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## *Blue Crystal* by Martha Hofmann

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Paul Shlichta  
*Crystal*

Martha Hofmann  
*Kristall*

And oft my heart becomes, in wakeful night  
Blue crystal, grows in caverns hid from light—  
And layers form, arrayed in mystic line  
Many-faced, starlike, rising through the vein—  
And hears the earth-deep rhythm and refrain,  
Surging with power, at the tap-root: Time.

### *Commentary*

Martha Hofmann was born into an opulent Jewish Viennese family in 1895. She grew up to become a poet, classics scholar, journalist, and ardent Zionist. In 1927, her first trip to Palestine ended tragically with the loss of her right arm in an auto accident. The Nazi annexation of Austria led to her emigration to Palestine in 1938 and to the deaths of her mother and sister in concentration camps. She returned to Vienna in 1948 and resumed her teaching and writing there until her death in 1975.<sup>1</sup>

Although her poems, published in eight books, were awarded several prizes, none are now in print. The present poem, included in her first collection (*Das Blaue Zelt*, Vienna: Saturn, 1934) and anthologized in *Österreichische Lyrik der Gegenwart* (Vienna: Saturn, 1934), remained in print only because of its appeal to scientists.

The first four lines evoke a resonant response in anyone familiar with the growth of crystals. Karl Przibram, one of the founders of modern solid-state physics and a pioneer in the coloring of crystals by irradiation, was particularly interested in the brilliantly blue color of rocksalt crystals found in a few potash mines. Therefore, he chose Martha Hofmann's poem as the epigraph of his *Verfärbung und Lumineszenz* (Vienna: Springer, 1953). The English

<sup>1</sup> A detailed biography and bibliography can be found at: [http://www.academia.edu/21383759/At\\_the\\_Crossroads\\_Martha\\_Hofmann\\_A\\_Zionist\\_Pioneer\\_from\\_Austria](http://www.academia.edu/21383759/At_the_Crossroads_Martha_Hofmann_A_Zionist_Pioneer_from_Austria)

translation of his book (*Irradiation Colours and Luminescence*, Pergammon, 1956) kept the poem in the original German.

Translating it into English verse with the same meter and rhyme scheme was surprisingly easy. This was partly because, as in a classical Latin style, each line of the poem divides into two phrases. Each phrase allowed some latitude of near-literal translation, so that by cutting and fitting, lines of equivalent metrical form could be fashioned.

Hoffman's other poems lie in undeserved obscurity on the dusty shelves of Austrian libraries and used-book stores, where, hopefully, future readers and translators will find them.

Source text:

Przibram, Karl. *Irradiation Colours and Luminescence*. Pergammon, 1956, epigraph on page xiii.