

PRAISE FOR *LOST LETTERS FROM VIENNA*

Lost Letters From Vienna evokes several different epochs: the grand life of wealthy Jewish families in Vienna before the First World War; the coming of the Nazis and the desperate efforts to find a way out; and life as refugee immigrants in Melbourne. Sue Course's story parallels, in many ways, that of my own family; but by weaving it into candid accounts of her personal life and those of her relatives, she has written a lively and engaging book.

— Peter Singer AC, Professor of Bioethics, Princeton University
and University of Melbourne

Sue Course's book is a unique insight into the discrimination and suffering of generations of Jewish families in Europe in the first half of the 20th century. It is drawn from 86 years of letters between members of her family who fled the Nazis and sought refuge in four continents. As one of the last remaining members of the migrant Jewish families born in pre-war Vienna, Sue tells a refugee family's story of love, heartbreak, death, amazing escapes, hard work, success, love and ultimately happiness and fulfilment.

This gripping tale ends with yet another migrant success story in Australia: Sue came to Melbourne Australia as a four-year-old refugee and became a leader of one of the nation's earliest and most remarkable urban land conservation victories. In 1975, while raising a family of four, Sue helped save 32 hectares on the banks of the Darebin Creek 10 kms from Melbourne CBD. This site is now the Darebin Parklands which attracts more than 100,000 visitors a year who can experience hundreds of species of flora and birds that have returned to their traditional environments.

— Michael Smith, former editor, *The Age*

An epic family history. A profound portrait of marriage. A book of magical detail.

— Tim Bonyhady, cultural historian

History is us, wrote the Italian singer-songwriter Francesco de Gregori.

History doesn't stop at the front door.

History breaks into our rooms, burns them,

History does wrong, and it does right.

History is us.

It is we who write the letters.

It is we who have everything to win, and everything to lose.

Sue Course's gripping, evocative family memoir reveals how history and ordinary life are woven together. History broke into her Jewish family's opulent rooms in Vienna, burnt them, it did her family wrong, it did them right, and it sent them to the other side of the world to begin very different lives. Her story is often grim, at times exciting, refreshingly frank, and told with a positive and imaginative spirit, without any self-pity.

— Tim Colebatch, journalist

Sue Course's memoir takes us inside the lives of a large wealthy Jewish Austrian family fractured by war and scattered across the globe. Her intimate, moving stories of persecution, poverty, death and survival trace the legacies of war across generations and continents. We are reminded again of the horrors so many millions endured in WWII, as well as the richness of culture and history they brought as refugees to their host countries.

— Professor Katie Holmes, La Trobe University

A poignant portrait of vanished places and times, as well as a heart-wrenching testimony to some of the cruelest parts of western history, *Lost Letters from Vienna* is a book to savour and treasure, also for its author's clear-eyed candour in telling her family's tale of persecution and survival. Coarse recreates the past with immediacy and vividness, and tenderness, yet with not even a hint of sentimentality. This is a work of integrity and compassion.

— Lee Kofman, author

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sue Course was born in Vienna in 1933 and came to Melbourne as a four-year-old refugee with her parents. Growing up in suburban Melbourne, Sue became a nurse and activist. In 1973 while raising a family of four, she helped save 33 hectares on the banks of the Darebin Creek, now called the Darebin Parklands, one of the nation's earliest and most remarkable urban land conservation victories. As one of the last remaining members of the migrant Jewish families born in pre-war Vienna, she tells her family's story.

LOST
LETTERS
from
VIENNA

Sue Course



Published by Wild Dingo Press
Melbourne, Australia
books@wilddingopress.com.au
www.wilddingopress.com.au

First published by Wild Dingo Press 2019

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Designer: Debra Billson
Editor: Catherine Lewis
Printed in Australia.

Cover credits:

Stack of letters: Agnes Kantaruk/Shutterstock

Map of Vienna 1858: Source: John Murray, Albemarle Steet, London;

Author: J & C Walker Sailp; Wikimedia Commons

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Chair: Adolf Loos, Chair from the Langer apartment, c. 1903,
National Gallery of Victoria.

