



## The Museologist, Writer, Educationalist Alma S. Wittlin (1899 - 1990)

A Preliminary Research Report

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My current research concerns the life and work of Alma S(tephanie) Wittlin (born 23 March 1899, Lemberg/Lwow/Lviv, Galicia/Poland/today Ukraine; died 31 December 1990, Palo Alto, California/USA). In this short article, written after my term at SCEMS, the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Education and Museum Studies, in Washington, DC (Award of Merit Fellowship, March - May 2011), I briefly chart out the aims and approach of this project, render an introduction to Wittlin's museum-related achievements, and also report on how I came to be concerned with her (scientific) biography.

My predominant interest in this study is in Wittlin's museum work (this reflects my own professional background), more specifically her practical and theoretical work on the conditions and possibilities of communication and learning in museums and exhibitions, topics and themes with which Wittlin engaged during the second half of her life, and in the English-speaking countries. However, a more thorough treatment will allow a larger contextualization, also taking into account other developments and life-circumstances, for example the re-orientations, that were required, by Wittlin's moves from the German-speaking countries to other continents and societies, and also her engagement in several disciplines (art history, philosophy, museology, writing, translating, pedagogy, and educational research). Wittlin grew up in pre-World War I Habsburg Austria. In Vienna, she attended a progressive secondary school and gained academic training and a university degree at a time when this was not regarded as a normal (matter of course) thing for women to do. Wittlin's multi-disciplinary orientation may be seen as a result of her life's sharply divided phases, caused by personal circumstances, including emigration and difficulties finding appropriate employment, but also by her diverse interests and talents. Today, Wittlin is best known in the English-speaking peer-world as a distinguished historical museologist, but is hardly remembered elsewhere.

A master file for the teaching personnel of the University of California, Santa Barbara, which Wittlin filled out in 1965, provides a quick overview of the first two thirds of her life (1). It begins at the threshold to the 20th century, when she was born as the daughter of a family of land owners in (or near) Lemberg (Galicia), that is to say in the 'far away' border land of the then Habsburg realm. It leads to Vienna, where she spent her adolescence and the years of university studies. After receiving her PhD (art history) in the mid-1920s, volunteer work took her to Berlin, to the then Kaiser Friedrich Museum (today's Bodemuseum, part of the Sammlung Preussischer Kulturbesitz on the Museumsinsel, Berlin). The administrative document of the University of Santa Barbara did not ask Wittlin to refer more closely to her biography. Thus, the

years in Europe are mentioned cursorily, merely as a list with dates, places and institutions, and almost exclusively in connection with her schooling and university years and careers.

Although trained as an art historian, Wittlin, in the 1930s, first found international recognition as a writer. However, being Jewish, and actively engaged in P.E.N., the international writers' association, Wittlin's career was not to be continued in the German speaking countries. She was forced to leave Austria as a consequence of the Nazi-regime politics and immigrated to England in 1937. She started her second career in Cambridge, at the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, in the years of the Second World War, (re)entering the museum world with pioneering educational work and with a seminal museum publication (1949). From the UK, in 1952, Wittlin left for the USA. There (most probably through the years 1953-57) she was in Santa Fe and Albuquerque (New Mexico), then in Cambridge (Massachusetts), in Washington DC, and from the early 1970s in California, seeing out her final years in Palo Alto. It can be assumed that she spent more than just a brief time-span in each of these places and regions. In the 1960s and 1970s, besides working as a research fellow, Wittlin taught and lectured (contracts with universities, adult education and teacher training institutes), and lastly, she engaged in experimental research in learning and communication.

### **Alma S. Wittlin - some notes on the research and intellectual environments**

My investigations will follow and make visible the traces of an almost forgotten writer, museologist and scholar, reconstructing her life story, her work and influences. This will be done with extensive research concerning all known primary and secondary literary sources, using Wittlin's own writings as well as that of others, encyclopedias, original documents, archival materials and also interviews of relevant persons. So far investigations carried out in institutes and archives (Austria - historical register data Vienna: Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, University of Vienna; Great Britain, USA) (2) have furnished a wealth of dates and facts, and also some more substantial information and details on Wittlin's occupations and travels. Important materials are in the holdings of several universities.

