



Marc Verschooris

**Martha's labyrinth** - an exceptional women's history 1938-1944

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English translation available in pdf

[www.marcverschooris.be](http://www.marcverschooris.be)

Martha's labyrinth is worth a movie. However, this biographical sketch about anti-Semitism, collaboration, and love for women during the Second World War is a bitter reality.

Marc Verschooris has written a haunting book, portraying the eventful lives of two exceptional women who met in troubled times. (...) The book is at the crossroads of Holocaust studies, research on collaboration and resistance in Belgium, migration, and gender history. The way the author deals with all these themes and patiently but accurately uses the source material to put together a particularly complex puzzle is a source of admiration. How the lives of Martha and Yvonne became intertwined symbolizes a multitude of undescribed lives of Jewish victims, resistance fighters and collaborators, or chance bystanders. Tirelessly and with commitment, the author traces the social network of both women through their correspondence, legal sources, travel documents, etc. The multitude of information provides a detailed picture but sometimes overwhelms it. As a reader, it is not always easy not to get lost in Martha's labyrinth. The investigative urge for completeness sometimes gets the better of the clarity. But perhaps the twists and turns, dead ends, and coincidences in the labyrinth that is every human life give us pause for thought.

Jonas Roelens (Radboud University Nijmegen & University Ghent) Non fiction \*\*\*\*  
De Standaard July 30th 2022



## Martha's Labyrinth Synopsis

*After the Anschluss of March 1938, the Viennese-Jewish biologist Martha Geiringer fled to Belgium. In Ghent she meets the doctor Yvonne Fontaine. An exceptional meeting that leads to a quirky and passionate relationship. Yvonne, talented, colorful and highly educated and the intelligent and free-spirited Martha. The magic of the covenant comes to an end when Yvonne's husband has Martha arrested. After the January 1943 raid, Martha, barely thirty, is deported to Auschwitz where she is murdered.*

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After the Anschluss in 1938, Jews had little choice. Their ultimate endeavour was to get away to a place where they would find safety and be accepted. All escape attempts follow a course of their own. Some succeed in reaching their goal – an overseas country. For others, the flight is a tough and terrible journey that sometimes ends dramatically. The people and events that Martha encounters, and the choices she makes determine her survival. Though no refugee is given greater support than Martha, betrayal comes from an unexpected corner.

Martha Geiringer is raised in Vienna's 20th district. She enjoys a carefree childhood with her two brothers and younger sister; the Augarten is their playground. She attends university from 1931 to 1934, where she studies natural sciences and in 1934 joins the Revolutionary Socialists and calls herself a 'Woman Fighter'. This illegal movement arose when the clerical and conservative Chancellor Dollfuss' seized power and went on to ban all parties except his own Patriotic Front. In 1935 Martha interrupts her studies to work as a researcher at the Vivarium, the Institute of Experimental Biology, founded by her mentor Hans Przibram. Despite her academic work in 1937-38, she does not obtain Absolutorium or her doctorate. In March 1938, after helping so many people across the border, she is forced to flee Austria herself. She's 26.

Martha's brother Alfred, who works at the Reuters press agency, is the first of their family to make it to London. Their younger brother Erich finds his own route out and their Mother Irma, stays. Martha and her sister Gertrude's escape route passes through Switzerland, France, and Belgium. However, they do not reach their final destination in the Netherlands but land up in Antwerp. Thanks to the mayor, Camille Huysmans, the sisters find temporary shelter at the local YWCA. They do not obtain the status of political refugee and with only transit visas and a complex Belgian immigration policy, they are doomed to be expelled. Martha is befriended by the married physician Yvonne Fontaine, from the French-speaking liberal bourgeoisie in the intriguing city of Ghent. Yvonne, always on the frontline for women's rights, is extremely active in the local YWCA and offers support and shelter to Martha which protects her. To the dismay of Yvonne's husband, a deep and spiritual bond develops between these two highly educated and talented women. Martha never hides her sexual orientation. She is lesbian and for that time really open about it. Yvonne is the love of her life.

