

*Maria Jaschok
with her Chinese
artwork*

*Photographs:
Damian Halliwell*

From darkness to light

Sylvia Vetta uncovers
an extraordinary family
story in conversation
with Maria Jaschok



One woman's wartime story has influenced Maria Jaschok, director of International Gender Studies (IGS) at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, throughout her life.

"In 1995, exactly 50 years after fleeing her home as Russian troops advanced into Germany, my mother, Hildegard Maria Jaschok, wrote the story of her nine-month search for my grandmother and her own baby son. The family became separated after they joined refugees fleeing from the city of Katowice towards the end of the Second World War," Maria said.

Her mother's book begins on January 18,

1945, when Hildegard, then aged 21, was told by a German officer that she should leave her home (in Upper Silesia and then part of Germany) as Russian troops were rapidly advancing.

Hildegard, who until then had led a relatively sheltered life, set off in one of the coldest winters on record with only limited supplies of food and clothing. Her husband Bruno, a soldier who had been fighting in Russia, was missing – and she did not know if he was alive or dead.

Maria explained: "My mother's decision to leave was also partly motivated by her unusual family background which caused suspicion even unpopularity among her neighbours. Her family was suspected of concealing their Jewish ancestry. Members of

the family were also regarded as political dissenters in an area where the population had been predominantly supportive of policies of Hitler's government."

Hildegard left home with her two children, Wolfram, a toddler of weak health, and Christian, a baby only a few months old. Her elderly mother was accustomed to a lifestyle of leisurely comfort. They were joined by Hildegard's nurserymaid Marie, legendary in the family for her moroseness and fierce loyalty.

The women and children joined a caravan of refugees fleeing the city.

"In the chaos of war-torn Europe, because of the shortage of fuel, there were no trains or

Continued on page 11

From page 9

buses, so the refugees walked or travelled in horsedrawn carriages. Hildegard, Marie and my brother Wolfram rode in one carriage, my grandmother and baby Christian, were in another carriage ahead of them," Maria said.

"One night hundreds of soldiers passed through the line of refugees and, in the process, scattered the caravan. My mother looked everywhere, but could not find her grandmother and the baby.

"In her book, entitled *18 January 1945*, my mother describes the nine months she spent trying to find them, haunted by fears of the child's helplessness and her mother's frailty. She does not describe nursemaid Marie's role, but it is clear that when my mother faltered and despaired, Marie was a pillar of strength – selling my mother's jewellery to purchase food and ensuring my brother's comfort.

"Everywhere my mother went she desperately asked if anyone had seen an elderly woman with a small baby. Her first clue to their whereabouts came in Münster where the International Red Cross told Hildegard that her mother had been seen near Osnabrück."

Maria said: "My grandmother had been fortunate. A family which owned a large estate had taken her in and Christian was alive and well. She had reciprocated for the generous hospitality accorded to a perfect stranger by teaching the local children."

After the reunion with her mother, Hildegard set about finding her lost husband. Amazingly, they too were reunited and settled near Osnabrück.

Before the outbreak of war, Bruno Jaschok had been a student at The Academy of Fine Art in Berlin. He was passionate about painting, but his new life left no time to pursue it.

Maria explained: "Educated young men who had somehow survived the war – however psychologically scarred – were urgently needed to teach. My father was put in charge of a number of schools. He must have been happy on the day I was born in 1950 because he declared it a holiday for the numerous schools in the district which he oversaw," Maria said.

"As I grew up people would remember my birthday because of that unexpected holiday. But the atmosphere at home was tense. My father excelled in everything he did – be it music, art, mathematics or literature – but he was aloof and demanding.

"My mother was compassionate but preoccupied with her children and the huge social demands which my father's position made on her. My mentor, in a way my parent, was my brother Wolfram, who became an accomplished artist," Maria said. "My feminism grew from his certainty that his little sister could achieve anything she set her mind to."

There was tension between Bruno and his talented son, who was living the life of an artist – a life that had been denied to his father. These unresolved tensions within the family home led to Maria's own bid for freedom – and her first destination was London.

"Nowadays you would call it a gap year but, in 1968, spending a year abroad was rare in our social circle. I used my love of English literature as justification, but in many ways it was a camouflage for a subconscious desire to flee from my family," she explained.

"I chose to remain in England to read



The cover of Hildegard Jaschok's book with an illustration by Maria's brother, Wolfram, a talented artist, who died in 1980, aged 38

International Relations at Sussex University and my parents agreed to support me. As a rather conflicted German I was enthused, like most of my compatriots, with the idealism and necessity of the European project and that influenced the choice of subject."

During her undergraduate years at Sussex, Maria had one of those chance encounters that can change lives. She met Cora Bell, who had been an advisor to Henry Kissinger at the time of President Nixon's visit to China in 1972, when she visited the university.

Maria recalled: "Cora Bell's cold warrior attitude in a perverse sort of way opened my eyes to China. The only way that I could, as a mere student, challenge what I considered her shallow understanding of Maoist China, was to read as much as I could. I simply had to know more than my professor in order to win the arguments in our tutorials.

