

Albert Lichtblau

Vienna–Altaussee–New York: Painter Charlotte Lichtblau

An Émigré Artist?

Prologue: Every interview is conducted at a specific place and at a particular time, and this one with Charlotte Lichtblau is no exception. For émigrés now living in New York who had to flee their native Austria in 1938, the end of January 2000 was dominated by an issue that The New York Times reported daily in decidedly matter-of-fact terms and often on the front page: the formation of an ÖVP-FPÖ coalition government in Austria and the looming boycott by EU member states. It was above all Austria's fast and loose dealings with its Nazi past that opened up the old wounds of those who had been expelled. It was not during the interview itself but rather in the pauses and during meals that Charlotte Lichtblau and I discussed our divergent takes on what was going on in Austria.

This text and the interview that follows are the results of an encounter with the artist's work over the course of almost 10 years. I am a historian and not an art critic; it was thus as a layman that I approached Charlotte Lichtblau's work and let it take its effect on me. I paid my first visit to her studio on the fourth floor of the building at 2255 Broadway on Manhattan's Upper West Side in 1993. Whoever is familiar with the Austrian colony in New York knows that many émigrés—artists and intellectuals in particular—still live in this very lively part of town. Writer Frederic Morton, whose acquaintance with Charlotte Lichtblau goes back to their youth, lives practically around the corner. In the 1990s, Café Éclair was still a neighborhood landmark exerting a magnetic attraction upon emigrants longing for Wiener schnitzels and Viennese pastry. The emigration experience brings out the wish to discover analogies to one's former homeland. After all, how many tourists in New York even stop to consider that there actually are parallels that can be drawn between the Alps and Manhattan? For visually oriented people, the harsh light of the metropolis, the contrast between light and dark, atmospherically engender a mood reminiscent of alpine valleys.

The studios are lined up side by side in the building at 2255 Broadway. There's a feeling of work in the air; the workspaces are bright and pervaded by the urban soundscape of cars and droning air conditioners.

Isn't it always the personal aspect that one seeks in paintings, reflections that shed light upon one's inner state, that make an unexpected step possible and can thereby ease one's burden or make it heavier? Isn't one seeking new questions? The way to an understanding of Charlotte Lichtblau's work was by no means an easy and direct one for me. But there was one small exception—I was immediately struck by something that reminded me of the children's game of seeking identifiable shapes in the clouds. And indeed, in many pictures I was able to discover some. Most of them irritated me at first—for instance, as an agnostic, I was repelled by the religious images—and all of my attempts to extract explanations from Charlotte Lichtblau initially failed. She refused to provide me with the answers that a historian longs for: explanations and background information. No, the pictures were supposed to speak for themselves. And thus remained silent in my recollection. It was only in the case of an extremely intense double portrait that she related the story of a painting's origins. It depicted a friend of hers, a priest and painter named Father Richard Mann who fell in love with a man and later died of Aids. I was struck by the expressive style in her large-format works. The use of strong colors and elementary forms made it clear to me from the very outset that this was an intense, highly expressive form of art, a mode of creativity that was not at all evasive but rather went right to the point, seeking the elemental, the substantial. Later, it became increasingly obvious to me that the images' contents do not reveal themselves at first glance; they withhold their secrets and challenge the observer.

My first visit to her studio came for me at a time of intensive encounter with exile research, and I also went about seeking manifestations of the Holocaust and the experience of expulsion in Charlotte Lichtblau's work. It was not until later that I understood that Charlotte Lichtblau did not directly depict the Holocaust theme; rather, she confronted it in another way—above all, through an encounter with the question of sacrifice. She would later explain to me during an interview: “In reality, the brutality is there right from the beginning.”