The collection of materials (in fact Wittlin's 1984 bequest) at Stanford University, Palo Alto, California was consulted in early 2011. As expected, this constitutes only a small collection of diverse types of documents and materials. (3) However, it seems to include Wittlin's most precious (mostly) visual material, museum-related photographs (carefully annotated and related to placements in her books). Wittlin had used these for her publications of 1949, and again in 1970. Other documents and miscellaneous materials may be found in archival holdings elsewhere - one being at the Schlesinger Library (Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Boston and Cambridge/Massachusetts) in Cambridge, MA.

The research undertaken recently when with the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. (where for brief periods Wittlin was engaged as a consultant or educational advisor), threw up new materials that still have to be worked through, integrated, and interpreted, also in the search for further clues and better insights.

From a number of documents it must be deduced that the years in England were not crowned by success for Wittlin, whether on an economic or on a social level. In order to make a living she wrote articles for journals and newspapers and gave lectures on art history and

related topics. But she was also a recipient of stipends from (among others) the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL) indicating that she did not do too well economically.

From autumn 1941 onwards, most probably until the end of the war, Wittlin carried out museum educational experiments at the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology in Cambridge (supported by the British Federation of University Women) and started to work on a dissertation in English (*The Museum*). Commissioned by the British Association for the Advancement of Science, she became involved in a study concerning the rebuilding of museums after the war, and in another commission, this time from the Department of Education (Section on educational research), she worked on an investigation of the possibilities for using museums and exhibitions as learning opportunities for deprived youngsters. (4)

Wittlin (then almost 50 years old) had managed to become an important voice in the discussions concerning the history, mission, and function of the public museum, in the general rebuilding phase after the Second World War. In 1949 Wittlin was one of five UK delegates who attended the General Assembly of the International Council of Museums in Paris (5). Contacts made on this occasion led Wittlin to the USA and, in the long run, also helped establish interest in her two widely read volumes on museums: *The Museum: Its history and its tasks in education* (1949) and *Museums: In search of a usable future* (1970) (6). These two publications, seen by some as standard works when it comes to discussion of museum issues, are still referred to today, in 2004, one chapter was re-published (as a reprint) (7).

Other than rendering an overview and critical appraisal of the written (literary and scientific) contributions of Wittlin's, this investigation will also witness the engagement of an ardent scholar, her diverse interests and the historical context, which in that 'mixture' led to a variously 'broken' scientific career.

Feminist research has been pointed out (8) that there are certain aspects characteristic for female biographies that will also have to be specifically considered in this project. Among these are: The use (more or less voluntary) of several, and varying names. This is a phenomenon (not untypical and in contrast to 'male' norm-biographies) which is also found in Wittlin's biography; Relationship is a category and dimension normally central in female biographies - usually these show the structural importance given to social contextualization and also the financial and social dependency most often experienced by women; As is often the case with female biographies of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the informal networks and the (socially) hidden work are of highest importance, but easily overlooked from a 'male-norm'-perspective, usually part of the 'hidden curriculum'.

In the decades of the 'modern' early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the structuring of a female biography through studies, training and earning a living were relatively new phenomena in the European context. In those years such was still often leading to, or the course taken in consequence of a 'broken' biography. It is hoped that this research will deliver a telling document pertaining to the roles women played in the production and transfer of knowledge in the first three quarters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to the biography of an individual, also pictures of cultural and political times are rendered, and with this glimpses of influences decisive for scientific climates, for advancement in teaching and research.

## Alma S. Wittlin's Writings

To make a living, from the early 1930s on, besides giving lectures and translating, Wittlin published in various journals, specialising in topics of art and culture. She wrote essays on historical and contemporary art, art history, applied art, and architecture, with an emphasis on the historical background and on sociological, as well as psychological aspects.

