

Alice's Book

How the Nazis Stole My Grandmother's Cookbook

by

Karina Urbach

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 author's 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 was in Germany. She died while I was still a child and my memories of her are hazy. I knew from family lore that she'd been a famous cook in Vienna in the 1930s – a sort of forerunner of Julia Child or Delia Smith – and that it was only thanks to her skills in the kitchen that she'd been able to save her life. But why and exactly how this had happened remained unclear.

Then one day, my American cousin Katrina (a single 'T' is the difference between our names) gave me a box with old family letters and cassettes. Katrina is a doctor and a pragmatist. She thought it was only natural that I, a historian, should research 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 inkling of what she'd been through. From that moment on all I wanted to do was to tell her story.

Alice Urbach was born in 1886 into an affluent Jewish family. Her father Sigmund Mayer was a successful businessman and a friend of Theodor Herzl. Alice wanted to become a chef from childhood, but such a profession was considered too common for a lady of pedigree. This changed with the end of the First World War and the precarious food supply in Austria. New apartments were now fitted with kitchens, while innovative cookery courses and books were suddenly in demand amongst all social classes.

Until that point Alice had lived the rather conventional life of a wife and mother. But when her husband died in 1920 and she was left penniless with her two young sons, Otto and Karl, she had to earn a living herself. Alice started a cookery school where she taught such prominent pupils as Sigmund Freud's daughter Anna, or Prince Liechtenstein. Over the course of the following years she rose to become a star chef, giving lectures on healthy nutrition and developing her own catering service. Her 1935 housekeeping and cookery book, *So kocht man in Wien!*, became an instant bestseller.

The political situation in Austria, however, was making life increasingly difficult for Jews, including Alice and her sons. Otto, now twenty-three, managed to emigrate to Shanghai, where as a member of the international Shanghai Volunteer Force he defended the city against the Japanese. His brother Karl stayed in Vienna, witnessing with Alice the 'Anschluss' to the German Reich in 1938. Karl was thrown out of university, while Alice lost her apartment and income. Overnight their lives had fallen apart, and now they were in a race against time. Alice and Karl tried to leave Austria as quickly as possible. Karl already had the necessary papers to emigrate to America when he was arrested in Vienna in November 1938 and sent to Dachau concentration camp. While Karl was a prisoner in Dachau, Otto joined the US intelligence services and later fought alongside his friend Cordelia Dodson in daredevil operations against the Nazi regime.

Thanks to a 'domestic permit' Alice was able to emigrate to the UK in 1938. She found a position as a cook at Grantham Castle in Lincolnshire. This vast manor house was owned by an eccentric millionairess who tyrannised her servants. Alice soon started to look around for a more suitable job and became a matron for Jewish girls who had come to Britain with the Kindertransport.

Alice and her refugee children spent the war years in the picturesque Lake District. Despite the idyllic rural setting, however, it was a traumatic time for all of them. Although

Alice tried to distract the girls from their nightmares, she suspected that neither the children nor she would ever see their families again. One of the girls developed such a serious neurosis that Alice took her to London to seek help from her former pupil, the psychoanalyst Anna Freud.

While Alice was trying to survive as an emigrant, her German publisher took a sweeping decision: ‘After the Anschluss of Austria I felt compelled to find another author for the cookery book, as Alice Urbach was a Jew and it would have no longer been possible to sell the book under her name.’ In 1939 a new edition was published, giving the author as one ‘Rudolf Rösch: long-standing master chef in Vienna and member of the *Reichsnährstand* (Reich agency for food production)’. Overnight her authorial voice had been transformed into that of a man. Even the illustrative photographs were said to be of Rösch; later, Alice said, ‘Even though you could see my Jewish hands in all of the photos.’

But who was Rudolf Rösch? There is no Rösch listed in the *Reichsnährstand*, nor is there a man of that name in the *Reichschrifttumskammer* (Reich chamber of literature).

Extensive research points to conclusion that Rudolf Rösch never existed and that this author’s name was used by the publishing house for other Jewish non-fiction titles.

Alice wasn’t the only author whose work was robbed in this way. *Alice’s Book* is the first systematic and documented study of how German publishers either plagiarised books by Jewish authors or used stooges like Rösch as ‘Aryan’ stand-ins. The injustice persists to this day; rather than penalising the theft of intellectual property after the war, the practice was tacitly continued. Neither Alice nor other Jewish authors ever got their books back. When Alice confronted her publisher in 1948 he angrily rebuffed her and continued selling rights for the book by ‘master chef’ Rudolf Rösch until 1966.

