was a recurring theme in Schnitzler's work; the melancholic doubts they have about just about everything. The scepticism his writing encountered was amply compensated for by his personal love for women and the many and often short-lived complicated love affairs. Desire demands fulfilment. There was the old Vienna with its double standards, which allowed the woman nothing and the man everything. Young women avoided premarital sex and entered marriage virginal, at least those from the well-to-do bourgeoisie. Boys did not have to suppress their sensual desires; women were supposed to curb their physical cravings.

Gradually, the double standard lost its force. Schnitzler was the chronicler of the hypocritical mores of the Viennese bourgeoisie. The extreme-right magazine *Volkssturm* considered Schnitzler the enemy of the German people. With his early death in 1931, Schnitzler escaped the burgeoning hatred of Jews, which the highly infected Hitler – with Vienna as his school of learning – would give shape to. Under the Nazis, Schnitzler's books were forbidden. The mild climate of Vienna, its spiritual tolerance of the past, so masterfully described by Zweig, thus came to an end.

THE WIENER KREIS AND THE WEIMAR BAUHAUS

From Schnitzler, it was a small step to the Wiener Kreis (Viennese Circle). Young intellectuals argued that philosophy and science form a unity and argued about what they saw as pointless metaphysics. The possibility of verification is the key, a logical empiricism. An assertion is only meaningful if you can find out whether it is true, Wittgenstein is not so far off. The thesis that all knowledge must be based on unquestionable grounds – observation or logic – is met with opposition. Even if most of the theses of logical positivism will not endure, its spirit will surely survive.

'Modernist musicians, poets, and artists all became introspective, lifting up the bonnet, examining how their art form functioned, and then choosing to expose inner workings to the listener, reader or viewer.' (David Edmonds)

The philosophers Moritz Schlick, Karl Popper, and Otto Neurath were among the founders of the Wiener Kreis. The Wiener Kreis helped to shape modernism, bringing together artists and scientists who all excelled in their own progressive ways. Klimt, Schiele, and Kokoschka, did not shun the erotic element in their paintings. Reactions to the hypocrisy of the Catholic bourgeoisie found their way into the books of Schnitzler, Musil, and the polemicist Kraus. Even non-Jews joined the 'Jewish' part of the cultural elite: Kokoschka and Musil. Adolf Loos – an architect – rejected the baroque and gothic styles of the previous century. The new building plans provided for clean lines and the omission of unnecessary and boastful ornaments. Kraus denounced the excess of adjectives that hide ideas, he saw them as 'ornaments', this was the imagery of the essayists and literary men. This made him a friend-moralist of Loos.

Otto Neurath was vigilant at the opening of Walter Gropius' Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar. In the young Weimar Republic, the cradle of modernity, the Bauhaus was the leading academy of architecture and art. The Bauhaus, founded in 1907 as the School of Weimar, was designed by the Belgian architect Henry Van de Velde. It is about time that the appearance of a new building is subordinated to its function – the function should dictate the form. Where the architect, the stonemason, the painter, and each craftsman assist with the realisation, the time-honoured hierarchy gives way to harmonious cooperation.

In Weimar's Bauhaus, Roderich Lasnizki, a German-Jewish salesman and theatre lover, met Tony Simon-Wolfskehl. She came from a privileged German-Jewish Frankfurt bourgeoisie, an intellectual environment that allowed her, a woman, a great deal of independence. The happy and democratic but turbulent Weimar years were of short duration. There are exactly fourteen of them, in which even mixed marriages between Jews and non-Jews were not uncommon. With the arrival of the Nazis, many dreams and wishes were dashed. The headstrong intellectual Tony, a doctoral student in architecture who designed furniture after working at Frankfurt's Neues Theater, would have to get away quickly with her husband. Together, they left Germany with a broad intellectual and cultural baggage, containing literature, music, and painting.

There are reasons why they came to Ghent, in the northwest of Belgium. Ghent was no stranger to them. With Roderick, Doctor Erwin Freund also returned to the capital of East Flanders. During the Great War, they both worked at the German Kommandantur. Ghent was at that time a refuge, a few years before a new fire would engulf the world.