Course, Sue 1933- author.

Lost Letters from Vienna / Sue Course.



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

ISBN: 9781925893052 (paperback)

ISBN: 9781925893120 (epdf)

ISBN: 9781925893137 (ebook)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has been a huge project spanning many years. I had no concept of what I was letting myself in for. It had its beginnings when I found the letters of my grandparents and continued with the collection of hundreds of other family letters and additional material.

I am indebted to a wide number of family and friends from all over the world who in their various capacities supported, advised and actively assisted. So many people have contributed that unfortunately I cannot mention everyone by name. You know who you are and I thank each and every one of you.

Some of these wonderful people are no longer with me to celebrate the great achievement—the result of their dedicated work. For a start I would like to mention particularly my childhood friend, Barbara Niven, and my American cousin, Henry Bohm, both of whom, in spite of failing health, made themselves available with their expertise and assistance. They taught me a lot on the way and persuaded me to donate the primary material to the State Library of Victoria.

Before we could do anything else, we had to translate around two hundred letters written in German, which took a lot of teamwork. After beginning with Henry Bohm's translation of some of my grandparents' letters, the task was carried on by Arthur Klimes, while my sister-in-law, Elizabeth Langer, undertook the translation of all Aunt Pauline's letters. Erica Price worked on the translations of my father's letters and many official German documents. I thank her for her enormous support and advice over many years.

The students of the Banyule German U3A class of the early 2000s enthusiastically embraced this project, especially Judith Hannah, Loretta Forsey and Janette Creed who often deciphered

difficult handwritten letters and continued on even after the class folded.

My appreciation also goes to my relatives in England, the US, Canada, Switzerland, South Africa and Australia, including Heidi Rohel, my brother Martin Langer, Dennis Stone and Alfred Muller who added to the actual written material; and others such as John Kary, Nick Kary, Claudia Kary, Andrew Jakins, Tim Bonyhady and Diana Dumouchel, who provided extra information which was able to be included. Lastly to Joele Bohm, Henry Bohm and Pauline Stone (Kary), all long deceased, for their forethought in recording their family stories that guided my approach to this book. A special thanks goes to Gordon Boath who, with his interest in genealogy, drew up the family trees to make the family connections easier for the reader.

I am indebted to Terence Lane for his expertise and contribution on the Adolf Loos material. I am grateful for the many who, with their expertise, supported me at various steps along the way and in a variety of ways did their best to keep me motivated, including: Eve Recht, Robert Upe, Susan Marshall, Michael Smith, Catherine McCardle, Janet Butler, Susan Sheldrick and Pao Franco.

This book could not have been written without Jeanette Leigh who assisted me in weaving together the past and the present.

