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## Books on Women, the Chancellor, and a Nobel Laureate: The Year in Austria

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# Books on Women, the Chancellor, and a Nobel Laureate

## The Year in Austria

Wilhelm Hemecker and David Österle

### One Hundred Years of Viennese Modernism

In 2018 Austria celebrated the centennial of the end of an era: the downfall of the Habsburg Monarchy at the end of the First World War in 1918—and with it the end of Viennese Modernism. In the same year, four of the epoch's protagonists died: Otto Wagner, Kolo Moser, Gustav Klimt, and Egon Schiele, all of whom have had a lasting impact on the architecture and art of Vienna. In keeping with the marketing logic of biographies, this jubilee year not only brought numerous biographically orientated exhibitions that ran under a common motto: “beauty and abyss.” The year also generated many new biographies of the stars of Modernism, including Gregor Mayer's *Ich Ewiges Kind: Das Leben des Egon Schiele*, Renata Kassal-Mikula's *Otto Wagner 1841–1918: Sein Leben – Die Familie – Das Netzwerk – Eine Chronik*, and a new biography by Mona Horncastle and Alfred Weidinger of Gustav Klimt, the painter of *The Woman in Gold*.

### Inspiring Female Figures

Among many other subjects, Gustav Klimt painted Margarethe Stonborough-Wittgenstein, whose father, the Gründerzeit industrialist and art patron, Karl Wittgenstein, was a great admirer and patron of the painter. She was a patron of the arts, occupied herself with mathematics and psychoanalysis, worked temporarily in a chemical laboratory in Zurich, and commissioned the construction of Haus Wittgenstein, the ascetic cubist city palace in Vienna. While the most prominent of her brothers—philosopher Ludwig and one-armed concert pianist Paul—have already been fully illuminated biographically, the life of Margarethe Stonborough-Wittgenstein is, and remains, far less well-known. However, in 2018 a biography by Margret

Greiner, a historian and expert in German studies, introduced Margarethe Stonborough-Wittgenstein to a broader reading public.

What distinguishes Greiner's biography is her liberal approach to the objectivity and conjecture of truth within the biographical genre. *Margarethe Stonborough-Wittgenstein: Grande Dame of Viennese Modernism* is not a scientific biography, but a *romanbiografie* (novel biography)—as the author herself has called it. The facts are enriched by fictional elements, clearly stemming from fictional narrative forms. The book contains dialogue and scenic descriptions that illustrate the life of Stonborough-Wittgenstein far more clearly, but turn the biographical object into a fictional character. Whether or not Greiner's biography still maintains a balance between poetry and science—something Stefan Zweig no longer saw in the genre of *biographie romancée*, and thereafter deliberately demarcated his own literary-biographical writing from this subgenre of biography—must be called into question. Pleasure should not be allowed to outstrip the “logic of history,” Zweig argued (143).

The biographical work being done in Austria during the last two years has been characterized by an intense occupation with inspiring female figures, women who for a long time were outside the canon of biography-worthy persons in a male-dominated world. In addition to Margarethe Stonborough-Wittgenstein, Lise Meitner, a pioneer of the atomic age, has recently become the subject of a comprehensive portrait by David Rennert and Tanja Traxler, two journalists of the bourgeois-liberal daily *Der Standard*. Meitner, who in 1906 became the second female physicist to receive her doctorate from the University of Vienna, was considered by Albert Einstein to be “our Madame Curie,” by the Nazis as an unwanted Jew, and by the tabloids as the “mother of the atomic bomb.” In Stockholm, where she fled in 1938, she discovered together with Otto Frisch the principle of nuclear fission. She was never considered for the Nobel Prize, most likely because she was a woman, even though she was nominated a total of forty-eight times. The aforementioned biography by Rennert and Traxler reads as a case study of a career within the male domain of science, in which women were not only underrepresented, but the absolute exception.

Things are far from different when it comes to the biography of Ingrid Wiener. The artist and cook, who spent a lifetime in the shadow of her husband, the avant-garde artist Oswald Wiener, was the subject of a biography by *Die Zeit* journalist Carolin Würfel: *Ingrid Wiener und die Kunst der Befreiung: Wien 1968 | Berlin 1972* (2019). Ingrid Wiener was a member of the Viennese Actionist group whose scandalous protests have made them one of the most radical of the numerous avant-garde movements in Europe of the twentieth century. The biographer describes how Ingrid Wiener didn't only rebel (together with the group) against the conservative-clerical postwar mentality, but also fought (in conflict with the group) against the patriarchal structures within the art world. For as avant-garde and riotous as the Viennese Actionists were in their artistic and ideological outlook, their frequently macho attitude put some members of the circle barely ahead of previous generations.

Würfel's biographical undertaking aims to free Ingrid Wiener from the stranglehold of those overpowering male figures from the art scene of the time. In the spirit of the biographical genre, however, the emancipation of Ingrid Wiener fails at one crucial point. Her own art, her graphic art, her weaving and watercolors, with which she strove to achieve an individual artistic expression, are markedly underrepresented in the biography. In contrast, her wild, disreputable life, her years in Berlin—where together with Oswald Wiener she ran the restaurant Exil, frequented by the likes of David Bowie, Peter O'Toole, and Max Frisch—are given generous attention. One has the feeling that the biographer herself has fallen for the nostalgia of the “wild” fifties, sixties, seventies, and eighties. Würfel's work, however, doesn't do justice to the genre of artist biography in its entirety.