Wittlin's doctoral thesis, *Altspanischer Kirchenbau* (Church architecture in ancient Spain), was published in 1930 (9). But she became better known as the writer A. S. Wittlin with her first historical biography, *Isabella: Begründerin der Weltmacht Spanien* (1936) (Isabella. Founder of the Spanish Empire). This topic may have been prompted by her studies of art history, archaeology, philosophy and anthropology (in today's terms a mix close to cultural studies), and quite obviously also benefited from her knowledge of the Spanish language, history and geography that she had gained in that context. *Isabella* came out in German with the well-established Swiss publishers, Rentsch, and was soon translated into four more languages. (10)

Wittlin's sound knowledge of several countries, their languages, and diverse cultural heritage seems to have given her the possibility to take into account different interests and a variety of approaches in her writings. She was linguistically versatile and knew how to develop a thrilling story with the aid of changing rhythms and perspectives. When employing visual material, she found unusual, expressive and convincing images. She made use of relevant overviews, as well as pertinent source material and original quotations, and devoted great care to the choice and crediting/referencing of these. With an increasing acquaintance with processes of writing, editing and publishing, she developed self-reliance and individuality. These must have been crucial experiences for her work as (acting) editor of the International P.E.N Bulletin of Selected Books, a post she held from 1950 to 1952.

Wittlin's innovative approaches in the areas of museum communication and learning in museums, it is to be assumed, stemmed (on the one hand) from the progressive atmosphere of her school and student years in Vienna at the Eugenie-Schwarzwald-Schule and the Vienna School of Art History and, on the other hand, from her experiences in the Europe of the interwar years, especially the time in Berlin with a liberal environment and a vivid and fluent exchange of knowledge and ideas.

With this background, and especially with her work in the UK and influential international contacts made soon after the Second World War, Wittlin had found decisive scientific input for new practical and theoretical approaches to her museum and education research topics. In the USA - starting anew when nearing age 60 with these ideas - she seems to have met enthusiasm, but not have found easy circumstances, and not the best practical possibilities for her projects and ideas.

## Wittlin's museum publications

Wittlin's first museum publication, *The Museum. Its History and its Tasks in Education* came out in 1949 in the series, 'International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstruction', edited by Karl Mannheim (11) for Routledge & Kegan Paul, Limited, in London. It is a book of 297 pages and 42 illustrations, with a biographical table, a list of collectors, and a general glossary of places and terms.

Wittlin starts with considerations relating to fundamental questions of the functions of museums in society, and their roles in educational work. In these respects, Wittlin saw European museums as poorly developed organisations, and often without function. She wrote in 1949:

Two considerations have prompted the writing of this essay. Firstly, the conviction that the unsettled conditions which have been and are still developing increasingly in contemporary society will not find a balance until general education, both as to its content and to its method, has been radically revised and adjusted to existing reality, and, secondly, the belief that the museum - the method of communicating, information and experience by the visual means of the exhibition and the appeal of the three-dimensional object - holds special potentialities for the fulfilment and the furtherance of educational requirements. (12)

Wittlin develops an encompassing etymology of the word 'museum', and critically and convincingly addresses the political, social, ethical and material qualities inherent in museum collections and in museum and exhibition activities. She describes some types of museums according to their respective tasks: for research, for students, for the general public, as well as special courses for museum training and arrangements for children. Wittlin also reports on her experimental work at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, with differing exhibition arrangements, devised for studying the reactions of visitors, and testing their applicability for various audiences, in a qualitative approach using interviews and questionnaires for interpreting visitor reactions and behaviour. As has been pointed out by George Hein, 'a model for current practice in visitor studies' (13), she also contextualized the historical objects on show, and introduced contemporary materials into the displays in order to provide easy clues for understanding and interpretation.

Wittlin's second seminal book on museums, *Museums: in Search of a Usable Future* (14), is a revised version of the 1949 publication. It is written for an American readership, with a new part concerning developments in the United States, and is also laid out differently. This book, with 300 pages and 50 illustrations, came out in 1970 with MIT Press, with a foreword by S. Dillon Ripley, then Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. The organisation of the material is new and particular, but nevertheless follows strict factual and practical criteria. The blurb on the flap of the book jacket states:

The hottest current issue, as Dr. Wittlin calls it, is ecology, the study of the interdependence of all living things not only amongst themselves but with the organic environment. The museum's role in this issue is postulated and discussed.