Alice moved to America where she began a new life. Right up till her death at the age of ninety-seven she gave cookery courses in San Francisco and presented her top recipes for

sweet dumplings, petits fours and ham pastries on US television. But her greatest wish was never fulfilled. Time and again she tried to have her book reprinted in America under her own name. In vain. As her German publisher still pretends she never existed to this day, the original photographs from the Viennese cookery book are also reproduced in *Alice's Book*, including its author's 'Jewish hands'.

Around 300 pages with c. 20 photographs.

Introduction

Vienna

On Friday 11 March, Cordelia, Elizabeth and Daniel Dodson bought tickets for the Vienna State Opera. It wasn't their first time in Vienna and they 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 clear leader of the group. The twenty-five-year-old decided what the siblings would do and that evening they'd 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.¹ Till that point she'd led an extremely sheltered existence. Like many American college students of her generation Cordelia was accustomed to a life of security. Her father, Mr W.D.B. Dodson, was the chairman of the chamber of commerce in Portland, Oregon. He'd financed an expensive university education for all his children, but his great hope was Cordelia. 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 wouldn't fail to meet her father's expectations.

The reason for Cordelia coming to Vienna in 1938 lay a few years in the past. As a schoolgirl she'd become enthused by *Sturm-und-Drang* literature and decided to study German. It was pure chance that she should sign up at Reed College, as was the fact that she met the Austrian exchange student Otto Urbach there. Nothing else of the story was chance,

¹ Reed Obituary <https://www.reed.edu/reed-magazine/im-memoriam/obituaries/december2011/cordelia-dodson-hood-1936.html>.

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 clue of her part in this rescue mission when she went to the opera with her siblings on 11 March 1938. Playing that night was Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, and the performance began at 7 pm. *Eugene Onegin* is no simple opera. It's about an aristocratic Russian egomaniac who rejects the advances of Tatyana and not long afterwards shoots dead a friend of his for completely trivial reasons. What's 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 conductor that evening, Karl Alwin, but also the singer playing the role of Tatyana, Jarmila Novotná, would realise shortly after this performance what it means to be confronted by a mass of hostile people.

We still don't know why Cordelia and her siblings should have gone to see *Eugene Onegin* rather than *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 just did what generations of tourists still do to this day – buy the first opera tickets they could get hold of and booked a table in a restaurant for afterwards. There was nothing unusual about Cordelia's opera visit, therefore, but 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 whether or not they were in favour of a 'free, German, independent, social, Christian and united Austria'. On 10 March the National Socialists succeeded in having the referendum cancelled. Now everybody was waiting for the next move.

At 7.47 pm., when Cordelia and her siblings were still watching the first act of *Onegin*, Chancellor Schuschnigg broadcast a speech on the radio. He informed listeners that

he'd decided to yield to force and announced his resignation with immediate effect. This cleared the way for the Austrian National Socialists. 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 didn't they would have realised that something dangerous had happened when they left the State Opera at 10 pm. Their Viennese friend Karl Urbach was waiting to collect 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 emotion and had also attended a psychology course at Reed College. But what she witnessed over the coming days in Vienna was an explosion of emotion 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 on Sunday 13 March. The city, which their friend Karl had proudly shown them around all week, was transformed into a sea of National Socialist flags. It was an orgy of jubilation and hatred. With her own eyes Cordelia could see both: people ecstatically triumphant as well as individuals who were utterly broken. 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 names, she said of the scenes on the streets: 'Their persecution of the Jews was inhumane.'²

² Cited in: *Sisterhood of Spies*, p. 176.

Cordelia took a decision that would determine the course of her life from then on. She wanted to help her new Jewish friends. Although she didn't yet know what she could do, she was prepared from the very beginning to take serious risks.

During the Second World War this naïve college student would turn into a steely member of the OSS, the American secret service. Cordelia would become an expert on Austria. And this was also down to her meeting with a short, round woman by the name of Alice Urbach.

Chapter 7

At the 'Castle'

Harlaxton Manor is a large estate in Lincolnshire, about two to three hours' drive from London. Since the 1970s this palatial property has been used by film companies as the setting for many a costume drama. Victorian carriages ride up the long drive to the main entrance and ladies in hooped skirts float through the endless succession of rooms. There is something eccentric about the theatricality of the building, and so it comes as no surprise that it served as the location for such films as *The Haunting* and *The Ruling Class*, which feature characters who slowly succumb to madness.

