



The Émigré Publishers and Book Artists in Britain

Weissenborn's address book contained the names of some well known people: writers like Victor Bonham Carter as well as luminaries from the printing world such as Stanley Morison of Monotype fame. There are also a number of German names among the contacts: Moritz Felsenstein, Erich Kahn, Erich Mendelssohn, Joseph Suschitzky, Georg Him among them. Others again may have been Anglo Saxon names which were hiding the identity of German refugees: Peter Midgely was in fact Peter Fleischmann, a fellow internee with Weissenborn on the Isle of Man. These German names belonged to people who formed the immigration that has been referred to as 'Hitler's gift to Britain'. Weissenborn was one of the some 80,000 refugees who came to Britain between 1933 and the outbreak of the World War Two in September 1939.¹ While Communists and Social Democrats were the first targets of Nazi action, as were for example trade unionists and others engaged in left wing politics, the majority of the refugees (also known as 'émigrés' or 'exiles', sometimes with different implications) were either Jewish themselves, or, as in Weissenborn's case, married to Jews. As Goebbels famously remarked, he decided who is a Jew, thereby enabling the Nazi authorities to remove from office people with one Jewish grandparent. Religious affiliation played no part in the programme, so that the fact that Weissenborn's Jewish wife Edith Halberstam was non-practising was irrelevant to their policy of removing staff from institutes of higher education.

¹ Information on immigration from Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews 1933 1948*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

In order to understand the impact that the arrival of the German speaking refugees from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia had on British life, it is important to have some idea of what prevailed in the world of art and book production (the two fields in which Weissenborn made his greatest contribution) in the time period before the emigration – in the 1920s and early 1930s. The Weimar Republic is associated with tremendous creativity in the arts, particularly in film, theatre, music and the visual arts. Book design was one of the most exciting areas in the first two decades of the twentieth century: typography, page design and illustration were all radically changed. Book design competitions proliferated; bibliophiles built up collections of beautifully crafted books, artists were commissioned to illustrate works of fiction. Not only was Weissenborn born into this feverishly creative period but he grew up in Leipzig, the heart not only of German but of European book production. It was in Leipzig that the *Börsenverein* came into being in 1825, the body representing both publishers and booksellers, with no exact equivalent in Britain. Their journal, the *Börsenblatt* was issued sometimes as often as daily before World War Two, an indication of the importance of the book trade in Germany and featured publicity and reviews of books, trade notices and classified advertisements for jobs in publishing and bookselling.

Weissenborn studied and worked in book production in this atmosphere of creativity. His own playful experiments with typographical ornaments are very much in keeping with the spirit of the Weimar age: throwing away the old rule book of symmetrical book design. In typography, one of Weissenborn's areas of expertise and an enduring interest, Germany had experienced changes that would have been impossible elsewhere. This was because of the existence of two main scripts – the 'blackletter' also known as Fraktur or Gothic – and the Roman. The need for modern fonts for mechanised presses at the very end of the nineteenth century had led to a mushrooming of new designs. Different schools of design became associated with the art colleges of different cities. For example, one of the most influential of all typefaces was designed

by Paul Renner 1878 1956 in Munich 'Futura'. This typeface was the first sans-serif to be widely used and is still today much admired, as well as modern looking.

When the National Socialists came to power in 1933, cultural issues were decided by leading figures such as Alfred Rosenberg who, among his many other roles, was also Head of the Centre of National Socialist Ideological and Educational Research. Such leaders hesitated, when choosing an official party typeface, between the traditional 'Germanic' Fraktur types on the one hand, and the modern,



Gothic and Roman typefaces



progressive Roman types on the other, finally plumping for the Roman, stating that the Fraktur was of 'Jewish' origin! What is true is that German Jews had long been active in the printing and book trade, although historically they were excluded from many other trades and activities.

One of the most influential typographer-printers was Rudolf Koch 1876 1934 whose role model was the Englishman William Morris. In Germany, Koch himself was admired and emulated as a craftsman and artist. Koch's star pupil was Berthold Wolpe 1905 1989) who worked and taught at the Offenbach School. After his enforced migration to Britain, Wolpe designed his font 'Hyperion' for Stanley Morison, who was typographer for the British printing giant, the Monotype Corporation. Morison was to provide support for Weissenborn when he was trying to find work in England.