During my visit to her studio, I immediately noticed the many depictions of alpine landscapes, but it took some time for me to come to the realization that these were exclusively representations of the *Ausseerland* district in northwestern Styria. Back then, Aussee was just a name for me; now I know that it is a designation for a sickness of the heart, the “*Ausseer Krankheit*.” At the root of this illness is a love of this particular landscape, its people and their rituals, which director Hans Neuenfels—a representative case that can serve as a proxy for many others—described in these terms: “Love of a landscape is similar to the love of a man for a woman or vice versa. Basically, it remains thoroughly incomprehensible to all others, and it becomes utterly dubious when one says: ‘I’m no mountain climber, no skier, no hang-glider, no fisherman, no hunter, and no fan of folk music and native costumes. Dialects make me nervous, just like staged *gemütlichkeit* does, and nevertheless Altaussee really is my Altaussee.’”¹ Aside from her love for *dirndl* dresses, this quote could have come from Charlotte Lichtblau, who likewise suffers from this *Ausseer Krankheit*. Over and over again, she returned from exile in New York to recover from this peculiar illness. To recover? No, that couldn’t possibly be the right word, but I can’t seem to come up with an alternative. Perhaps it would be better to say: to undertake an encounter with this beloved summer resort of her childhood, to make it hers once again after having lost it, to regenerate her roots, to return to her origins, to penetrate and pervade the place in its continually novel facets, that place at which she learned to see, learned to comprehend and grasp the world, learned love and its opposite pole: death.

Exile art? Charlotte Lichtblau—like so many others—quite properly rejects such a simplifying compartmentalization. After all, aren’t artists—with the exception of many nationalist crackpots—generally cosmopolitans unconstrained by national borders, or rather, oriented on that which is universal? And isn’t it the tension between the local and the global perspectives from which they derive that power to envision that so moves us as viewers? In answer to the question of whether she considers herself an exile artist, I received a response that was characteristic of her: “All art is exile art.” Charlotte Lichtblau long rejected having her work categorized as “exile art,” but she ultimately came to accept it because she finally had to admit the extent to which the experience

¹ Theatrical and operatic director Hans Neuenfels, *Mein Altaussee*, in: *Die Weltwoche* Nr. 44 dated October 29, 1998, p. 88.

of exile has had an impact on her work. Many artists throughout the 19th and 20th centuries were seeking out existentially extreme experiences—for example, by means of drugs—but for Charlotte Lichtblau this process was a very real one. One sees the world with different eyes when one is suddenly hovering in mortal danger, is at the mercy of the arbitrary will of potential murderers, loses almost everything—including that with which one is on most intimate terms—as a result of having to flee, and is forced to begin a new life.

A Viennese Jewish Family

The Adelbergs were a typical Viennese family whose members came from all over Central Europe—Vienna, Bohemia, Alsace. By typical, I also mean a certain indeterminacy, the fascinating blend of human beings from diverse geographical origins in the melting pot of Vienna. It was not until the era of National Socialism that the Adelbergs would be relegated to the status of outsiders bearing a stigma that had not previously been all that important to them—their Jewishness.

Ernst Adelberg, Charlotte Lichtblau's father, returned from service in World War I with a severe case of malaria; his older brother Paul died in action. Austria was his great, tragic love, Charlotte Lichtblau would say during an interview. She was her father's pride and joy. He loved nature, the mountains, hiking and mountain climbing. When he returned from the war, his parents' textile plant was beyond hope of rescue. Later, he developed special printing processes for the Guntramsdorf Printing Plant.

It's said that even back then, the women of the family included some truly imposing figures—first and foremost grandmother Lilli Ehrmann (née Heller). As a young girl, she fell in love with Isidor Ehrmann, her religion and Hebrew teacher originally from Brennporitschen in Bohemia southeast of Pilsen. In Vienna, he would go on to an very successful career as CEO of the Phoenix Life Insurance Co. Grandmother Lilli led a life that was fully in keeping with the ways of bourgeois women of the day—doing charity work and serving on the Municipal Welfare Board—but also acquired quite a reputation for her unconventional lifestyle.

