

ALICE'S BOOK

HOW THE NAZIS
STOLE MY
GRANDMOTHER'S
COOKBOOK



KARINA URBACH

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my Grandmother's Cookbook

*Translated from the German by
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MACLEHOSE PRESS
QUERCUS · LONDON

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PREFACE
THE BOOK OF AN UNKNOWN WOMAN

I can't cook, which is probably why it took me so long to realise that we had two cookbooks on our shelf at home with the same title: *So kocht man in Wien! (Cooking the Viennese Way!)* The text and colour photographs in both books were identical; the only difference was in the name on the cover. The 1938 edition was attributed to Alice Urbach, whereas the 1939 one claimed Rudolf Rösch as its author.

Alice Urbach was my grandmother. I hardly ever saw her because she lived in America and I grew up in Germany. She died while I was still a child and my memories of her are hazy. I knew from family lore that she had been a famous cook in 1930s Vienna and that her culinary skills had saved her life. But why and exactly how this had happened remained unclear.

When, many years after her death, I became a historian, it never crossed my mind to write about her.

But, one day, my American cousin Katrina (a single "t" is the difference between our names) gave me a box with family letters and old cassettes. Katrina is a dedicated paediatrician and a pragmatist. She thought it only natural that I, a historian, should explore our grandmother's story. As so often is the case, my family members had a wealth of anecdotes and few facts. But when I started reading the letters and listening to Alice's voice on tape, I began to get an idea of what she had been through. From that moment on, all I wanted to do was tell her story.

The research took me from Vienna to New York via London. And as the geographical scope of my investigation widened, so did the

group of protagonists. Alice was part of a complex family history, which began in a ghetto and then continued in Viennese millionaire circles. Famous individuals such as Anna Freud and the physicist Lise Meitner played a role in Alice's life, as did many others whose names are unknown to history. These included an American secret agent by the name of Cordelia Dodson, a Munich publisher, and twenty-four Jewish children who Alice looked after in the Lake District during the Second World War. The story of Alice's own children – her sons Otto and Karl – was remarkable too. While Otto led an adventurous life in China, back in Vienna Karl believed for a long time that he was safe from the Nazis.

This book is also an indictment of theft. Alice was a cookery writer who saw her work appropriated by an "Aryan". What happened to her was part of a large-scale fraud that German publishers continued to practise after the war. Alice's case meant that this fraud was first made public in autumn 2020, leading to some surprising revelations. They are discussed for the first time in this new edition.

Although Alice fought for her book to the bitter end, she would have hated being thought of as a female Job. She wanted to be remembered for her "adventures and actions". Her son Otto also strove to avoid sentimentality. When he tried to get Karl out of Vienna in 1938, he wrote to his brother, "I beg you to do without maudlin sentiment . . . It's completely unnecessary to gush with gratitude in your letters."¹

This book will attempt to avoid maudlin sentiment.

Karina Urbach
Cambridge, November 2021



1: THE VIENNA STATE OPERA, 1938

"Red-white-red unto death!"

Cornelia Dodson, 2003¹

On Friday 11 March Cordelia, Elizabeth and Daniel Dodson bought tickets for the Vienna State Opera. They'd been in Vienna for some time and knew their way around the city. All the same, no-one would have taken them for locals. The three siblings looked exactly as you'd imagine young Americans from a well-to-do family to look: tall, sporty and casually dressed, in an expensive way. Cordelia was the eldest and the undoubted leader of the group. The twenty-five-year-old decided their programme and that evening she had scheduled a visit to the opera.

If Cordelia's later comments are to be believed, she resolved to change her life after the events of 11 March.² Until then she had led an extremely sheltered existence. Like many American college students of her generation, Cordelia was accustomed to a life of security. Her father, William Dodson, was the chairman

of the chamber of commerce in Portland, Oregon.³ He had financed an expensive university education for all his children, but Cordelia was his great hope. It was no coincidence that he'd named her after one of Shakespeare's heroines. And like King Lear's daughter, in the end Cordelia Dodson would not fail to meet her father's expectations.