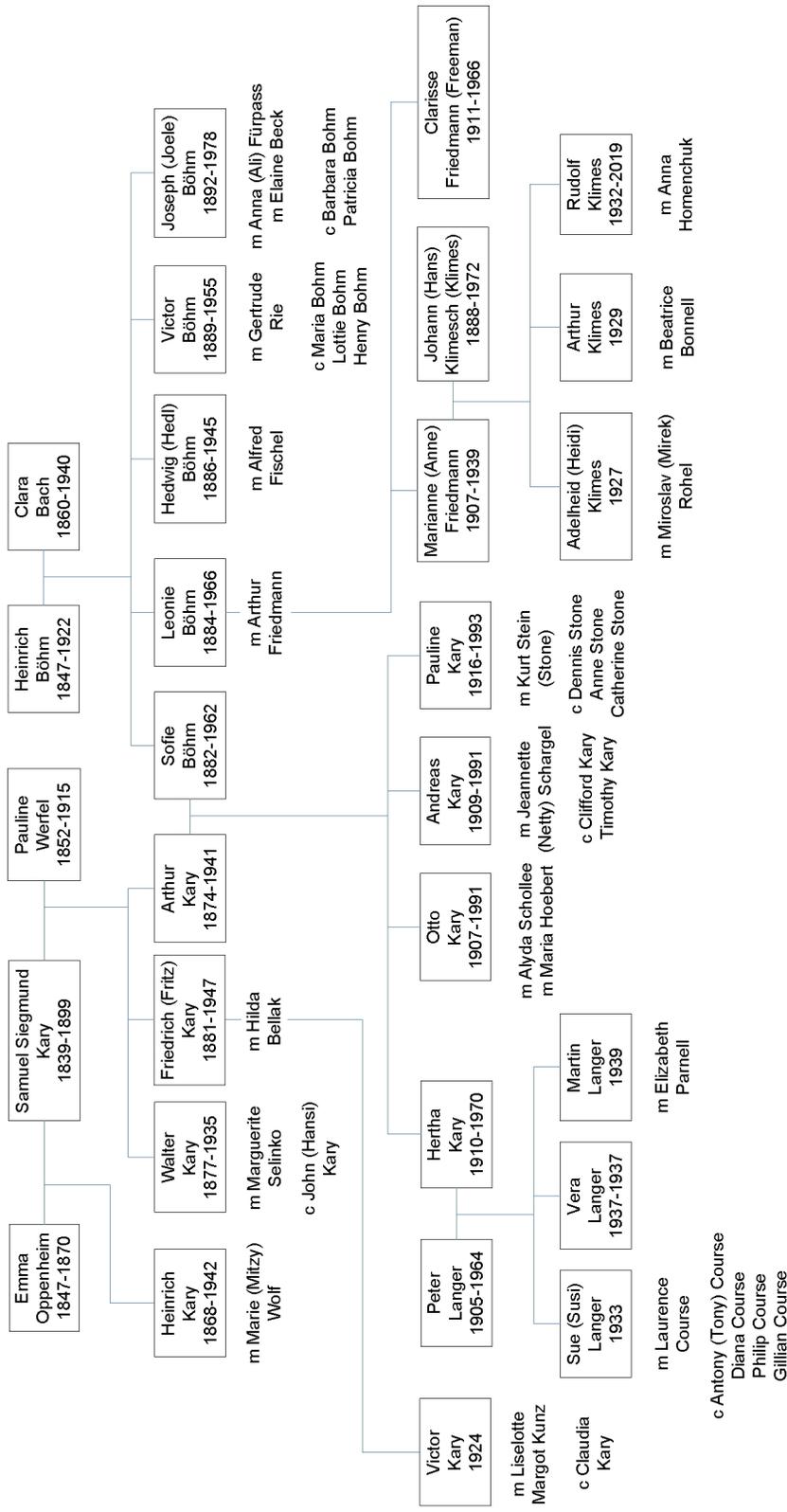
A special mention goes to my cousin Jonathan Jacobson who took on the task of reading several drafts of the book as they became available and made comments on information and errors that had been overlooked.

Warmest thanks go to Catherine Lewis who took the project out of a dream into reality and to all her diligent team at Wild Dingo Press.

Finally, much gratitude to my children, Tony, Di, Gill and Phil for their loving support and help. I particularly thank Phil who pursued the project with me the whole way.

*This book is dedicated to my children and grandchildren
and to all my extended family across the globe.*

The author's paternal family tree



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INTRODUCTION

I was four years old when the Germans marched into Austria. Being a toddler, I was probably only aware of my parents' distress on a subconscious level. Our home was Vienna, and it was the age of the Anschluss, that forced, feckless union with Hitler's Germany. You will know what followed: a holocaust of epic proportions. Survivors talk about the shock of it all. People simply could not believe what was happening; that their lives could break down so profoundly.