**There is an immediate click between the intelligent Martha and the rebellious Yvonne, who, as a married woman, does not allow herself to be suffocated by the patriarchal conventions of the time.**

Martha hopes to complete her master's degree and present her doctorate in Ghent. Neither the ministry nor the faculty, provide a positive outcome, despite the support of Professor De Waele, who highly values her scientific work. However, De Waele, whom she met in 1935 at a congress in Lisbon, gives her a temporary job in his lab for General Zoology and Animal Physiology.

Alfred Geiringer marries into a distinguished London family and is blessed with substantial means and the best international contacts. He keeps a direct line open with Brussels where, since April 1935, the Labour and Socialist International (LSI) has had its headquarters. Alfred wants his entire family to come to Britain and reaches out to his friends from the Vienna Rote

Presse who are installed in the Belgian capital. Erich, by this time in Ghent, and Gertrude, do not hesitate, and his mother too eventually reaches London safely. However, Martha does not board the Vienna-Brussels-London Express. She stays in Ghent where the Jewish population amounts to about 300 people, including about 15 Austrian, mainly Viennese refugees. Twenty percent of the Jewish population in Ghent has Belgian nationality, for the whole of Belgium that is about 6%.

The justice department evaluates Martha's application to remain in Ghent but demands that she does not give up her plans to leave. She tries to arrange a marriage at a distance with a Viennese student friend, who is in exile in the Philippines. He encourages her to join him there. With a Belgian passport, a visa from the American embassy, and the trip paid for by Yvonne, she departs from Rotterdam. After seven weeks and a perilous crossing, she arrives in Manila to be greeted by a sick, unemployed man who can only offer a meagre hut as accommodation. This is the man whom she thought would offer her a better life. Hurt and bitterly disappointed, she turns round to return to Ghent.

On 6 April 1940, Martha arrives in Genoa. At the Belgian Consulate General in Milan, she applies for an extension of the validity of her passport and a return visa for Belgium. Again, her lack of political refugee status gives problems and a swift return to Belgium is difficult. Martha remains in Italy until 10 June, the day Mussolini declares war on France. She manages to take the last train to Nice. However, because she has crossed the border illegally, she is picked up and sentenced to one month in prison. During her detention, the armistice is signed between France and Germany. Upon her release, she finds herself in the Vichy France of general Pétain, but seen as one of the 'undesirables', and is sent to the occupied part of the country, some 600 kilometres away, in Chalon-sur-Saône. The Germans are not interested in their fellow countrymen, Jewish or not, and send them back.

Martha remains in Nice until 25 October 1940 and is fortunate enough – thanks to Yvonne and many others – finally to be able to return to Belgium. Her arrival in Ghent coincides with the first anti-Jewish orders and leads to more trouble in Yvonne's marriage. For Yvonne's husband, Andreas Claessens, Martha's return to Ghent means nothing more than pure terror inflicted on him by these two conspirators. Because of his Nazi sympathies, Yvonne throws him out and files for divorce. Claessens fears that Martha will testify against him. Without the slightest reason, Martha is imprisoned in a Ghent prison from 15 July to 16 October 1941.

Martha's contact, Professor De Waele, is no longer there to support her. He appears in the black uniform that he also wears during his lessons – the perfect Nazi, in behavior, looks, and manner. At the end of June 1942, Martha is arrested again for not wearing the Star of David, and because she is caught with Yvonne after 8 pm. Only a snitch can once again put an end to the strong bond between the two women. Martha is released in October 1942; she is only a shadow of herself. The psychological pressure of being locked up, without the support that Yvonne has always been able to give her, has broken her morale. Physically a wreck, tormented, mentally and emotionally damaged, she falls prey to severe persecution madness, and hypochondria.

On 11 January 1943, Martha is yet again detained at her official address. She had denied her connection to Judaism in 1931 and falsely believed that this had made her safe. Now she is part of convoy XIX which departs from Mechelen to Auschwitz, Poland on 15 January 1943.

