

Photo Exhibition

April 1 - June 30, 2025

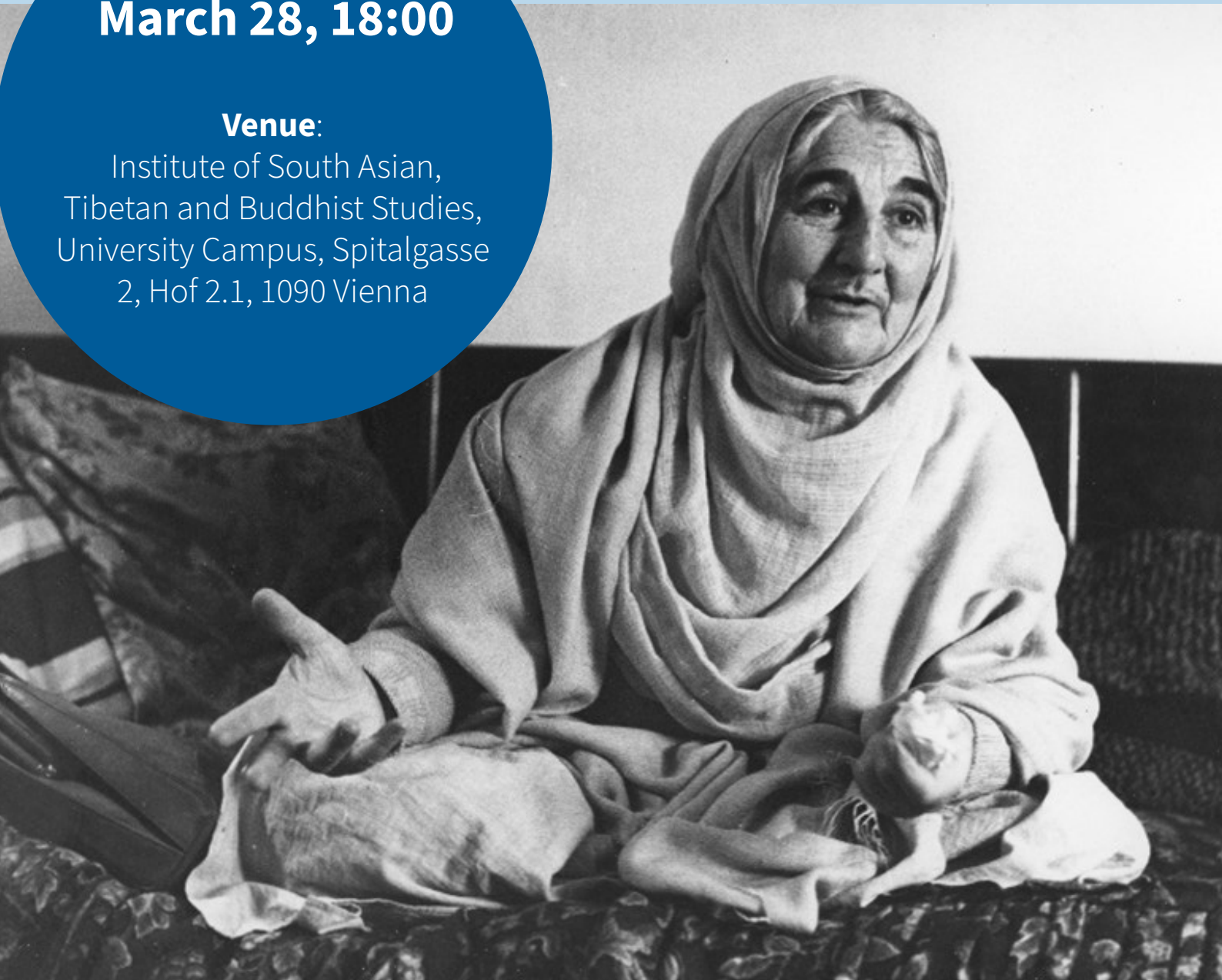
Mira Behn in Austria (1960-1982): Inspired by Gandhi and Beethoven

Curator: Martin Gaenzle, University of Vienna
based on the holdings of the Mira Behn Archive,
South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies Library,
Vienna University Library

Opening:
March 28, 18:00

Venue:

Institute of South Asian,
Tibetan and Buddhist Studies,
University Campus, Spitalgasse
2, Hof 2.1, 1090 Vienna



austrian cultural forum^{del}



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She is widely seen as the „ultimate disciple“ (Thomas Weber), one of the most active and devout followers of Mahatma Gandhi. And yet, Madeleine Slade alias Mira Behn has had a life of her own, following the path of her teacher but also pursuing her own projects. In the decade after Gandhi’s death she worked in the Himalayan hills, setting up various ashrams and experimenting with sustainable forms of agriculture, animal husbandry (esp. cattle breeding) and forestry. She became an early ecological activist and eventually an important inspiration for the later Chipko movement.

But what is lesser known is that Mira Behn, after returning to Europe in the late 1950s, spent the last part of her life, more than two decades, residing in the woods close to Vienna in Austria, and continuing her spiritual journey. Usually the reason given for this life decision is her love for Beethoven and his music. And indeed, this was an important part of her life which originally had brought her to Gandhi and to which she deliberately returned: she not only cherished listening to Beethoven’s compositions in Austria – she also began writing a book on the composer. However, it would be misleading to conclude that she somehow turned away from Gandhism. In fact, for Mira Behn, Gandhi’s philosophy and Beethoven’s music had something crucial in common: a unique kind of spirituality.

The exhibition documents this later period in Mira Behn’s life. The photos speak for themselves, but, of course, they do not tell the whole story. Therefore, observations by contemporaries have been added to provide more contextual information. For further research, the Mira Behn Archive at the University of Vienna, where her immaterial bequest is stored, can be consulted.