When Alice took a position on this country estate in the winter of 1938–39, she rapidly came to the conclusion that its owner could not be sound of mind.

According to the regulations of the British immigration authorities, Alice could only remain in the country if she could prove she was working in service. As she was not permitted to do any other job, it seemed obvious that she should apply to be a cook. To be well prepared for the position, she first wanted to learn all she could about British food.

Alice was convinced that she was fluent in English. She'd read Shakespeare and Byron at school and thus believed she was prepared for any eventuality. But doubts crept in after her first trip to buy groceries. She was keen to try 'marmalade', only to discover that the English word means a bitter preserve of citrus fruits, whereas in German it is a general word for jam. She reckoned her English teacher had failed on this count. Many other English words seemed to make no sense either. A 'biscuit' was nothing like Biskuitkuchen in German, which is a sponge cake. A Viennese Biskuit, on the other hand, is more like a scone, while the word 'cake' in English covers both 'Kuchen' and 'Torte' in German. The English 'tart',

however, is not a ‘Torte’ but only an ‘Obsttorte’, which is like a fruit flan (for a long time Alice didn’t realise that the same word could be used to refer to a prostitute). Hardly anybody in Britain seemed to have heard of petits fours, and those who had thought they were too complicated and time-consuming to make. Alice was particularly shocked that British children were allowed to eat ice cream for pudding whenever they liked, and that their parents didn’t regard this as risky. In Vienna, ice cream was thought to be loaded with calories, which children should be allowed only ‘on their birthdays and after a successful trip to the dentist’. For a pastry chef like Alice, the jellies so popular in Britain were another culinary crime.

Friedrich Torberg – like Alice, an Austrian emigrant – remarked in his book *Die Tante Jolesch* on the status of British cuisine in the 1930s: it was generally accepted as being ‘inedible’.¹ For Viennese people like Alice and Torberg, who were used to Austro–Hungarian–Czech–Jewish fare, Britain was on the bottom rung of the European culinary hierarchy.

If, as an Austrian, you had the misfortune to have to eat in Britain, there was only one way to survive: you had to find a kosher restaurant. Only here could you find meat dishes and pastries with any flavour, and thus it is unsurprising that these restaurants were regularly frequented not only by Jewish customers, but also by desperate diners from other countries too.

Although Alice was aware that she’d ended up in a culinary wilderness, she had to keep her opinion to herself to avoid risking losing her ‘domestic permit’. Nobody would be willing to hire a cook who mocked the eating habits of a country which had saved them from the Nazis.

¹ Friedrich Torberg, *Die Tante Jolesch oder der Untergang des Abendlandes in Anekdoten*, Munich 1986, p. 71.

Alice tried, therefore, to avoid expressing any criticism, however difficult that was. Her entire world had been turned upside down. As in *Alice in Wonderland*, the source of her name, everything had gone topsy-turvy since the Anschluss of Austria in March 1938. Previously she had always been the employer. At her cookery school she had hired staff, and a whole chapter of her book *So kocht man in Wien!* had been dedicated to the correct way to treat maids (rule number one: ‘Be nice to your staff’). Now she was herself subjected to arbitrary behaviour. This was chiefly due to her first employer, the owner of Harlaxton Manor: Violet Van der Elst.

These days nobody in Britain remembers Mrs Van der Elst, but in the late 1930s she was a colourful figure who was a regular feature of the country’s gossip columns. ‘Violet’, as she was called by her admirers, came from a modest background and worked her way up the social ladder with great energy. She was born in 1882, the daughter of a washerwoman, and started work herself as a scullery maid. Pretty and intelligent, she was able to make the leap from servant to dancer, appearing in some rather dodgy venues, where she met her first husband Henry Nathan. Nathan was a Jewish engineer, fifteen years older than Violet. As careers in such joints rarely have much of a future, she accepted his offer of marriage. It offered her material security and the opportunity to climb socially into the middle class.