The reason for Cordelia's coming to Vienna in 1938 lay a few years in the past. As a schoolgirl she had become enthused by *Sturm-und-Drang* writers and decided to study German literature. It was pure chance that she enrolled at Reed College in Portland as a literature student, as was the fact that she met the Austrian exchange student Otto Urbach there. Nothing else of the story was chance, however. Cordelia went to Vienna on Otto's recommendation. She met his mother Alice and his brother Karl, and ultimately their friendship would save the lives of several people.

Cordelia had no inkling of this future mission and her role in it when she went to the opera with her siblings on the night of 11 March 1938. Playing was Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, and the performance began at 7 p.m. *Eugene Onegin* is not light entertainment. It's about a Russian aristocrat who rejects the advances of Tatyana and not long afterwards shoots dead a friend of his for completely trivial reasons. What is interesting about the character of Onegin is that he's unable to show empathy. A similar phenomenon – an utter lack of empathy – would soon engulf the whole of Vienna, including the staff at the State Opera. Not only the Jewish conductor that evening, Karl Alwin, but also the singer in the role of Tatyana, Jarmila Novotná, would soon lose their careers and the sympathy of others.

We still don't know why Cordelia and her siblings went to see *Eugene Onegin* that evening rather than Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* the following day. Perhaps the Wagner was already sold out or she didn't like his music. Or maybe she didn't have much of a clue about opera and merely did what tourists still do to this day – buy the first opera tickets they could get hold of and book a table somewhere for afterwards. So although there was nothing unusual about Cordelia's opera visit, the atmosphere in which it played out was anything but usual. The city had been gripped by a tension for days. On 9 March, the Austrian chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg had announced a referendum, in which all Austrians would be asked to declare their support for a "free, German, independent, social, Christian and united Austria". On 10 March the National Socialists succeeded in having the plebiscite cancelled. Now everybody was waiting for the next move.

At 7.47 p.m., while Cordelia and her siblings were still watching the first act of *Onegin*, Chancellor Schuschnigg broadcast a speech on the radio. He informed the country that he was yielding to force and announced his resignation with immediate effect, clearing the way for the Austrian Nazis. A few hours later, Hitler's man Arthur Seyss-Inquart took over as chancellor.

Maybe the Dodsons heard about Schuschnigg's speech in the interval after the first act. If they hadn't, they would have realised that something serious had happened when they left the State Opera at 10 p.m. Their Viennese friend Karl Urbach was waiting for them at the exit. The expression on his face was clear; they would have to forgo their planned restaurant visit.

Until then Cordelia's passion for *Sturm-und-Drang* literature

had been purely theoretical. She was interested in human emotion, so much so that she had also attended a psychology seminar at Reed College. But what she witnessed over the coming days in Vienna was an explosion of feeling that went beyond the boundaries of any psychology course.

On the morning of 12 March 1938 the first German troops crossed the Austrian border, reaching Vienna the following day. The city, which Karl had proudly shown his American guests around over the past few weeks, was transformed into a sea of Nazi flags. It was an orgy of jubilation and hatred. With her own eyes Cordelia saw both ecstatic triumph and utter despair, and what surprised her was the extraordinary speed of this change: “Things just happened so fast. All of our civilian rights, the police system, certain protections that everyone took for granted were just gone . . . I learned to hate the Nazis from that time on. They were so arrogant, so merciless.” Without mentioning Alice’s or Karl’s name, she said of the scenes on the streets: “The persecution of the Jews was inhumane.”⁴ Determined to help her new Jewish friends, Cordelia took a decision that would change the course of her life. Although she did not yet know what she could do, she was willing to take serious risks.

During the Second World War this naïve college student would turn into a steely member of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the most elite of the American intelligence agencies. This was partly a result of her meeting with a short, round woman by the name of Alice Urbach.



