



by Bernhard Herrman &  
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Fiction

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## The Wine of Oblivion

### *Der Wein des Vergessens*

#### review

Documentary fiction at its best, *The Wine of Oblivion* is based on a real-life journal and tells of a fight for justice amid the horrors of Nazi rule in Austria.

The narrative documents the appropriation of Jewish property and businesses in Austria under Nazi rule, describing how the Jewish vintner Paul Robitschek was robbed of his vineyard in Krems. It also tells of the love story between Paul and Gustl Rieger in glorious post-imperial Vienna with its opera, theatres, restaurants, tailors, and vibrant Jewish communities. Paul and Gustl are lovers at a time when homosexuality is illegal. Gustl is one of life's charmers, and his elegant apartment is thronged with smart people. Paul, too, makes many friends as he travels the country, selling wine to hostelryes. Pitted against these social butterflies are the local farmers, grimly determined to establish a wine cooperative. They move to strike as soon as Nazi law is imposed. Paul transfers the property to Gustl and a long and acrimonious legal battle ensues. Meanwhile Paul escapes to Trieste, where he obtains a Cuban passport and eventually sails to Venezuela.

Back in Vienna, Gustl and his devoted servant Herzog pursue the case, in spite of the risks this entails. After the war, the new Austrian government recognises the validity of Paul's and Gustl's claim against the cooperative, resulting in a settlement. Paul's address in Venezuela is obtained and the two men meet in Caracas. Ten years have passed, and while Gustl has been struggling financially, Paul

guarantee.

has been building up a successful business in Venezuela. His exasperation with Gustl's inability to manage money is evident, whereas Gustl is deeply hurt by Paul's failure to empathise with him, and to recompense him for defending his interests under the dangerous Nazi occupation.

The narrative ends with the news of Paul's death, and Gustl's rapid decline and eventual death in 1953. Their story remains untold until many years later when our authors open an old suitcase and discover the fascinating letters, journals and photos that form the basis for this gripping narrative. Recalling Jean Findlay's *Chasing Lost Time: The Life of C. K. Scott Moncrieff* (2015), which was also based on a journal and sold very well in the USA, *The Wine of Oblivion* is an ingeniously presented story written in a lively, journalistic style.

## press quotes

*'Researching this story quickly turned a family matter into an example of just how ruthlessly financial interests were pursued after the Anschluss.'*

– *Tiroler Tageszeitung*

*'An incredible story of betrayal and loyalty, love and business, destruction and repression.'*

– *erinnern.at*

## about the authors

**Bernhard Herrman** lives in Vienna and is a historian, Germanist and author of various radio features on literature, fine art and music. It is thanks to Herrman that the correspondence, as well as the court papers concerning the Aryanisation of the Sandgrube vineyard, have been discovered and scrutinised.

**Robert Streibel** was born in 1959 in Krems an der Donau, and studied history in Vienna. He has completed numerous research

projects on National Socialism, Judaism and exile, and has written various commemorative campaigns relating to forced deportation and resistance in Nazi Germany.

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