

Marie Blaschke

Marie Vandewart Blaschke (1911-2006) was born to a music-loving Jewish family in Berlin, and she became an accomplished cellist at a young age. When the Nazis rose to power, she, like all Jewish musicians, was only allowed to perform in Jewish orchestras. She became engaged to the social worker Alfons Blaschke who, although not Jewish, was persecuted by the Nazis because of his political beliefs as a pacifist. The couple was lucky to find a farmer in Hawkes Bay who was prepared to sponsor them. Marie arrived in New Zealand in and in 1941 she received news via the Red Cross of the death of her parents in the Holocaust. She and her husband settled in Auckland in 1977, where she took up a post as a cello teacher at the university.

The Vandewart family lived in an apartment block in the comfortable Berlin suburb of Westend, close to the giant Siemens factory where Eugen had a position as a marine electrical engineer. Marie and her sisters attended Westend School and then a nearby comprehensive high school.

The Vandewart's family life centred around Eugen's job, music lessons and chamber music for all the family, weekend Ausfahrten (excursions), holidays in the countryside and visits to the grandparents. None of the family identified themselves as Jewish. It was a life typical of thousands of assimilated middle-class Berlin Jews, and somewhat shielded from the horrors of the First World War, the turbulence of the 1920s and the ensuing depression.

Marie had been a talented and hard-working cellist from an early age. In the early 1930s she entered the famous Berlin Hochschule für Musik where she studied cello and other music subjects. Her teachers were Otto Niedermeyer and Enrico Mainardi, and she also took private lessons from Emanuel Feuermann, one of the greatest cellists of the century. In 1933 she was invited to a party at an older student's house, where she met and fell in love with the boarder, a social work student from Düsseldorf. His name was Alfons Blaschke.

Their subsequent courtship took place against the rise of Nazism in Germany. Marie was expelled from the Hochschule along with other Jewish students and teachers, but kept up a full musical life of playing and teaching within the Jewish cultural organisations which sprang up. Alfons and Marie soon realised that they would not want to, nor be able to stay in Germany together. Emigration was impossible for Marie's parents because of Eugen's defence-sensitive work, and Eugen only sanctioned the children's departure after a brief incarceration in Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

Marie and Alfons decided to try for New Zealand after meeting two New Zealanders in Berlin and, having consulted an atlas, deciding that it was far enough away from the madness of Europe. Marie, Eva and Gertrude were able - after much effort - to obtain exit visas and sponsors, in Marie's case sponsored by a sheep farmer from Gisborne. They left as refugees for England in April 1939. There they briefly joined Alfons who had clandestinely left Germany a few days before his military call-up. Then Marie left in an Italian ship and arrived in Wellington in July 1939. The outbreak of war a couple of months immediately put an end to any possibility of Alfons being able to join her, so she was on her own.

However, Marie quickly made friends with fellow refugees and native New Zealanders alike, particularly among a group of university-based liberals. In particular, the Einhorn, Haiselden,

Easterbrook-Smith, Munz, Long and Beaglehole families became lifelong friends, and although many of the original group of immigrants are dead now, the friendship continues among the next generation.

Marie's sponsor had kindly released her from farm-girl duties in Gisborne (she never met him until much later), and she rapidly plunged herself into musical life in Wellington, teaching and playing a wide range of concerts. To begin with, she also played some of the early live broadcasts of classical music, but a ban on broadcasts by 'enemy aliens' put a stop to that. She also worked in the University library and had a brief and, one suspects, not illustrious career as a nurse-aid at Wellington Hospital.

A seminal musical event was the formation of the Dorothy Davies Trio in the early 1940s: Marie, violinist Erika Schorss, who had also been a student in the Berlin Hochschule, and Dorothy Davies, an already well-known New Zealand pianist who had studied in Germany. This trio played widely during the war and immediately after, including concerts in many other New Zealand cities. We have met many older people who still remember these concerts, not just for the quality of the music but perhaps as much because events like them were so rare.

Marie received news via the Red Cross of the death of her parents in late 1941 in the Holocaust. She never spoke much of this to the family, but she did talk about the whole of her first stay in New Zealand as having an unreal, holiday-like quality about it. In the circles she frequented, she was subject to relatively few restrictions and remarkably little anti-German sentiment during the war. Surely, however, anxiety and grief must have not been far beneath the surface. As offspring of our mother, in the following decades we were aware of the unrest and anxieties that somewhat belied the image of the gracious and serene artist, hostess and confident musician.

Contact had been maintained with Alfons throughout the war by letter (always in English, and of course censored, the censor being none other than Reuel Lochore, the husband of Dorothy Davies). The war ended but it was still not possible for Alfons to get a passage to New Zealand. So in May 1946 Marie traveled back to Europe. On arrival in London, she and Alfons were promptly married and Anthony born barely nine months later. The new family lived in a series of children's camps and old apartments around London and Birmingham, following Alfons' various social work and union jobs. Marie's domestic duties were relieved by only a little playing and teaching.