Mother Erna, born in 1902 in Vienna, was among Austria's first emancipated women to study law, but instead of practicing her profession, she married and gave birth to two daughters—Charlotte on August 9, 1925 and Doris on February 15, 1929. Thoroughly in tune with the times, she would later venture into the world of psychoanalysis. Charlotte Lichtblau's parents had a place in Vienna that they could call their own cosmos—Café Schottentor, where they socialized with writers, physicians and musicians. Photographer Trude Fleischmann, whom we have to thank for the wonderful portraits of the family, was a member of this circle, as was author Paul Elbogen.² Erna Adelberg was considered a “muse,” and was particularly fond of the work of novelist author Robert Neumann. She was one of the seekers of her day, rebelling against all that was traditional and conventional, whereas Charlotte Lichtblau's beloved father played the role of his wife's prudent, bourgeois counterpart.

Is Charlotte Lichtblau a rebel like her mother and grandmother? Is it rebellious to steadfastly resist hackneyed stereotypes being attributed to one's work or to refuse to curry favor with the mainstream? I assume so, but at the same time I presume that she would absolutely reject the application of the term “rebellious” to her. What's she rebelling against if she paints because she has to?

The second cosmos of the Adelberg family was Altaussee. Whereas the *kaffeehaus* was a cosmos of adults, this beloved refuge of nature-hungry city dwellers was also open to children, and thus meant the beginning of a life-long love affair for Charlotte Lichtblau. It was a very feminine place, she says today. And that had to do with the role of the women of Aussee, she adds. The husbands of the female vacationers often came only on the weekends from the oppressively hot, muggy city. Charlotte Lichtblau was 12 when she painted her first picture of the Aussee landscape; the painting of the Dachstein peak hangs today in the bathroom of her apartment on the corner of Westend Avenue and 84th Street. She once even attended the Altaussee elementary school, since her family had left for summer vacation before school was officially out. The extent

² Alois Mayrhuber, the chronicler of the Aussee artists' colony, wrote about Paul Elbogen. See Alois Mayrhuber, *Künstler im Ausseerland*, Graz-Vienna-Cologne: Styria 1995, pp. 157-162. On Trude Fleischmann, see, for example: Jutta Dick and Marina Sassenberg (Eds.), *Jüdische Frauen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Lexikon zu Leben und Werk*, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt 1993, pp. 116-119.

to which Charlotte Lichtblau loved Altaussee even as a child becomes clear in the interview. Although she had no idea about the background of the customs and festivals, she soon became aware of the eeriness behind the beauty. This fascinating strangeness becomes palpable in her paintings. She “appropriated” it—among other reasons, to fully “understand” it.

Nestwärme (the warmth of a happy family life) is one of those words that Charlotte Lichtblau uses to describe her relationship with her parents. Nevertheless, even as a child, she sensed that the life of this extended family clan staged on a grand scale could not continue as it had in the past. She also became aware of the threats looming beyond the confines of the cozy family nest. As a child, she had hoped for peace and was convinced that, without a Kaiser, war would henceforth be impossible. The Nazis’ murder of Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss destroyed that illusion. Religion no longer provided a sense of security. When the adults talked about “God,” it was with the use of quotations from the works of great classical thinkers like Goethe. As was the case in many other Jewish families, celebrating Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter was taken completely for granted. And then there’s the anecdote passed down about Grandmother Lilli, who is said to have notified the Jewish Community of Vienna of her resignation via picture postcard.

Charlotte Lichtblau was sent to what one would nowadays call “the” alternative school of that day in Vienna—the legendary Schwarzwald School. Looking back, Charlotte Lichtblau sees herself walking through downtown Vienna, grateful every day for being lucky enough to live in such a magnificent city. During the final years prior to National Socialism, she formed a close personal bond with her friend Susi, the wild daughter of actress Kitty Stengel and actor Hans Jungbauer. Both girls loved the works of author Karl May; to this day, Charlotte Lichtblau still knows the beginning of “*Durch die Wüste*” (Through the Desert) by heart. From Susi, who had moved to Vienna from Germany, she learned, long before many others, about the facts of life under Nazi rule.

