

Film afternoon: *Woman in Gold*

On Sunday 3 April 2016, at 2:00pm, about thirty CCJWA members and guests were welcomed to St Peter's & Emmaus Church in Joondanna, to view the film *Woman in Gold*.

CCJWA Vice-Chair Dr Judith Schneider gave a brief introduction to the film. She observed it followed the story of Maria Altmann, an elderly Jewish refugee living in Los Angeles who fought to retrieve a painting stolen from her family – namely a portrait of her aunt, Adele Bloch-Bauer I, painted by Gustav Klimt – stolen by Nazis just before WWII. With the help of Randy Schoenberg (grandson of the Jewish-Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg), the film traces their effort to reclaim what is hers, with Altmann ultimately taking her case to the US Supreme Court.

Avoiding giving away too much of the film beforehand, Dr Schneider simply encouraged viewers to pay attention to the thread of the argument, especially with respect to who rightfully owned the painting, the Nazi crime of looting as hidden and brushed over, and Jewish contribution to Austrian culture as unacknowledged!

The film, directed by Simon Curtis and featuring Helen Mirren as Maria Altmann, basically surrounds Maria engaging Schoenberg as her legal help, his subsequent investigation, and the unexpected help from Austrian journalist Hubertus Czernin (in pursuit of restoring possessions taken in Nazi looting to their rightful owners).

It begins with Maria's modest but successful life in Los Angeles, California, a result of her emigrating there during the war. At the age of 82, Maria learns from Czernin that the painting is rightfully hers and engages Randy Schoenberg to sue the Austrian Government, something he isn't equipped to do!

The scene then moves to pre-WWII time, to show Maria's family life as it was then, constellating warmly around music and art, and, significantly, contributing to Viennese society. Maria's uncle Ferdinand, a wealthy Czech sugar tycoon, commissions a painting by Gustav Klimt of her aunt Adele, resulting in a stunning gold-leaf portrait (1.38 x 1.38 m) which would hang in their home, viewed ritually during family gatherings. Importantly, while the Bloch-Bauers celebrated their Jewishness, there was no sense of this family not also belonging to Viennese Austrian life. We then see their pre-war charm abruptly ending with the violence of Nazi occupation. Maria has her aunt Adele's jewellery (given to her at her wedding to Fritz Altmann) snatched from her, and similarly her father loses his beloved Stradivarius which he played daily, causing him to die soon after from a broken heart. Eventually Maria and her new husband Fritz escape Austria, flee to the Netherlands and then make their way to America.

The questions that arise in the journey that follows are: Did her aunt actually own the painting commissioned by her husband (the artist's fee having been paid by her uncle)? When Schoenberg files a challenge with the art restitution board, it's denied. As Altmann does not have the money needed to challenge the ruling, they return to the US.

Schoenberg takes matters up himself, using a narrow rule of law and precedents of an art restitution law applied retroactively. He files a claim in US court against the Austrian government contesting their claim to the painting. The appeal reaches the Supreme Court which rules in Altmann's favour, causing the Austrian government to try to persuade her to retain the painting in their gallery, which she refuses to do.

Altmann and Schoenberg fall out over returning to Austria to argue the case, but she agrees that he go and argue the case in front of a panel of three arbiters in Vienna. The panel hears the case, where Schoenberg reminds them of the Nazis' war crimes, and begs them to think of the meaning of the word 'restitution' – to look beyond these items as national artwork and to see them as stolen personal possessions. Unexpectedly, Altmann arrives during the session to support Schoenberg. The panel rules in favour of Altmann, and returns her paintings. The Austrian government representative begs Altmann to keep the paintings in the Belvedere against a generous compensation, but she refuses and has the painting moved to the US with her ("They will now travel to America like I once had to as well.")

At the conclusion of the film, Dr Schneider invited comment on the justice issues raised in the film:

Beyond the injustice of theft, dispossession, and displacement, it raises questions about the injustice of racism, and what culture means to persons. Before the war, many Jews assimilated into Austrian-Viennese culture simply felt themselves to be good Austrian citizens. Why shouldn't they? It was in this spirit of goodwill that Adele bequeathed the painting to the Austrian State Gallery upon her husband's death. Self-identifying as a good citizen, she was oblivious to the possibility of not being accepted.

There is also the issue of hiding the painting's provenance – if it was donated to the gallery – who donated it? Adele Bloch-Bauer's desire was to be philanthropic. (Though misguided about the painting as hers to give away, she felt it was hers). Some suggest she was in a relationship with the artist.

Further, there is the issue of making the subject of the painting anonymous. Was it simply of a fictitious woman dressed in Gold?? No. This was a Jewish woman – Adele Bloch-Bauer to be precise. She, like other Jews, was no longer viewed as simply a good Austrian citizen who contributed enormously to Jewish culture.

There have been other examples in history: Heidegger's two Jewish girlfriends: Hannah Arendt and Elisabeth Blochmann. Hannah Arendt:

came to define her Jewish identity in a negative sense after encountering antisemitism as an adult. She came to greatly identify with Rahel Varnhagen, a 19th-century Prussian Jewish hostess who desperately wanted to assimilate into German culture, only to be rejected because she was born and grew up Jewish. Arendt later wrote about Varnhagen that she was "my very closest woman friend, unfortunately dead a hundred years now."¹

Such self-observation of rejection points to a societal illness that we should be ever vigilant about. What does it mean to insist on cultural *purity*? In other words, what lies beneath such a quest?

The discussion continued over refreshments.

Judith Schneider
Vice-Chairperson, CCJWA Inc.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hannah_Arendt