The story of escape and restoration that follows is one I can tell now from the comfortable distance of time because of a special discovery. There I was in my modest suburban Melbourne home in 1969 with two young children. I was seven months' pregnant, had a high-maintenance husband, and I had just brought my mother across from New Zealand because she was gravely ill with cancer. In her luggage were boxes of letters and papers, all written in German. Well, I certainly had no time for dealing with them at the time, so they were relegated to the top of a cupboard, where it was nice and dark, and easily forgotten.

Life passes quickly. The calendar page turned over to the year 2000, the year I retired from nursing and when my favourite aunt, Aunt Liesl, died. To assuage my grief, I cleaned and cleared. So, there I was, getting into the cupboards, pulling out old bags, books, hats and clothes, my husband Laurie's briefcase, missing since 1962, and there was that cookbook I was looking for in 1965. Squashed in behind all of this were hundreds of letters and war accounts, some

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handwritten and some typewritten, and all written in German.

The cardboard box collapsed as I removed it from the cupboard, the letters dropping like shot birds falling from the sky. I began leafing wildly through the skin-thin airmail pages. My German was rusty; I could read it but not scan it. However, what I could determine was that the letter I was holding was written by my mother, Hertha Langer, in 1938, and that others were from her parents, Arthur and Sofie Kary, from that year forward. I was completely overwhelmed.

I emailed my Viennese cousin, Henry Bohm, who lived in the United States, and asked him to help with the translation. Because of the enormous volume, I conscripted other Viennese relatives and friends to assist with the mammoth task. As the decoding progressed, German giving way to English, it was like reading an historical novel. The letters revealed a family history that I had no idea about. No one had ever told me about any of these events.

The mail service of 1930s' Europe was probably way better than Australia's today. Can you believe that letters sent from Vienna took only ten days to get to Melbourne in 1938? And remarkably, the postman delivered regularly within Europe even after the various Nazi invasions, which meant my family was able to stay in touch while in flight.

At that time, writing was a vital point of contact for everyone, and throughout this period of an extensive family's dislocation and dispersion, the letters poured to and from across oceans almost as regularly as the waves. Letter by letter, I relived the stories of escape, resettlement and the fate of those left behind. Frank and detailed accounts portrayed communities lost to time, immersing me in the deteriorating conditions and increasing restrictions experienced by Viennese Jews as Nazification continued on its deadly path.

My parents and I were the first of our family to leave. In 1938 the trip to Australia from Vienna was relatively easy, and I was still very young. Before me now were the stories of all the people I had

lived amongst who had such a terrible time of it. What did this all mean? Why was it coming out now? I was dumbfounded.

My family was so close before the war and then suddenly we were wrenched apart. Those letters had kept everyone connected, and I felt that their reappearance would only strengthen those ties. I began engaging my extended family, urging them to add titbits of information and stories to fill the gaps. In more recent years, when relatives visited from Canada and the United States, they sat for hours reading the letters. They never said much but I could tell they were deeply affected.

In 1968 I returned to Vienna for the first time since I was four, with my nine-year-old daughter Diana. We left our modest *pension* near the imposing Hofburg Palace in the city centre to walk to my great-aunt, Marguerite Kary's house. She lived in my family's original home on the Ringstrasse and was my only surviving relative in Vienna. Nearby, I saw a group of Austrian soldiers standing on a street corner with rifles slung over their backs, and had an instinctive urge to flee. Something must have happened in those pre-war months for me to have that pure, chest-tightening fear, but no details remain in my conscious mind. I can recall that feeling still.

Years later, I visited the Hundertwasser Museum in Vienna. It is an extraordinary art museum created by artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser, a Viennese-born Jew who avoided persecution by being baptised into Catholicism in 1935. His mother was Jewish, but his father was Catholic. I bought a postcard in the museum shop with a quote of his that struck deeply:

Wer die Vergangenheit nicht ehrt, verliert die Zukunft.

Wer seine Wurzeln vernichtet, kann nicht wachsen.¹

I had it framed for my living-room wall to remind me of how lucky my family was. We were forced from Vienna and dispersed,

1 Those who don't honour the past lose the future.
Those who destroy their roots cannot grow.

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but thanks to an efficient postal service we were able to weave an invisible connective web around the globe.