America

Charlotte Lichtblau is one of those exiles who describe themselves as lucky, since her sister, parents and grandparents were not murdered. Luck? Expulsion and the loss of other close relatives are nevertheless a heavy emotional burden. For family members in Bohemia, there was no escaping. Charlotte Lichtblau's parents initially succeeded in fleeing with their children to Zagreb after having first undergone baptism in Korneuburg in order to be able to cross the border. The priest did not enter the date on the baptismal certificate, knowing full well that those at risk would backdate it themselves.

"Luckily" they remained on the run and made it to England. When war broke out, the children were evacuated from London. Even in late 1939, the Adelbergs risked the dangerous crossing to America. With the *Lancastria*, they sailed in a convoy out of the danger zone; during its next crossing, the ship was sunk. Charlotte Lichtblau still has horrible memories of their arrival in New York during the cold January of 1940 and living in slum-like conditions in roach-infested rooms. America was too far away and too wild for her. The Jewish refugee organizations made every effort to steer the exiles away from New York. The Adelbergs were sent to relatives in St. Louis. At first, poverty was their constant companion. The father attempted with scant success to make a go of it as a door-to-door salesman of wares like brushes and stockings; he took on janitorial jobs, and the mother became a masseuse. In spite of their catastrophic living conditions, the father succeeded in accomplishing the most important thing: the last-minute rescue of relatives and friends from the deadly Nazi danger by enabling them to come to America.

The three-and-a-half-year age difference between sisters Doris and Charlotte had enormous consequences for how they adapted to emigration. Doris, the younger sibling, would become fully integrated into American society. She would marry an American and speak German only grudgingly. In an interview, the author of children's books said that she feels like an American and chooses not to suffer from homesickness. Although she may not like to continually dwell upon having been deprived of her homeland, she describes this loss in many of her works. Her

children's book "*Der Teufel in Wien*" (The Devil in Vienna) depicts the first months of 1938 in the form of a diary, whereby she utilizes the artistic device of a protagonist who combines her own experiences with those of her sister.³

Charlotte, on the other hand, remained within a circle of German-speaking Austrians. After the family had returned to New York during World War II, Charlotte Lichtblau met "little Bambi," her homeroom teacher at the Schwarzwald School. Gertrude Bamberger, as she was actually called, acquainted Charlotte with Austro American Youth, a club in New York for exiled Austrian young people. For many of them—and especially those who had come without parents—this group became an emotional haven in a strange, new world. As a meeting place for marriage-minded singles, it has played a role—even to this day—in the lives of many of its members. One was Charlotte, who met her future husband, Hans Lichtblau, there. In Vienna, his family had owned a factory producing pipes for smoking tobacco. Charlotte—not yet 19—and John—as Hans came to be known—married while the war was still going on. Shortly thereafter, he was drafted to fight the Nazis, and a year full of fear followed.

After the Allied victory, John remained stationed in Germany. He worked in conjunction with the Counter Intelligence Corps on assignments that included de-Nazification duties. His cases included the Wagner family in Bayreuth. Charlotte Lichtblau followed her husband to Germany. In Hof in the German province of Franconia, she joined a group of artists who had been blackballed as degenerates by the Nazis; among them were Gottfried Brockmann and Werner Gilles. Naturally, she and her husband were already back in Altaussee by 1947, bringing with them cooking fat and other items that were exotic treasures in postwar Austria. "Christ a'mighty, it's Lotte," is how she was greeted by old Mrs. Angerer, a lady with whom she had lived as a child. Hugs. Elation. Weird.