Although it was Henry Nathan who provided the starting capital, ultimately it was Violet who turned it into a fortune. Ever since her days as a scullery maid she’d dealt with soap, and this gave her the idea of developing more effective products. She invented a shaving cream and, later on, several face creams for women. When Henry Nathan died in 1927, Violet immediately married her manager and secret lover, the Belgian John Van der Elst. Together they expanded the business, devising new products. In the process Violet became a true marketing genius. Well aware that any new product needed a good sales story,

she claimed that her face cream DOGE was based on an old Venetian recipe that Lucretia Borgia had used. For this myth she hired a suitable carriage in which she rode through the streets, selling DOGE from door to door. Sitting beside her on these trips would be several beautiful salesgirls with fresh, rosy skin. Violet too could still boast an alabaster complexion well into her mature years, and thus the crew in the carriage seemed to be the ideal advertisement for DOGE. The spectacle impressed British housewives, but what ultimately convinced them was that Mrs Van der Elst promised a money-back guarantee if the cream didn't work. Whether any of her customers ever made use of this – and, if so, how many – is unknown, but the business flourished. Everything appeared to be going well until her second husband died unexpectedly in 1934 and Violet fell into a deep depression. From that day on she became unbearable.

When Alice arrived at Grantham station in November 1938 she knew nothing about her employer Mrs Van der Elst or her successes in the cosmetics industry. After fleeing Vienna Alice couldn't afford creams like DOGE and anyway, she had other problems to deal with than facial care.

She'd been to Britain once before, in 1937, but now the situation had completely changed. There was no return ticket for Alice and Britain was the only country prepared to take her. The first thing she had to do, therefore, after her arrival in Grantham was to register at the local police station and provide her new address. This was:

Alice Urbach

Cook for Mrs Violet Van der Elst

Grantham Castle.

Grantham Castle was a fantasy name that Violet Van der Elst had invented for Harlaxton Manor. In 1937 Harlaxton had been advertised for sale in *Country Life*, and when Violet saw the photographs she immediately wanted to add it to her collection of opulent properties.

The manor house was set in a magnificent 400-acre park with several artificial lakes and ponds. It was a sort of retro product, which the architect, an expert in castle renovations, had built in Elizabethan style in the 1830s. It has been claimed that Mrs Van der Elst's offer trumped those made by other interested parties such as the Duke of Windsor and Henry Ford's son, but that seems rather improbable.² Such cosseted individuals would not have been interested in a house that had no electricity or bathrooms. Violet, however, was not put off by such details. Within a year she had the house wired as well as eight bathrooms installed. Eschewing understatement, she decreed that henceforth Harlaxton was a castle and was to go by the name of Grantham Castle. Grantham was the nearest town and there seemed to be a certain logic in this decision.

At first Violet didn't have enough furniture to fill the place and so she embarked on a grand shopping tour. She began, as ever, at the very top, her first port of call being Buckingham Palace. Through an antiques dealer she was able to acquire Gobelins that Queen Alexandra had once been given by her brother-in-law, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. They depicted the four seasons and Mrs Van der Elst developed such a passion for tapestries that over the years she purchased over one hundred Gobelins (in total valued at the sum of 30,000 pounds, which represented a fortune at the time). As she also had a weakness for the Middle Ages, the corridors of Grantham Castle were decorated with suits of armour and mediaeval weapons.

The best pieces were picked up from house clearances. When the Duke of Norfolk and the Duke of Northumberland sold antiques, Mrs Van der Elst was on the scene at once.

² See Charles Gattey, *The Incredible Mrs. Van der Elst*, London 1972, p. 159.

She had no time for minimalism and for her art collection she acquired sumptuous pictures by Guido Reni and Luca Giordano, two-thousand-year-old Greek statues, a famous bust of Napoleon and even a fragment of the Elgin Marbles. She was especially adept at snapping up bargains, one of her most spectacular acquisitions being the 150-bulb chandelier for the marble entrance hall of her castle. It was made in Czechoslovakia and originally destined for the Royal Bank of Madrid. When the civil war broke out in 1936, however, it could no longer be delivered. Mrs Van der Elst was able to purchase it at a knockdown price and she used to tell all her visitors that she owned the largest chandelier in the world. On a mantelpiece very close to the chandelier she placed the urn containing the remains of her second husband. One of the maids' most important tasks was to dust the urn every day and decorate it with fresh flowers.

Thus Alice's new home would be this sumptuously furnished Grantham Castle. She gave the address to the police officer in Grantham and spelled her name several times (this was another typical experience of the emigrant: 'Our mad rush to get stamps, visas and residence permits... How do you spell it? was the inevitable, humiliating question we hated with a passion').³ Over the years Alice would turn spelling her name into quite a routine, always with a thick Viennese accent of course.