History consists of a series of stories; our daily events, moment by moment, are relegated to history. The deeply personal sagas, our subterranean stories, are most important because our past guides us at an unconscious level. I think history allows us to make sense of our lives. I am sharing this one because everything that happens shapes our world.

For generations my family lived on the ‘Ring’, the famous Ringstrasse in the very heart of Vienna. Our family home was one of the many palatial buildings constructed along the grand boulevard which replaced the mediaeval ramparts that had been paid for from the ransom of Richard the Lionheart.

Our lives were rich with privilege because from the early 1800s through to 1938, the family businesses were multinational corporations. On my mother’s side were the Böhms, who owned one of the biggest hat manufacturing companies in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And then there were the Karys who were big in silk textiles, the biggest in Europe. My father’s clan, the Gallia family, were also successful, in the gas lighting business, and were keenly involved in the Secession art movement in Vienna.

My ancestry was full of high achievers. You need go no further back than my great-uncle, Franz Werfel, who wrote a book you may have heard of, *The Song of Bernadette*, which was made into a major Hollywood film starring Jennifer Jones. One of my aunt’s cousins, Annemarie Selinko, wrote *Désirée*, the bestselling story of Napoleon’s first love, and my great-aunt, Hermine Gallia, is preserved in one of Gustav Klimt’s most famous portraits.

This was the setting where generations of Jewish people were intrinsically enmeshed in the cultural and economic life of Vienna, the European hub for cultural pursuits. The scene collapsed when the Nazis invaded on the 12th March 1938, uniting Germany and Austria in a marriage made in hell, known as the Anschluss.

But let's go back to Vienna at the turn of the 20th century when it was the European hub of great artists, thinkers and composers. The capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire abounded with these modernist geniuses who were taking convention and turning it on its head. My grandparents could walk down the street and enter a café for strudel and coffee and overhear discussions between the luminaries of the day. When my grandparents went to the opera, great composers such as Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss were actually conducting.

In the 1920s and 30s, on the boulevard on which I lived, on any day, you would have been likely to see several of the world's greatest talents. Sigmund Freud often strolled down the Ringstrasse on his way to his favourite haunt, Café Landtmann, a place of historic elegance. Other masters frequenting that café were writers such as Thomas Mann and Bohemian modernist poet, Peter Altenburg. More recently, it has hosted Marlene Dietrich, Hillary Clinton and Paul McCartney. The café has been there since 1873 and today continues to attract tourists.

Families of our social standing were schooled in the arts, so some of my relatives were fine musicians, including my father, Peter Langer, a complicated man who would become a cellist in the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in 1946. Our education focused on music, literature, languages and philosophy. This began at an early age, especially for young women.

Disproportionate numbers of Jews within Vienna made up the creative intellectuals engaged in the adventure of discovery and knowledge, including film director, Fritz Lang, palaeontologist and evolutionary biologist Othenio Abel, philosopher Martin Buber, neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, creator of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, and the pioneer shopping-mall designer Victor Gruen. Then there was Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the famed novelist and librettist, who was related to my great-aunt Friedl by marriage.

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Many of these Jewish luminaries converted to Catholicism or Protestantism. Some even to Lutheranism, the most anti-Semitic Christian sect of them all. Why did they do this? The answer is expedience: to fit in. Anti-Semitism pervaded most professions. A composer or conductor, no matter how prodigious their talent, could never reach their career pinnacle while being a Jew.

Immediately after Gustav Mahler converted to Catholicism in 1897, he was appointed director of the esteemed Hofoper, the Vienna Court Opera, a role that was denied to Jews. Ironically, or perhaps as one might expect, Mahler was never really accepted as a Christian, nor did he fully embrace it in his heart. After his conversion he famously commented:

I am rootless ... as a Jew everywhere in the world. I am thrice homeless: as a native of Bohemia in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout the world. Everywhere an intruder, never welcomed.