This is an issue which today - more than 40 years after the publication of the book - has not lost topicality; on the contrary, it has become more urgent than ever before.

It was through such clairvoyant, courageous and critical judgements, but also through her practical work, that Wittlin gained the respect of her contemporaries and colleagues, and it is these qualities which we consider valuable, and still inspiring.

### **Alma Wittlin and Museum-(Hi)stories**

Early in the 1980s, there were two publications in the rich holdings of the museum studies section of the Library of the University of Leicester (GB) (15) which were especially difficult to obtain. These sought-after books were the two museum volumes by Alma Wittlin - most important reading assignments for museology-students (16). As such I too had become a Wittlin fan, and, like many of my fellow students, I was impressed by the way this author addressed museum matters in a systematic, and critical presentation, and by her views on the social functions of museums. Wittlin's explicit emphasis on 'museum communication' related well to my own specialisation and personal interests. I took notes and quoted Wittlin extensively in my MA thesis (17).

About ten years later, when engaged in my doctoral research (18), I worked with the material in the 'Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection' of the Department of Typography and Graphic Communication, University of Reading. I was not particularly surprised that I should come across correspondence between the two Neuraths and Alma Wittlin in this archive (19). Both Wittlin and Otto Neurath were centrally concerned with the museum as a social institution, that is to say with its usefulness for society at large, and both were hostile to elitist exclusivity, as was expressed in the following:

The reconstruction of the museum to a functioning public institution is not a matter of concern merely to curators: it is the responsibility of the educationalist, of every socially minded person, of every citizen conscious of the implications of our time. (20)

In the chronology of my Wittlin studies there followed a (first) talk with my highly esteemed colleague George E. Hein, Professor emeritus at Lesley University in Cambridge (Mass.). Hein, a well known figure in museum educators' and museologists' circles, had for quite some time - since the 1970s - been particularly interested in the pedagogical concepts ('progressive education') current in Red Vienna (21). Not unintentionally, I mentioned the name of Alma Wittlin in a conversation, and was very anxious to know his reaction. It emerged that the 'Museologist/Pedagogue' George Hein, too, had undertaken some formal research, and could point me to a further important link, an eye-witness even, who had visited Wittlin in 1985, namely, Mary Ellen Munley, another prominent museum communication specialist (22). Both have since generously shared their Wittlin reflections and findings with me.

## Summary

As mentioned at the outset, the goal of this research is to produce a well founded and scientifically oriented biography of Alma Stephanie Wittlin (1899-1990). It will take Wittlin's publications and writings as its starting point. Together with other documents and materials these will be used as key elements for recounting her story. The quite recent reception with which Wittlin's work has been greeted in publications by other museum researchers and practitioners, will help to complete the picture.

What might be expected of such a biography? On a very general level, it will offer a thorough treatment and readable presentation of a specific female biography: a description of the life history, the manifold occupations, receptions and influences of the writer, museologist, and scholar Alma S. Wittlin. This will help a better understanding of the processes within which this female career developed, specifically under conditions of forced migration (shoa), and the stipulations of the varying and clearly distinct social contexts.

In addition, it will also be possible to show how Wittlin, possessing a very broad professional basis, tried to make use of her European intellectual heritage in her research and teaching in American museum and college situations. Finally, it is my sincere hope that this biography of a researcher fundamentally interested in a democratic and egalitarian use of museums, will help to foster present day museum discussions.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> University of California Santa Barbara – Personal File, Form 1501 (4 pages, signed by Alma S. Wittlin, on July 7, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Among others at: The National Archives, Kew/GB; Society for the Protection of Science and Learning, SPSL-Files, Bodleian Library, Oxford/GB. A systematic evaluation and interpretation of these documents has not yet been achieved.

<sup>3</sup> Disappointingly, not all items listed in the catalogue entry (on site and digitally) were available for study in the Stanford University Library. A seven-page guide and description of the slides which Wittlin had donated to Stanford University, together with the other materials, could not be traced during my term there, in early 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Cf.: Bodleian Library (Oxford) SPSL-files, Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 194/1-9.