## Marc. Verschooris

Marc Verschooris (1956) is a former lecturer at Hogeschool Gent. Since 1994 he has been researching and publishing about the resistance, collaboration, and the persecution of the Jews in Ghent during World War II.

Between 1994 and 2019, 5 publications were completed: *The parrot has been shot* (1994) and *Waiting for the moon of May* (2000) about Albert Mélot (1915-2010), *Writing in the shadow of death* (2005 ) about the return of political prisoners and the Jewish population of Ghent, *How black thrives in the dark* (2015) about the Sipo-SD Ghent-Leeuwarden and *De broken arm of the law* (2018) about the judicial police at the public prosecutor's office of Ghent (1937-1947).

In 2019 and on the 75th anniversary of the liberation, a publication in French, *Attendre la lune de mai*, was published with the emphasis on the secret agents who were active in Ghent in 1944, in the service of the State Security or the Second Directorate of National Defense. This publication has also been published in Dutch. In 2020 he published a book about the help of Ghent residents to Jews in their city: Marc Verschooris, *Uit de loop van de strop*. Gentenaars in the breach for the Jewish population 1940-1944, Gorredijk, Sterck & De Vreese, 2020, 288 p.

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What a beautiful book!

I read Martha's labyrinth in one sitting.

The story of Martha and Yvonne got deep under my skin. When reading certain passages, it seems like history is repeating itself, which is chilling...

Martha's agony, the divorce between Andreas and Yvonne, the child of the Polo bill, the close friendship between the two women... it seems like a screenplay for a movie.

The story of Martha and Yvonne takes place in beautiful Ghent.

Martha's labyrinth is an Ode to women, her intelligence, her mercy, her fighting spirit, her determination, her strength in all its facets, an Ode to Martha and Yvonne.

I enjoyed every chapter!

## **Responses re Martha's Labyrinth from Bristol & SW Second Generation Group**

**From Rosemary Schonfeld**, email: [rosemary@schonfeld1.plus.com](mailto:rosemary@schonfeld1.plus.com)

What a very interesting, and ultimately tragic, story. I don't think there are a lot of Holocaust books with this kind of theme: telling a woman's personal story about their life, education, political activism in the 1930s, and then their attempts to negotiate everything involved in avoiding capture as a Jew in Europe during the war. There is also very little Holocaust literature where the main protagonist is a lesbian. These two factors give the book a 'different' take on the subject, and publishers generally want something with a marketable 'difference' element.

Re: suggestions, I can only go on my own experience. I know Vallentine Mitchell (my publisher) has said they are not accepting any more Holocaust Memoirs. But this is not a memoir, even though it is described as such. Why is that? They were open to my book, and I have to say, I do believe it was the lesbian content which put a few other publishers off (after reading the synopsis which didn't mention it and then after they'd read the whole book). Vallentine Mitchell didn't bat an eyelid. I suggest your friend go on VMs website and look at the submission guidelines. Prior to finding Vallentine Mitchell, I trawled the Writers and Artists Yearbook, which contains an exhaustive list of publishers and agents, listing the areas they cover. I also think it might be worth trying gay and feminist publishers (if there are any left!), and even German feminist publishers. I do have feminist/political activist friends in Germany who might have some ideas. There is much more interest there than here in the lesbian and feminist 'movements' in pre-Nazi Germany.

I wish your colleague the best of luck.

**From Cynthia Hollinsworth**, email: [cynthia.hollinsworth@gmail.com](mailto:cynthia.hollinsworth@gmail.com)

Thank you for sharing this amazing story. I think the concept and subject matter will always be of interest. In general, I think the translation is well written and easy to read, so compliments to the translator.

**From Frances Freeman**, email: [francesfreeman3@gmail.com](mailto:francesfreeman3@gmail.com)

The request has reminded me of a book of one of my great-aunts that has been published in German by an Austrian publisher (Mandelbaum), but we have not been able to find a publisher for the English version.

The Hare with the Amber Eyes was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, who are apparently accepting unsolicited submissions.

Good luck to the author, because clearly a lot of research has gone into the creation of the book.