



Pushing Time Away: My Grandfather and the Tragedy of Jewish Vienna

Peter Singer

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"What binds us pushes time away," wrote David Oppenheim to his future wife, Amalie Pollak, on March 24, 1905. Oppenheim, classical scholar, collaborator and then critic of Sigmund Freud, and friend and supporter of Alfred Adler, lived through the heights and depths of Vienna's twentieth-century intellectual and cultural history. He perished in obscurity at a Nazi concentration camp in 1943. More than fifty years later, philosopher Peter Singer set out to explore the life of the grandfather he never knew. Combining touching family biography with thoughtful reflection on both personal and public questions we face today, *Pushing Time Away* captures critical moments in Europe's transition from Belle Epoque to the Great War, to the rise of Fascism, and the coming of World War II.

Pushing Time Away: My Grandfather and the Tragedy of Jewish Vienna Details

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From Reader Review Pushing Time Away: My Grandfather and the Tragedy of Jewish Vienna for online ebook

Michael Lewyn says

This book is essentially a biography of Singer's maternal grandparents; his grandfather died in a Nazi concentration camp, while his grandmother survived.

The book works best as a love story. The relationship between David Oppenheimer and Amalie Pollak began quite oddly: with David's letters about his homosexual interest in another young man. As David refocused his interests on Amalie, another obstacle asserted herself: Amalie was an observant Jew, while David was an atheist or agnostic. (They ultimately negotiated away this problem by having kosher plates for Amalie and nonkosher ones for David).

And yet the two had a happy marriage; how did they manage it? Singer does not think that there was romantic love between the two, at least not at first. Instead, David at first sought Amalie's wisdom, and the relationship grew from there. Singer writes: "if admiration of intellect and character comes first, love can follow, and passion too." (Singer seems to focus more on why David was attracted to Amalie than vice versa, perhaps because David left more of a paper trail).

Along the way, Singer tells us a bit about early 19th century Vienna: a society where Jews could rise to the top of any profession, but also a society where the longtime mayor campaigned as an open anti-Semite. One bizarre example of the society's anti-Semitism was the Jewish-by-birth (though Christian by religion) author Otto Weinberger, who asserted that women were naturally amoral, and that Jews were naturally feminine and thus amoral as well. Weinberger put his principles into action by shooting himself.

Singer also describes his grandfather's philosophical thought; however, I have to admit I often found this discussion a bit harder to follow.

Sharon Griffin says

This was a very philosophical book, and therefore not really what I expected. I was hoping it would be more about their lives during the takeover of Vienna. I have much respect for the author, though for bringing his grandfather, a very educated man, to life for all readers.

Emily says

This book is long, interesting and pulls at the heart-strings. My grandfather lent this book to me to read while i was in Vienna and it was great to recognise the references of the places. The writing was kind of dry and the people described felt bland but it was enjoyable enough. The ending felt a bit lacking and the whole book lacked depth. I liked the historical aspect of the book and the description of the shocking treatment of Jews during and before Nazi annexation of Austria. Just a warning though: the Freud section of the book is quite explicit.

Jessica Feinstein says

'Enjoyed' isn't the right word for this book but I am in awe at what Peter (one of my heroes) has achieved. It's a truly wonderful way to remember his grandfather.

Jeffrey Green says

I found this book in a used bookshop in Jerusalem and couldn't resist buying it. I had read quite a few articles by Peter Singer, mainly about animal rights and other issues. He is an eminent philosopher, presently on the faculty of Princeton.

In this book, unlike his philosophical works, he tries to understand his maternal grandfather, David Oppenheim, a direct descendant of the eminent Chief Rabbi of Prague of the same name. Singer's grandfather was a secular intellectual, a teacher of Greek and Latin in the leading high school of Vienna, and the author of academic articles, an associate of Sigmund Freud and then of Alfred Adler.

Oppenheim died in Theresienstadt, though his children managed to emigrate, and Singer grew up in Australia. His book is based on correspondence that his aunt saved as well as on Oppenheim's published works.

Singer paints a convincing (though not terribly lively) and sympathetic portrait of a highly idealistic intellectual, a devoted teacher, and a man betrayed by the high culture in which he believed. The final chapters on his grandparents' desperate situation in Nazi Vienna are sad enough, and the earlier chapters about Oppenheim's exemplary service in the Austrian army in WWI are also nerve-shattering.

An underlying theme of the book, which could have been developed, is the vast difference between the profoundly serious idealism of the author's grandparents and the more cynical and rebellious attitudes of people born generations later. Since most of the book is based on his grandfather's letters, we get almost no outside perspective on the man, who must have been wildly atypical of his age, especially in his devotion to high culture and his belief in its values.

Interestingly, both David and his wife were strongly attracted romantically to people of their own sex, and they corresponded with one another about this before they thought of marrying one another. Singer is puzzled and tries to understand it, but he doesn't go very far with this theme. Similarly, Amalie, his grandmother, was an orthodox Jewish woman, observed the Sabbath, and ate only kosher food, but her husband was totally secular and ate non-kosher food at home. How could they have lived that way without strong tension? Singer doesn't go deeply into this issue either.

There was a time when students of classics believed that the culture of Greece and Rome was ideal, but today we are too much aware of, for example, the fierce cruelty of the Romans, to hold them up as heroic models. Singer never tells us whether his grandfather was at all critical of the classical tradition, which he taught.

If David Oppenheimer had not been Peter Singer's grandfather, Peter Singer would never have thought of writing about him. After all, he is a philosopher, not a historian. If Peter Singer had allowed himself to be more introspective in print, he would have told the reader more about the emotional meaning to him of his family connection to a rather obscure Viennese Jewish intellectual - and he might have written more about his grandmother, Oppenheimer's wife, who survived the Holocaust and spent her last years with her family in Melbourne.

This should not be the only book you read about the Jews of Vienna.

karen says

A really interesting look at the culture of Vienna in the early part of the 20th Century (Freud, Adler, etc) as well as a poignant tribute to the author's grandfather.

Angela Sorby says

Fascinating peek into the world of psychoanalytic interwar Vienna.

Denise Cumming says

This book goes with others about Jewish life in Vienna before and after the Nazi's. Also insight into Freud, Jung and Adler when they were thinking up their big ideas.

Adrian says

The author decides to investigate the life of his maternal grandfather, David Oppenheim, a man he never knew. Singer pieces together Oppenheim's fascinating life through family letters and papers. DO was part of the intellectual class of Vienna playing a part in circles that included Freud and Adler. He married Amalie, an intellectual of some estimation herself. Their wonderful life was shattered by, in succession, WWI (DO served and was twice wounded), recession, rise of Naziism and the German invasion. Amalie and DO were sent to Theresienstadt in 1941. David died there but Amalie survived joining her grown children in Australia in 1946. A story like thousands of others but nonetheless well told.