It was commonplace for religious conversions to occur to secure that top job, but total acceptance was mostly elusive; at the end of the day, once a Jew, always a Jew, according to those who find Jews odious.

At the beginning of World War I, Vienna had the largest Jewish community in western and central Europe with record numbers of Jewish people attending *Gymnasium* (academic senior secondary school that led to university entrance). Although my parents and grandparents were Jewish, they were secular in their leanings. My parents were married in a synagogue but they never attended for worship, nor did they observe the holy days. In fact, they were so secularised that they had me baptised in the Anglican church in Vienna on the 8th August 1938 before coming to Australia because they believed it would be easier to get along in life as a Christian. My father also converted, although had his father, Jakob, lived to see this he would have been horrified. Jakob was deeply committed to his roots and supported many Viennese Jews, including the

provision of financial support for penurious members of the community.

For centuries, secular Jews chose total assimilation; in Vienna they were well accustomed to acting flexibly when it came to their identity in order to make the cogs of life mesh more smoothly. Despite their legislated rights and the fact that Austria was a modern liberal state, the devoutly Catholic Habsburg Empire made sure that Jews remained on the periphery. Around 9,000 converted to Christianity between 1868 and 1903.

Back in 1848 under Emperor Franz Joseph I, it seemed that a new world for Jews was surfacing in Austria. He granted them some civil rights including the right to establish an independent religious community. This was more of a property deal than an altruistic act, but more about that later. Full citizenship rights were granted in 1867. This volte-face, where Viennese Jews finally had freedom and could function normally in society, saw a burgeoning in their numbers from 6,000 in 1860 to around 185,000 in 1938.

So, at the end of the 19th century, one could accurately say that Jewish people were not only major players in the arts in Vienna, they carried it: in other words, they paid for it. On my paternal side, my great-great-aunt Hermine and great-great-uncle Moriz Gallia were two of the most significant Secession artist patrons. The Gallias had more bohemian leanings than my mother's family. When Hermine Gallia modelled for revolutionary painter Gustav Klimt, it thrust her into a fame that outlasted her lifetime; the portrait now resides in the National Gallery in London.

Then, March 1938 saw everything change—we went from being doyens of the arts to objects to be disparaged, dislocated and discarded. Suddenly, the air needed purifying of the stench of greatness that we had become. Aryanisation and Nazification sent my family fleeing across the globe.

Over the coming years, more than six million European Jews were dislocated from their lives, stripped of their dignity and murdered along with some millions of other 'undesirables' such as

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Roma, homosexuals, people with disabilities, political opponents, etc. No less tragic, although perhaps less frequently acknowledged, are the other casualties of that insane war: the estimated 70 to 85 million people who were wiped out as military and civilian casualties right across the world.

Most of my family did not suffer these shocking acts but they had their wealth and businesses taken from them and were forced by the German army to house strangers in their homes; and when they were completely humiliated and disempowered, most of them managed to flee Europe. Just a few of my relatives were carted off to concentration camps alongside other mothers, fathers and children, to be subjected to the most sadistic cruelty and brutality during the 'Final Solution'.

Yes, we were lucky. The loss of belongings and our homes was a small price to pay for our lives, but I am filled with sadness at the injustice. A consonant and a vowel, a language and hundreds of years of history, plus the oceans I crossed, separate Austria from Australia. At various junctures, Vienna, city of music, city of dreams, has called to me across the chasms of time, distance and history. What an interesting time it has been, this life of solving family puzzles. Now I am one of the last remaining members of the Jewish families born in Vienna; and at this ripe age of 86, husband long gone, with four kids and eight adorable grandchildren, I am grateful that they have not had to tell a story of escape.

So, time-leap with me back to the Vienna of September 1938—me in father's arms, my mother's unworldly dark eyes glancing back, not daring to shed tears, as we boarded the Deutsche Luft Hansa Junker plane.