In 1948, they wanted daughter Claudia to be born in the US and not in Europe so John got a government job in Washington. However, American anti-communism threatened the young

³ Doris Orgel, *Der Teufel in Wien*, Munich: C. Bertelsmann 1990. On Doris Orgel, see, for example: Ursula Seeber (Ed.), *Kleine Verbündete. Vertriebene österreichische Kinder- und Jugendliteratur*, Vienna: Picus 1998, especially pp. 149-151.

couple's familial bliss. Former members of the Austro American Youth came under intelligence agency scrutiny when it turned out that two former officials had been Soviet spies. An author whose book John Lichtblau had critically reviewed denounced him as a member of a communist organization, whereupon John was immediately suspended from his job. John Lichtblau was later able to refute these charges and returned to his position in the government. In 1953 he signed on with an oil consulting firm in New York. Later, he went out on his own, founding the Petroleum Industry Research Foundation, and is now an internationally respected specialist on oil issues. His expertise in the field was also recognized in Austria when Dr. Franz Vranitzky appointed him to an international commission of former Austrians to serve in an advisory capacity to the Austrian chancellor.

In the following interview, the prime focus is on Charlotte Lichtblau's work as a painter; nevertheless, some of her other accomplishments should not be overlooked. Her parents wanted to steer Charlotte's artistic ambitions in a direction that seemed more sensible to them so they sent her to Washington Irving High School where she was to learn a "proper" skill: fashion design. She still breaks out laughing when she recalls a scholarship she received which provided her with her own atelier for a certain time. The first thing she drew wasn't a sketch of a high-fashion ensemble but rather a giant gentian. Greetings from Aussee! While she was still attending high school, she did her part to help out the family's tight budget by painting neckties for piecework wages. In her spare time, she enjoyed joining other immigrants at round-table discussions of art and politics. Later, she painted gloves and got jobs doing window dressing.

In the '60s and '70s, Charlotte Lichtblau played a substantial role in the New Yorker art scene as a critic. She first wrote for *The Philadelphia Enquirer*, then contributed reviews to *The Herald Tribune* and prestigious *Arts* magazine. She rushed from one opening to the next and was courted as a critic. Her essays on subjects like "The Apocalypse in Art," "Chagall and the Bible" and "Nineteenth Century Hang-ups Today. The Relevance of Literary Painting" can still be read profitably today.

With income from these various sources, Charlotte Lichtblau financed art instruction from former Viennese painter Josef Floch and from Henry Schaefer-Simmern. And she taught too—one of her students is Julia Logothetis, a painter living in Vienna. And there was another activity as well: her aunt, Hilde Adelberg, worked in New York as a psychotherapeutically oriented social worker and referred several clients to her for art therapy. This was not a matter of making artists out of them; rather, painting was meant to help them find a structure in their lives. In the '70s, Charlotte Lichtblau contributed the illustrations for sermons written by Father Patrick Ryan, a priest who became a long-time friend; these appeared weekly in the Jesuits' *America* magazine.

Charlotte Lichtblau, the art critic courted by the establishment, was nevertheless unable to use her position to further her own artistic endeavors, and it remained difficult for her to exhibit her work. She laughs when recalling that she had painted pictures that no one wanted to exhibit—religious images, landscapes (many of *Ausseerland*), portraits—and, what's more, did so in an expressionist style that was hardly in tune with the *zeitgeist*. But at a sales exhibition in the *Van Bovenkamp Gallery*, she could hardly complain about a lack of interest in her work.

Of Charlotte Lichtblau's many exhibitions, the most important one for her took place in the spring of 1975 in New York's Cathedral St. John the Divine, a gigantic neo-gothic edifice that is still under construction. This was one of many joint exhibitions with American sculptor Sy Gresser, and represented the fulfillment of a dream—that of exhibiting at a venue that was neither a gallery nor a museum, but rather a place to which those viewing the art would come for deeply personal reasons. The works of art came across as if they were an integral part of the cathedral. Perhaps the exhibition in Altaussee would enable her to experience something similar—that not only was *Ausseerland* a part of the work of Charlotte Lichtblau but her paintings were also a part of *Ausseerland*.