As Alice was about to leave the police station she was spoken to by a man in German, who had also been in the queue. His name was Arthur Pan (1894–1983), like Alice a product of the defunct Habsburg Monarchy. Originally from Hungary, Pan was a painter whose wartime portraits of Winston Churchill are still well known. Back in 1938, however, several years before these commissions, he only had one client: Mrs Van der Elst. Pan told Alice all about his experiences with this woman in Grantham Castle. It wasn't a particularly

³ *Die Tante Jolesch*, p. 264.

encouraging story. Pan's problems had begun when Mrs Van der Elst proved to be an extremely difficult model during their sessions. She insisted on being painted wearing all black and on a chair that the doges of Venice had sat on before pronouncing the death sentence. As she regarded herself as a highly talented painter too, she further insisted on having a say in how the painting was executed. Although she was satisfied with the end product, more problems emerged when it came to payment.

Violet Van der Elst was notorious for taking ages to pay for services rendered, and in many cases not paying at all. For this reason she was sued many times throughout her life. In one instance she refused to pay for a picture because she didn't look sufficiently attractive in it. In court, her long letter of complaint to the artist was read out: 'I have too much hair [in the picture] and bottom part of my face too weak. I have a square chin... I have beautiful hands and these hands are too bony' etc. etc.

In Arthur Pan's portrait Mrs Van der Elst looked younger and slimmer than in real life, and so he didn't have to worry about receiving an angry letter. His money only arrived after some disagreeable wrangling, but he told Alice that he'd been invited to spend Christmas at Grantham. He promised to come to see her in the kitchen.

After they parted company, Alice had to make her way to Grantham Castle. Weighed down by a heavy suitcase, it was hard to get to the house on foot, and just for once the chauffeur came to pick her up. It was an interesting car ride. As Alice recollected it, the car took fifteen minutes just to negotiate the castle's long drive (here she must be exaggerating somewhat as the drive is about one mile long, which means the car must have been going at a snail's pace). As the chauffeur wasn't usually allowed to drive staff, all the servants had bicycles. Alice couldn't ride a bike, and so during her entire time at Grantham she never left the estate once.

Although she had grown up under the Habsburg Monarchy and knew Schönbrunn Palace well, Alice was impressed by the size of Grantham Castle. It had its own orangery full of exotic plants and peach trees that blossomed even in winter. In total, the house boasted around 100 rooms, although nobody seems to have counted exactly how many there were. No sooner had Alice arrived than she realised that there were too few staff employed at Grantham to care for this abundance of rooms. Most were never cleaned and the servants seemed to be in a permanent feud with the eccentric mistress of the castle.

The prevailing atmosphere at Grantham Castle was the opposite to that at the fictitious Downton Abbey. Grantham wasn't run by a kind family who touchingly attended to the cares of their servants. On the contrary, the mistress of the castle was deeply suspicious of her staff. Violet Van der Elst wasn't regularly in court only because of outstanding payments, she often appeared as the plaintiff too, claiming her personnel were guilty of theft. Over the years she accused servants of stealing clothes, jewellery, cheques, rugs and furs, to name but a few. One of her methods of testing servants was to place banknotes beneath the rugs (probably to find out whether they cleaned under them too) and wait for the response. One maid was so incensed by this that she nailed a banknote to the floor. This woman was especially furious with Mrs Van der Elst because she was often woken by her at three in the morning to change the bedclothes. The staff also had to put up with Mrs Van der Elst hurling objects about during her emotional outbursts. For this reason, she couldn't expect much sympathy. When she fell down the stairs one evening the butler hissed, 'I hope she's broken her neck.' Even her young secretary Ray, with whom she had an on-and-off relationship, later admitted that Mrs Van der Elst demanded absolute subordination and treated her staff like 'slaves' (he himself had to put up with several jealousy dramas from her).