Return to New Zealand was always the intent and the family were able to leave for New Zealand in March 1951. On arrival back in Wellington, Marie seemed to fit in with her old set straight away. Alfons missed his old life in Europe (especially England) more. Paul was born in 1952. The family moved down and around Karori in a series of flats, and the then in 1957 came the purchase of Marie and Alfons' first home in Fairview Crescent in Kelburn, only 6 years after the family's virtually penniless arrival from Europe. They brought a big old Chevrolet and Marie painfully learned to drive in 1960, this for the purpose of being able to drive once a week to teach at Chilton St James school in the Lower Hutt.

Marie was a foundation member of the Alex Lindsay String Orchestra, playing as principal cellist and sometimes as soloist. They played right around the country. She was the cellist with the Francis Rosner Quartet, one of New Zealand's first regular string quartets of professional players. There were also many other chamber music performances, tours with

Donald Munro's fledgling New Zealand Opera Company, occasional stints in the cello section of the National Orchestra (later the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra) and chamber music and solo recordings, including the first New Zealand performances of the Bach cello suites.

In 1961 Marie applied for and was subsequently offered the position of cello teacher in the new Executant Music Course in the Music Department of Auckland University. Her boss was Professor Charles Nalden. Originally her colleagues were Winifred Stiles and Michael Wieck, soon joined by Janetta McStay, a friend and colleague from Wellington. Later teacher/performer colleagues included Glynn Adams, Phillip Todd, Ladislav Jasek, David Nalden, Mary O'Brien, and Brian Sayer.

Marie was on the staff for 15 years at the Music School, teaching scores of students, playing in scores of concerts and preparing students for scores more concerts. Some of those concerts were truly memorable. These activities spilled over into the Cambridge Music Schools led by Ron Dellow. Marie's first sabbatical in 1968-9 included a spell with Dr. Suzuki in Matsumoto, Japan, which had a great influence on Marie's subsequent teaching.

The Raumati Road house was enlarged in 1964 and remodeled to accommodate music-making and gatherings in abundance. Plenty of red wine was accidentally spilled on the carpet. But Marie's and the family's life was not all music. There were regular weekend excursions to the Waitakere Ranges, holidays on Kawau Island, around the Hokianga and many other places. There was a further sabbatical leave in 1973-4 and then several subsequent trips after retirement in 1976.

Another strand of Marie's life was politics and peace. Marie's beliefs were streaked by liberalism and humanism, sometimes perhaps, in the views of her sons, to the point of naivety. We remember accompanying Marie and Alfons on CND marches in Wellington in the 1950s. In Auckland the gambit included anti-apartheid, and anti-Vietnam war marches. Marie became an active member of the Women's International Movement for Peace and Freedom and later did a lot of voluntary work for Greenpeace and the Green Party.

Marie's retirement from the university in 1976 changed the balance of her activities but not their intensity. Her teaching continued privately into the 1990s and as Marie got older her pupils seemed to get younger. She enlarged an earlier interest in early music, acquiring and becoming proficient on a range of viols. She encouraged Alfons to build a succession of keyboard instruments – harpsichords and a clavichord – and these were regularly lifted into the boot of the Maxi and carted around to various drafty early music venues in Auckland and further afield.

Her interest in the environment grew – she celebrated her 80th birthday by planting trees in the reserve across Upland Road from the back drive of their home, and also in the dunes at Piha. She and Alfons walked the Routeburn and then the Hollyford Tracks and got the car stuck in remote locations on numerous occasions. Concert-going continued unabated, as did the after-match functions. The Blaschkes were notorious for being the last to leave these functions.

Marie took pleasure in the restoration and viewing of her and Alfons' print collection, the nucleus of which had been gathered by her father Eugen in the 1920s. But gradually and almost imperceptibly, life slowed down, in spite of Marie still wanting to be involved in

anything and everything. Alfons grew more dependent and frail, and the walking group, the chamber music and the trips to see friends became somewhat more constrained.

Alfons' stroke in October 2000 was a major blow for all of us, but particularly for Marie as she struggled on for another couple of years fitting in daily and often twice daily visits to Caughey Preston Hospital as well as keeping up the house and as many activities as she could manage, sometimes more. Much to the relief of everyone except herself, she failed to renew her driving licence at the age of 92.

Alfons' death in mid-2002 of course left a huge hole in her life. Finally the realisation by Paul and Anthony – not shared by Marie – that she was not coping in the house, which led to her move to the Remuera Lifecare Centre in Meadowbank, and eventually to the sale of the family home at Raumati Road which had been the setting of so many wonderful memories for us all.

Marie never settled in properly at Remuera Lifecare Centre, in spite of being the model of fitness and vitality among the residents, and of the care and good humour of the staff. Who knows whether the anxieties that plagued her in these last years were a long-delayed reaction to the real dangers and sadness she had experienced in the first half of her life?

When, late last year, the walks to her beloved Waiatarua Wetland ceased, we knew that this was the beginning of the end. Marie's final month at Caughey Preston Hospital, two doors from the room where Alfons had ended his days, was a mercifully short and well-cared for stay. She died in the presence of her family, at peace after a long life of constant, sometimes restless achievement and striving, and much achievement and satisfaction in her music-making and her life in the family of humanity.

Paul and Anthony Blaschke