<sup>5</sup> Cf.: Wittlin, 'Preface and Acknowledgements', in: Alma S. Wittlin, *Museums: In search of a usable future*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1970: xvi. According to the rules and regulations of the International Council of Museums of those early years, there was a maximum of 5 delegates per country represented to attend the General Assembly.

<sup>6</sup> Alma S. Wittlin, *The Museum: Its history and its tasks in education*, International library of sociology and social reconstruction, Series editor Karl Mannheim, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949; Alma S. Wittlin, *Museums: in Search of a Usable Future*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1970.

<sup>7</sup> Cf.: Wittlin, 'The Twelve-Point Program for Museum Renewal', in: Gail Anderson (ed.), *Reinventing the Museum, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2004: 44-60.

<sup>8</sup> [www.biografia.at](http://www.biografia.at) (accessed: 24 June 2010)

<sup>9</sup> A. S. Frischauer, *Altspanischer Kirchenbau, Studien zur Spätantiken Kunstgeschichte*. Berlin and Leipzig: Verlag de Gruyter, 1930. Wittlin had been married from 1921-1930 to Paul Max Frischauer. This publication appeared under

her married name, Frischauer, as did her translation of a novel by Stella Benson, *Goodbye, Stranger* (Macmillan and Co, London, 1926) from English into German (*Fremd wie mein Geliebter*, Zsolnay Verlag, Berlin, Leipzig, Wien, 1930).

<sup>10</sup> Alma Wittlin, *Isabella: Begründerin der Weltmacht Spanien*, Rentsch, Zurich and Leipzig, 1936, 440 pages, 14 plates (came out in an English edition as: *Myself a Goddess: A New Biography of Isabella of Spain*, Nicholson & Watson, London, 1936; translated from the German by Mary L. Goldsmith (also in Hungarian 1936, Spanish 1938 and Italian editions). The second historical biography, *Abdul Hamid: Shadow of God*, followed in 1940 that is to say in the very early phase of the Second World War, translated from German into English by Norman Denny and published by John Lane in London.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Mannheim (March 27, 1893, Budapest – January 9, 1947, London) was one of the founding fathers of classical sociology.

<sup>12</sup> Wittlin 1949: xiii.

<sup>13</sup> Hein 1998: 44-6.

<sup>14</sup> Wittlin's second volume *Museums: in Search of a Usable Future* (1970, MIT, Cambridge, Mass.) is listed in the "AAM Future of Museums Bibliography" (<http://www.futureofmuseums.org/reading/bibliography.cfm>; accessed June 24, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> The University of Leicester is one of the British universities founded in the prosperous years after World War Two and offered exceptional studies, for example the School of Museum Studies, the oldest full course in museology (since 1966).

<sup>16</sup> Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (Professor emerita, School for Museum Studies, University of Leicester) referred to Wittlin's publications as 'at that time, the only readable books' (personal communication, August 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Kraeutler, H., 'Museum Education in Austria: The Present State and a Proposal for Future Development', Master Thesis Museum Studies, University of Leicester, unpublished, 1985: 6-11, 15, 27, 63).

<sup>18</sup> Kraeutler, H., *Otto Neurath: Museum and exhibition work. Spaces (Designed) for Communication*, Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Correspondence between Otto Neurath (1882-1945) and Alma Wittlin dates from 1943-44, that between Marie Neurath (1889-1985) and Wittlin was written shortly after 1945 (Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, Department of Typography and Graphic Communication, University of Reading).

<sup>20</sup> Wittlin 1949: 222.

<sup>21</sup> Hein, G. (1975), 'The social history of open education', in *Urban Review*, 8: 96-119; Hein (1998), *Learning in the Museum*, Routledge, London and New York.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Ellen Munley, influential museum consultant, has been engaged in seminal publications on topics of museum communication, public value, and management matters (American Association of Museums), active in The Museum Group (<http://www.museumgroup.com/Munley/munley.htm>).

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