Because the staff saw Mrs Van der Elst as the common enemy there was great solidarity between them. Alice never mentioned that she ever had any problems with her

colleagues. This was not obvious. A growing number of British servants at the time reacted against new arrivals such as Alice. Between 1933 and 1939 20,000 Jewish women fled to Britain. All of them had to look for positions in service as a condition of their immigration, generating a competition that threatened the livelihoods of British staff. The reactions of some were so extreme that they joined far-right movements. The number of servants who supported the British Union of Fascists increased dramatically at the end of the 1930s. They were convinced anti-Semites.⁴

Anti-Semitism was absent at Grantham Castle, which may in part have been down to the fact that two important men close to Mrs Van der Elst – her secretary and lover Ray, as well as her chauffeur – were Jewish. Alice didn't have to worry, therefore, about anti-Semitic attacks. Finally, she appeared to be safe, far from the horrors of Austria. But she knew that she hadn't escaped Vienna altogether. Her son Karl was still there, waiting for his emigration permit. So long as Karl was stuck in Austria, Alice couldn't be free.

She hadn't heard from him since 10 November. She knew that every letter was opened and she didn't want to endanger him with direct questions. As with all exiles, Alice was routinely evasive in her letters. Long after the war Friedrich Torberg described how they all started to develop a secret language for certain unpleasant terms. For example the Gestapo became 'the teacher' while concentration camps were referred to as 'concert halls'. This gave rise to bizarre sentences such as: 'Poor Uncle Sigi has been in the concert hall for two weeks' or 'Yesterday the teacher instructed us to come to Hotel Metropol'. (Everyone knew what this meant as in 1938 the Gestapo had turned Hotel Metropol into its Viennese headquarters.)

⁴ Tony Kushner, 'Politics and Race, Gender and Class: Refugees, Fascists and Domestic Service in Britain, 1933–40', in: Tony Kushner/Kenneth Lunn, *The Politics of Marginality. Race, the Radical Right and Minorities in 20th Century Britain*, Oxford 1990, p. 49ff. Traude Bollauf, *Dienstmädchen – Emigration. Die Flucht jüdischer Frauen aus Österreich und Deutschland nach England 1938/39*, Vienna 2010.

Alice would have immediately understood everything Karl wrote, but she hadn't heard from him since 10 November. She suspected that something terrible must have happened.

*

On 9 November 1938 Karl celebrated his twenty-first birthday with a few friends. He'd held the party at home because Jews were now forbidden from visiting restaurants and coffee houses. Not many had turned up. After Karl was kicked out of university he saw few of his Aryan student friends. His best pal Willy continued to stand by him, however. They still shared a small apartment and thus it was Willy who'd last seen Karl on the morning of 10 November. For Karl it had been a good morning; he was relieved that he finally had all the necessary papers to emigrate to America. He just needed one final document:

'The alarm clock rings at 6. I am tired and don't want to get up.

'However, I must go down town so I jump out of bed and get started. At a news stand I see a headline in big letters: "Herr von Rath dies. Jews will pay for it." I feel rather shocked, but feel that there isn't much more they can do to us after all they have already done. I also feel secure with my summons to the American consulate and my boat ticket.

'I arrive at the Jewish emigration office at 8 am to file my papers. How strange, I think, that no people are waiting today. I immediately realize that something is wrong. I turn around and start to leave as quickly as possible. A man dressed in civilian clothes approaches and asks what I want. I reply that I want to get my papers in order.

"Well," he says, "just walk in and get what you want."

‘It is too late to get away. Many people are standing around who look like Gestapos (secret state police). So I go to the door and open it, and there, lined on each side of the stairs, are a row of beefy looking big storm troopers in full equipment, steel helmets and field uniforms.

‘The first one grabs me by my coat and shouts, “So we got you.” No sooner do I turn around than he socks me with his fists, then the others start in. One slap after another, kicks in my face and boots in my back. But I don’t feel anything, it’s too big a shock. They throw me up and down the stairs, it seems great fun for them.’⁵

When the SA troopers had tired of beating Karl, they pushed him into a little room. He saw twenty men, women and children, some of whom were crying. An SA man was sitting at a desk, taking telephone calls. He greeted each caller with the same message, delivered with sarcastic politeness: ‘I’m sorry, our phone doesn’t work today. I can’t get you a connection to the the office you want, but you had better come down and investigate for yourself. Or if you will give me your address I will send someone to help you later on.’”

The man’s accent sounded so Prussian that Karl was sure no Viennese Jew would fall for it. Anybody with their head screwed on right would avoid the emigration office now. But for him it was too late:

‘We stand there waiting and waiting. Later a Gestapo official asks all the women and boys under 16 to come with him. They may go home. One man tells the official that he has heart trouble and asks if he may go, too.

“‘Shut up,” is the answer. “We know your dirty tricks. We will cure you.”