Where fascism lives, science and culture must die

THE GEIRINGERS IN A PROGRESSIVE JEWISH CULTURE

The name Geiringer originates in the vicinity of the Hungarian Stampfen, near Pressburg. Today it is the Slovakian Stupava in the Bratislava surroundings, close to the Austrian border and a short distance from Vienna. In the central European monarchy of the Habsburgs – which ended in 1918 – Stupava was part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. By the end of the eighteenth century, Jews were obliged to choose an appropriate surname, frequently named after the residential zone.



Wilhelm and Irma Geiringer
(AFA)

Presumably, the choice of the name Geiringer refers to the small community of Gajary, scarcely 10 kilometres away from Stupava.

Wilhelm Geiringer was born in Vienna in 1881. Some documents locate his workplace in Stampfen where he was working as a businessman and accountant. In 1910 he was still in Hungary, Magyarfalva (Ungereigen) where he married Irma Körner from Eichhorn, Lower Austria. Irma came from a more religious family. Even before the outbreak of the First World War, large numbers of refugees were on the move.

The law of December 1863 stipulated that every Austrian citizen must have a 'Heimatrecht'. This 'right of domicile' – with more rights and duties – did not have to be the birthplace. A marriage location, the place where a public office was held, or where a legal transaction took place were among the conditions for acquiring this right. After his marriage, Wilhelm received a 'Heimatrecht' in Stampfen. Wilhelm and Irma settled in Alt-Brigittenau.

Brigittenau, in Vienna's 20th district, had a few cinemas, called 'Ladenkinos', which served as business posts, but which could be quickly transformed into projection rooms

at certain times, so that enough people – one to two hundred – could enjoy the spectacle. In October 1912, the most modern cinema in the district, the Wallenstein, was built. The theatre, decorated in gold and cream colours, could only contribute to ‘increasing the interest in cinema viewings’.

Considering the density of the Jewish population, Brigittenau took fourth place, after Leopoldstadt (2nd district), Alsergrund (9th), and the Inner Stadt (1st). There, Martha Geiringer is born on the 28th of August 1912 in the Klosterneubürgerstrasse in the 20th district, one of the oldest traffic arteries in the city. Martha is the second child: Alfred, Martha, Erich and Gertrude are born between 1911 and 1918. Martha enjoys a carefree childhood with her two brothers and younger sister.

At the end of November 1915, Wilhelm comes before the recruiting commission and passes his medical examination, which earns him – once approved – a place in the 72nd Infantry Regiment. During the First World War, he fights in the army of the dual monarchy, the Kaiserlich- und Königliche Armee (ККА), and thus in the service of the honourable Emperor Franz Joseph. He sacrifices his health to his military service. Seriously injured he develops a heart condition – endocarditis – which was not treatable until antibiotics were developed and would lead to progressive heart failure and premature death. At the end of the war, Wilhelm loses his ‘Heimatrecht’ in Stampfen. After the first world war, when Jewish and other intellectuals flocked to Vienna, it



Coffeehouse Geiringer and Martha
bottom right (AFA)



Martha, top right 1922 (AFA)

became known as Red Vienna because of its prevalent socialist ideas and policies. In 1923, over two hundred thousand Jews live there, seventeen thousand five hundred of whom live in the twentieth district, Brigittenau. This is eighteen percent of the total population in the district.

In 1921, Wilhelm and Irma, Social Democrats, run a typical Viennese coffeehouse on the corner of the Rauscherstrasse and the Wasnergasse, the former Cafe Electra. The hundreds of Viennese coffee houses symbolised a vibrant and creative existence. Stefan Zweig gave the best description of this meeting place, 'a democratic club' where students and professors often meet. The Cafe is worth a visit after synagogue or is even a substitute for a visit to the Shul. Members of the Viennese Circle would routinely hold their meetings there and order 'a piece of apple strudel or Sachertorte'. Regulars have their own table (Stammtisch). The Cafe was not a pub or tavern, which implies more a bar primarily for alcoholic beverages, and mainly preferred by labourers. Wilhelm also imported and sold skis and clearly had some sort of import business on a small scale. Both Alfred and Martha are avid skiers. In Vienna one could catch a tram into the woods and ski among the trees. Wilhelm is a committed socialist and even in later years,



Gertrude standing in front, next to her grandfather Max Geiringer (AFA)

though a chronic invalid, was known for helping his neighbours with legal and social matters. He was a Fürsorgerat, which today we would call a social worker. Inviting the needy to his bar is a noble task, where they can warm themselves and be served food and drink. What is perhaps less amusing is that this magnanimous act scared away the regular customers.