"My passionate involvement with the country, with the idea of a successful revolution that enabled women's fullest participation in the shaping of their country, totally naïve as it turned out to be, began at that time," Maria said.

"I was determined to learn more about China and wrote to someone whose erudition I much admired, the incredibly busy scientist

and sinologist, Joseph Needham. I did not expect him to reply."

Needham was a famous Cambridge scientist who mastered Classical Chinese in order to research China's ancient technological and scientific past.

Maria revealed: "He invited me to Cambridge, taking an entire day from his hectic schedule to listen to me and share his own experiences of China. That meeting inspired me to read for a PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

"I worked hard to learn Mandarin, doing a Masters in Chinese Anthropology and Sociology before embarking on my PhD on the subject of female domestic servitude, the international campaign for its abolition and the politicisation of what became 'the Chinese slave girl' issue in the context of pre-Second World War colonial Hong Kong.

"I made my first visit to China in 1979 and, after getting my doctorate in 1981, I decided that I wanted more time to live, learn and research in China. My mother's wry observation was 'is there nothing closer to home?'"

Going to China was an adventurous option,

Continued on page 13

From page 11

but Maria had developed an unstoppable passion.

"I obtained a position at Zhongshan University (Guangzhou) which involved most importantly supervision of dissertations considered too 'sensitive' for others to take on," she said.

"Despite the numerous difficulties in getting permission with the authorities to pursue my research independently, it was a fruitful time. I developed wonderful relationships inside the university and in the wider community."

Zhongshan University was followed by an appointment with Long Island University in the United States, which asked Maria to set up Chinese Studies programmes for American students in China and Taiwan, with its main offices in Hong Kong. While in that post she met another charismatic woman, Li Xiaojiang.

"Then already a scholar of considerable renown, the philosopher Li Xiaojiang was eloquent and persuasive. In the early 1980s, she set up one of the earliest Women's Studies centres, at Zhengzhou University in Henan.

"We corresponded and met for the first time in 1988. She confronted me with a challenge to help her establish the first international women's college and women's museum in China in Henan. It was a challenge I could not resist," Maria said.

In 1994, Maria became the college's vice-president and the deputy director of the Henan Women's Museum, the first such museum in China, with the purpose of preserving relevant material artefacts as evidence of the past and creative lives of Chinese women.

She explained: "We assumed that we would have official support but as Li Xiaojiang did not shy away from controversy, she had made enemies. Although we enjoyed local backing for our projects, our assumption that we would get national approval was to prove wrong.

"Our first exhibition was to be about a Shaanxi peasant artist Ku Shulan, known as 'The Paper Cutting Woman'. She cut up colourful remnants of old propaganda posters with a tiny pair of scissors, making the most extraordinary creations of the most subtle beauty.

"Nowadays images of her work – nearly always depicting Niang Niang, the Goddess of Paper-cutting – are ubiquitous on souvenirs and household objects that can be purchased in chic boutiques in Beijing and Shanghai, earning certain people a great deal of money," Maria said.

"Ku Shulan died dirt-poor, to the last exploited by an abusive husband and by greedy county officials. I discovered her living in the poorest and most remote part of Shaanxi. I purchased some of her work before I left the village, wanting her to possess money without the knowledge of her husband and local officials.

"Before we were able to open the exhibition we were accused of illegal 'women's rights activism', our institutions were closed down and our offices sealed off. We no longer had access to our work. Ku Shulan's paper-cuttings and poetry, as well as the many artefacts we had already been able to collect were confiscated.

"After long negotiation, I left the country, having negotiated a compromise which allowed return to China and continuation of



Maria with her desert island choice – her father's briefcase

research on the understanding that I would resign from my positions at the college and the museum."


In 1998, Maria came to Oxford as a Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research on Women (founded in 1983) then part of Queen Elizabeth House. This became the International Gender Studies Centre and, in 2011, moved to Lady Margaret Hall.)

"Two things happened which led to my decision to stay in Oxford instead of returning to Asia," she explained. "My mother underwent a heart operation from which she never properly recovered. And the centre was in need of a new director. I like to think that what was a decision made under great emotional pressure became, in the course of time, just right – for everyone concerned."

The time had come for Maria to make her choice of desert island object, art or book.

"It would have to be my father's briefcase,"

she said. "It is the most important and meaningful gift he gave me, just as I entered primary school. He had used this briefcase when he started his career in education, and it is forever associated with that little girl who looked out of the window, waving her father goodbye, as he made his way to work, his briefcase, students' essays and books tightly clutched under his arms."

It seemed only fair that the briefcase fulfil its purpose and contain a few things like books and photographs of paintings by her father and brother, so she will be reminded of her father, mother and her beloved Wolfram. 

■ For information about IGS activities held during their 30th anniversary year go to www.lmh.ox.ac.uk/igs/home.aspx
For information on this year's Oxford International Women's Festival go to www.oxfordwomen.co.uk/events/oiwf-2013