⁵ The Nazis sent me to a Concentration Camp, *The Sunday Oregonian*, 21 May 1939, article by staff writer Francis Murphy, based on an anonymous interview with Karl Urbach.

‘He signals a storm trooper, “Take this dirty pig in an upper room and cure his heart trouble.”

‘We are loaded into several trucks which were waiting outside. In the rear sits a storm trooper with his pistol ready. “Now you keep quiet and don’t move,” he commands. “If you make any trouble I’ll shoot, but it doesn’t matter, because we’re going to shoot you anyhow.”

‘One elderly man loses his nerve and starts to cry and shout. He already has one son in Dachau, and he has just returned from a Nazi prison himself. Later I am to see this man in the concentration camp. He will have gone mad.

‘The truck hauls us to a well-known prison. It was a Viennese school before the Anschluss, but Hitler needs more prisons and barracks than schools.

‘We stay there five days. During the first two days one truck after another arrive. People stagger in with torn clothes and bleeding faces. There isn’t even room to sit on the floor. Occasionally the Gestapo holds inspections in the middle of the night.

‘Sunday morning a man suddenly loses his mind and jumps out of the window. The commander of the whole prison comes into our rooms afterwards and says that because of this atrocity we must stand up for two hours. I had thought it would be impossible to stand for two hours without moving, but we did, and it is good training for what is to come. One fellow has heart convulsions and falls on the floor. Nobody can help him, nobody dares move. After that the commander tells us that if anyone jumps out of the window he will shoot ten of us, and we believed him.’

By now Willy already suspected that something must have happened. When Karl failed to come home, Willy tried to alert all his family members. But it took a while to locate them. Alice’s eldest son, Otto, wrote from America, ‘Today I received a letter from Karli’s friend Willy [...] in which he told me that Karli disappeared without trace on the tenth of this month. Supposedly it’s got something to do with a debt mother left unpaid in Vienna. The

entire affair is most unclear and although I intend to take immediate steps I can't do much without knowing exactly what happened... I'm terribly worried about what's happened to Karli and I can't imagine any reason that might have led to this. Apparently, Karli already has a ticket for America and although I don't know if he had his US visa, I'm pretty certain that the American consulate issued it to him. I'm going to get in touch with a Viennese lawyer today to see whether he can do anything. His name is Dr Hardt and I think he's got good contacts.'⁶

At this point Karl was no longer in Vienna; he'd been transferred from his prison:

'Monday morning a storm trooper comes in announced that we have stolen some blankets and everyone will have to pay for them. We haven't seen a single blanket during the whole time, but everyone has to pay a mark. Later, another fellow comes in and announces that some plates have been stolen. Everyone has to pay again. If one doesn't have the money, someone has to pay for him.

'Shortly after this they load us like cattle into trucks again [...] I hope they will give us a trial [...] Well. I got my trial. First in a little room a physician in storm trooper's uniform asks me just one question:

““Healthy?”

““Yes,” I say. Another S.S. man kicks me into the next room. A high Gestapo official sits behind a huge desk like God himself. He asks what steps I have taken to leave Germany so far. When I hear this question, I feel absolutely sure that I will be free within the next ten minutes.

'I show him the summons to the United States consulate, my passport and my boat tickets and say that I'll be leaving Germany on December 20.

⁶ Letter from Otto Urbach to Aunt Marie Urbach, 27 November 1938, Private papers Karina Urbach.

“That’s fine,’ he says. “You have lots of time.”

‘He then marks a big red “D” on my paper. “D,” he says to the waiting S.S. man. Again a kick, and I am in the corridor, forced to stand with my face to the wall as usual.

“Don’t move, don’t talk.”

[...]

‘Then a voice behind me says [...] “So you dirty dogs want to kill us Germans? But wait, you’ll see. Do you know where you’re going?”

“No,” I say.

“Well, my friend – Dachau.”

‘I couldn’t believe it. I wouldn’t believe it. It was so impossible. Dachau! This word meant murder, slaughter, hell.

‘I believed it in the evening when my train left the West railroad station.’

It’s uncertain whether Karl ever found out that his brother Otto took part in the bombing of Vienna’s Westbahnhof in March 1945. Several years would pass before then and many more trains would depart from that station. Alice didn’t forget the bombing, however. She made a note of it, without passing comment.