The Kaffeehaus Geiringer is located opposite the Augarten park, with 52 hectares of land and a characteristic French garden around the Palace. It is an oasis of peace and stability, but also a place of fun for the young Geiringers. With the early death of Wilhelm in 1930 – his heart finally gave up – Irma had to get on with running the business and raising her young children. Thanks to great self-sacrifice and family support, the talented children could continue their studies, at the same time developing a strong political commitment to progressive Jewish culture. However, it is likely that his father's early death prevented the start of Alfred's university studies. The Geiringers were interested and involved from an early age in the socialist movement. Even Erich was expelled from a primary school for distributing socialist pamphlets.

SMALL FRESHWATER PLANKTON IN THE LUNZER LAKE

In 1923, Martha Geiringer starts secondary school at the Brigittenauer Gymnasium, in the Karajangasse. It doesn't go well. It is not until 1929 that she completes her final years at the Realschule in the Glasergasse, the ninth district of Vienna. Martha doesn't miss the opportunity to diligently pursue an additional subject such as chemistry. She gets a bonus for teamwork, where especially the interest in the German and the French language is promoted: Heinrich von Kleist versus Marquis de Girardin. Martha will do her utmost to understand the past participle agreement ('l'accord du participe passé') in the French language, conjugations being the hardest part for a foreign student.

On the 6th of July 1931, Martha finishes her secondary school with a final oral examination. She is ready for university, which in Vienna is called 'für reif erklärt'. Her final work 'Das Phytoplankton des Süßwassers' shows precisely what she wants to do in the immediate future. This study of the microscopic algae that live in the water, and the presence of animals, can tell a lot about the local habitat. She is especially interested in the Limnology Institute of Lunz am See where every year summer courses in aquatic biology are organised. Precisely because of his tropical experience in Batavia, Sumatra, and Bali, Franz Ruttner attracts many scientists to the institute and the lake.

'Proletarians of the whole world unite in sport.'



Martha surrounded by her aunts, Vienna 1924 (AFA)

1931 is also the year of the Olympiad. This is the greatest festival for the socialists, a tribute to the workers. Martha has thought carefully about her choice of study. With his limitations, a human is part of nature. Through perseverance one can strive to achieve something by developing one's potential. This is what she remembers from the work – however unfathomable – of the thinker and naturalist Spinoza, who had done everything to free himself from a belief that was oppressive to him. The faith that remains is natural science, with a wink to Descartes.

'Universities were organised around the classics. Languages and history were considered important. There were no women there. The natural sciences had less prestige, which made it somewhat easier for women to enter'. (Mon Klein Douwel)

During the winter semester 1931–1932, Martha begins her study in natural sciences at the Faculty of Philosophy at Vienna University. She must complete exactly eight semesters to gain the *Absolutorium*, an old Austrian term for a university degree. Only once – on the first enrolment – does Martha need to mention her religious origins. In the second semester, 'Mosaïsch' is replaced by 'Konfessionslos' (non-denominational). This alteration at the beginning of her university studies is also recorded in the *Kultusgemeinde*: left Judaism on Nov 22nd, 1931. There is a contradiction between the natural sciences and religion. Martha seeks a rapprochement with other young, enlightened, and progressive Viennese freethinkers.

Martha attends university from 1931 to 1934. Like her friend 'Mitzi' Jahoda, she combines her studies with a strong commitment to the Socialist Revolutionaries. This movement arose as a result of the clerical and conservative Chancellor Dollfuss' seizure of power. In September 1933, he announces the end of parliamentary democracy and its replacement with an authoritarian corporate state. He goes on to ban all parties except his Patriotic Front. Soon the only political symbol will be the Crutched Cross. The regime is inspired by the totalitarianism of Mussolini, whom he sees as his protector. The corporative state is against the Social Democrats, against the Austro Marxists, and yet also against the Nazis. The clerico-fascist state is not openly anti-Semitic. Being so outspoken against the Nazi party, even Jews are prepared to wear the red-white-red ribbon of the *Vaterländische Front* in their buttonholes. But various pseudo-military groups such as the *Heimwehr*, with a strong anti-Semitic wing, exist. The Austrians have an ambivalent attitude to Dollfuss's Austria. In fact, he strongly believes in the country's independence and wants to create a state which has similarities to the

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