2: A BLIND FATHER AND A POOR CARD-PLAYER

*“When I look at the Jews,
It gives me little joy.
But when I see the others,
I’m happy to be a Jew.”*
Albert Einstein¹

It was a long, narrow alley. The houses stood close together and every square centimetre of living space was precious. The shops were on the ground floor, stuffed with fabrics, and one storey higher were the living quarters, stuffed with people. Around 5,000 people lived here, even though the official number was far lower. Not everybody wished to be registered and some lived illegally with friends and relatives. Alice’s story began in Judengasse in the Pressburg (now Bratislava) ghetto, sixty kilometres to the east of Vienna. It was where her grandfather Salomon Mayer (1798–1883) had grown up. According to family legend, when he was seven he stood with his parents at the window of the small apartment and watched world history

being made. As the story goes, his mother pointed outside and told him, “Look down at the street my son, and all your life remember that little man riding on a white horse down there. He is the man before whom the whole world trembles. His name is Napoleon.”²

As is so often the case with family anecdotes, this one isn't particularly reliable. Although the Peace of Pressburg was concluded in December 1805 not far from Judengasse, the signatories to the treaty were Napoleon's foreign minister, Talleyrand, and Johann Joseph Prince Liechtenstein, representing the Habsburgs. Napoleon himself didn't come to Pressburg until four years later. Maybe they had simply got the year wrong and Salomon was eleven when he caught sight of the French emperor. The colour of the steed isn't quite right either, however; Napoleon's war horse was a light-grey Arabian called Marengo. It is perfectly possible, of course, that Salomon's mother assumed the horse was just dirty from the last battle and actually white in colour.³ Using your imagination was important in the ghetto, as a way of blocking out the greyness of everyday life. A white horse sounded much more romantic than a grey one.

Whether or not Salomon did see Napoleon and his horse in 1809, the key reason for the significance of the episode to him and the other Jews of Pressburg is omitted from the anecdote. It didn't need saying as everybody knew it at the time. Napoleon embodied the French Revolution, and for many Jews, France was now the Promised Land. Since 1791 the Jewish population of that country had been made up of free French citizens who – theoretically, at least – differed from the rest of the population

only by dint of their religion. In the eyes of the Pressburg Jews, Napoleon carried this idea with him throughout Europe. Which explains why in their family memory the Mayers placed themselves at the window and saw what they wanted to see. Ultimately, the precise year and the colour of the horse were insignificant; all that mattered was the hope for a future without fear. It was a sort of founding myth for the Mayers, and later Alice's brother Felix even toyed with the idea of writing a family history with the title "From Napoleon to Hitler". He compiled a little statistic for this which established that amongst his relatives there had been very few divorces or cases of cancer, but two suicides. No Mayer – according to Felix's records – had ever become a criminal,⁴ but countless family members fell victim to the most heinous crime of the century. In the end Felix could not bring himself to write about this crime and his book project came to nothing.

Thus the family history begins with Salomon Mayer at the window. Salomon was also an important figure for his descendants because he always made the right decisions in life. This included marrying a clever woman with whom he could forge something extraordinary: Antonia (Tony) Frankl (1806–95), who became part of the family legend.⁵ At the time there were thirty textile wholesalers in the Pressburg ghetto and, thanks to Tony's good taste, the Mayers were one of the most successful.⁶ Not only did Tony work incredibly hard, she also gave birth to sixteen children, of whom only nine survived. For the time this was not unusual. Children died with predictable regularity, from whooping cough, typhus, diarrhoea, scarlet fever, measles, and so on. The infant mortality rate in the ghetto, furthermore,

appears to have been higher than average. Alice's father Sigmund blamed the premature death of his siblings on poor hygiene. In his memoir he describes the primitive living conditions in the ghetto:

Wooden, wobbly and pitch-black steps led up to the apartments, which at the rear could not be anything but damp and dark because they were right up against the hillside. The sewerage was pitiful, the tiny courtyards meant that the circulation of fresh air was wholly inadequate and the atmosphere was heavy and stifling. Not a single building had a well. The entire population had to draw bad, barely drinkable water from two communal wells.⁷

But there were other reasons why Sigmund hated the ghetto. He swore that he and his siblings never laughed. Nor could he recall a single child ever having played in Judengasse. Only one feeling existed here: fear. If you had to live in the ghetto you were closed in, literally so. Every evening "the city police shut off the street with heavy iron railings".⁸ Officially these railings were to protect the Christians from the "dangerous" Jews. In reality they were put up to protect the Jews from acts of violence. And the violence could occur at any moment. Although the citizens of Pressburg came to the Jewish shops during the day to buy goods cheaply, the mood could rapidly turn. Someone who in the morning had purchased silk, haberdashery, linen, brushes, buttons and combs from a Jewish shop might get irate about the price that same evening. Sigmund recalled a Catholic