It was traumatic for her that she wasn’t able to help Karl at that time. In December 1938, she found herself in a British castle, totally cut off from family and friends. She didn’t know anybody who could help her. Until then she hadn’t even had the opportunity to talk to her new employer or at least impress her with her culinary skills. From the other servants, she’d found out that Violet Van der Elst suffered from a serious weight problem and was adhering to a strict diet of toast and apples. Although Violet spent hours on an exercise bike, she never lost weight. It was assumed therefore that she had a tendency to binge and would secretly empty the pantry at night.

Alice's official job was to bake for the house guests and plan the Christmas menu. A large party was expected to descend on Grantham Castle for the holidays. Violet Van der Elst surrounded herself with impoverished aristocrats who were known everywhere as scroungers and accompanied their rich benefactor on casino trips to France. Mrs Van der Elst also socialised with local politicians who were meant to help her secure a parliamentary seat. She planned to stand for the Labour Party and she lobbied for the abolition of the death penalty in Britain. As with the sale of her DOGE cream she employed the most up-to-date marketing strategies for her campaign. As soon as someone was sentenced to death she would open a petition for signatures. These were regularly ignored. On the day of the execution she would arrive in her Rolls Royce at the prison where it was being carried out and deliver a speech against the death penalty by megaphone. While she spoke a plane, chartered specially for the occasion, would fly over the prison with a black banner trailing behind it. This didn't distract from the events on the ground, however, for each time there was a tussle between Mrs Van der Elst's supporters and the police. Order would only be restored when the time of execution was announced and the protesters sang 'Abide with me'. Afterwards Violet was usually arrested for disturbing the peace and would spend a few nights in police custody.

For all her eccentricity, therefore, Mrs Van der Elst had an impressive social commitment. Her methods were in the long tradition of the suffragettes and it was in part thanks to her persistence that the death penalty was finally abolished in Britain in 1964.

In 1938, however, most of the servants, Alice included, thought that Mrs Van der Elst was only posing as the great fighter and that her campaign against the death penalty was one big egotistical spectacle. In the eyes of the servants Violet simply couldn't be a good person. Alice accepted the view of the long-suffering staff without thinking much about it. She was

also misinformed about Mrs Van der Elst's business success. Alice believed that Violet's Jewish husband had been solely responsible for building up the cosmetics empire and that she was now just 'blowing' the money.

All this misinformation was not a good basis for the first encounter. When Violet Van der Elst, after some hesitation, received her new cook, the two took an immediate dislike to each other. This was nothing unusual as far as Mrs Van der Elst was concerned. She had a thorough distrust of other women, even treating the wives of her guests frostily. She believed that only men were worthy of addressing her. By contrast, since her disastrous marriage to Max Alice had avoided men, preferring the company of women. For this reason, Alice had probably hoped she'd somehow get on with Mrs Van der Elst; they were roughly the same age, after all. But the social divide that separated them was too large. Their lives had gone in opposite directions. Whereas Mrs Van der Elst had worked her way up from a servant to a millionairess, Alice had worked her way down from the affluent Jewish grand bourgeoisie to the misery of domestic service.

Even though Alice sensed at once how much her employer disliked her, she asked Mrs Van der Elst for her help. She told her about Karl and a concentration camp called Dachau which was close to Munich and where terrible things were happening to her son. Mrs Van der Elst listened to her story and said she'd write a letter to Hitler. This horrified Alice, who thought such a move would put Karl in an even more precarious position. Looking back, she came to the conclusion the letter was never written. 'Death would have been sure for him then.' In her view, Mrs Van der Elst was 'enormously wealthy, enormously fat and enormously crazy.'

Chapter 9

Return to Vienna

Alice lost three sisters in the Holocaust. By comparison the loss of a cookery book was a trivial matter. Perhaps she would have forgotten about the whole thing if she hadn't by chance been passing the window of a Viennese bookshop. In 1948 the displays in Austrian shop windows were still sparse, and the title of the cookery book immediately caught her eye. She went into the shop and leafed through the volume. It was without doubt her book, her writing, her photographs. But the name of the author on the cover was Rudolf Rösch. At that moment a number of recollections must have shot through her mind: when she first held the large, fat book in her hands in 1935 and celebrated the publication with all her friends; the three years that followed, in which the title became a bestseller, and women approached her in the street to congratulate her; and then in 1938 when from one day to the next the book could no longer be hers.

But what exactly had happened to her cookery book since? Why had it been published in Austria under the name of Rösch?

[...]