### A Chancellor's Biography

Looking back on two years of biography in Austria, one has to start with something that sounds more like a bad joke than serious biographical work, but something that truly matters. We look at three biographies on a figure whose polished face—without any expression, any character, anything worth mentioning at all—mirrors his short life. He grew up in the protected environment of a bourgeois family, enjoyed Christmas with his grandma in the countryside, and likes to share fond memories of the idyllic holidays of his childhood—boring even in terms of the popular counter-heroic genre of the everyman's biography. Incomplete studies of law, to continue, a girlfriend since their schooldays, but meanwhile a stunning political career. He was chairman of the Young People's Party (YVP), the conservative Austrian People's Party's youth organization; State Secretary for Integration (of immigrants); the country's youngest Foreign Minister at the age of twenty-seven; and finally Chancellor of the Republic of Austria in a coalition with the far right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ). We are dealing here with Sebastian Kurz, “the friendly face of Europe's new right” (Shuster). After less than a year and a half into the government, a soap opera-like scandal unexpectedly derailed the coalition between Kurz's right-wing Conservatives and the far right-wing Freedom partners, and a path towards new legal elections became necessary. However, with his characteristic vagueness and his seemingly unshakeable likeability ratings, the Austrian climber seems to be sufficiently well equipped to further his striking career even under completely altered conditions: the rise of the Green Party in Austria (as elsewhere) in the wake of the currently popular ecological movement.

It is clear that Kurz's biographers have to add a new chapter concerning his meteoric career. One of these biographies, *Sebastian Kurz: Die Biografie* (2018), was written by Paul Ronzheimer of the popular tabloid *BILD* with an extremely wide circulation in Germany. According to the book's blurb, Ronzheimer had interviewed Kurz several times and got access to his inner circle, friends, and members of his family to compile his text. The first forty pages are on Kurz's younger years, but the main narrative is Kurz's favorite and most popular subject during the last

elections in 2017, his “successful” political fight against African refugees on their way through the Balkans to Austria and Europe. The term “border” appears seventy-nine times, the terms “escape,” “refugee(s),” and “refugee crisis” 255 times in Ronzheimer’s 200-page biography. Having reported from crisis regions in the Middle East, Ronzheimer is not entirely *d’accord* regarding Kurz’s largely exclusionary politics, which were to turn the young chancellor into a political high-flyer in Europe.

Another biography, *Sebastian Kurz: Österreichs neues Wunderkind?* (2017), was written by the journalists Barbara Tóth and Nina Horaczek, working for *Falter*, a magazine targeting a more critical, politically liberal Austrian readership. Surprisingly, they take a more moderate approach; they neither indict him nor panegyricize him. Stefan Löwenstein noted in his review, “Die Bewertungen sind kritisch, aber nicht mit solchem Hass erfüllt, wie er den Chefkomentatoren im „Falter“ bisweilen reflexhaft beim Namen Kurz in die Tastatur zu fallen scheint” [The assessments are critical but not as hateful as some of the *Falter* commentators tend to be when they hear the name Kurz]. The most recent book: *Sebastian Kurz: Die offizielle Biografie*, by freelance journalist Judith Grohmann, is, to put it briefly and to get back to our starting point, a truly bad joke. Her unconcealed adulation cannot satisfy anybody, least of all Kurz himself, the subject of this hagiography.

### A Nobel Laureate’s Biography

After having overcome a sequence of scandals, the committee of the Nobel Prize in Literature found itself once more in a tricky situation: the nomination of the Austrian writer Peter Handke caused intense international criticism, which resulted once again in the resignation of committee members and a petition signed by more than 60,000 people calling on the Nobel committee to revoke the award. Handke is accused of having supported the genocidal Serbian regime led by Slobodan Milošević. In a number of interviews in the wake of his nomination,<sup>1</sup> Handke dismissed “ignorant questions” by journalists about his admiration of the Serbian leader whose hangmen were suspected to be responsible for mass atrocities, among them the Srebrenica massacre in which some 8,000 Muslims were killed. In defense of the committee’s choice, its chair Anders Olsson emphasized “the ambition is to celebrate his extraordinary literary work, not the person” (Flood). Herewith, Olsson addressed a crucial issue of biography—the relationship between life and work—and fueled a heated debate on this with respect to Handke.

There has been just one comprehensive biography on Handke, published in 2010 by the highly acclaimed journalist and literary critic Malte Herwig, whose articles and interviews have appeared widely in noted German and anglophone publications. In 2017, a permanent exhibition was established in Griffen, a small town in Carinthia where Handke spent his childhood years. The accompanying catalogue is regarded as a kind of biography in images. It is organized in chapters concerning the author’s life in chronological order, each of them with a summary of

key events at the beginning. In addition, the catalogue contains articles on specific subjects concerning the writer's life and work, and finally a comprehensive bibliography of Handke's book publications, presented with images of every single cover, again with illustrations and the relevant data, which round off this impeccably printed publication. However, a biography would have to dig much deeper into the life and work of this highly problematic author of utterly self-centered and artificially stylized literature.

The titles discussed here reflect politically charged times as well as the centennial of the end of World War I which led to the inauguration of the First Austrian Republic. In different ways, they all demonstrate an essential problem of biography: the question of the adequate distance between biographers and their subjects.

## Notes

The first two sections of this essay are by David Österle, and the final two segments are by Wilhelm Hemecker.

1. For example, see Flood.

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