Chapter 6

Lost in the Transnational:
Photographic Initiatives of Walter and Helmut Gernsheim in Britain

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A glut of studies, including documentaries in diverse media, reveal seismic shifts in mid-twentieth century British culture. Art, literature (at all levels), music, education, the press, and fashion are among a host of phenomena that scholars and other commentators identify as fomenting and indicative of such changes. Visual culture, in this regard, has come under increasing scrutiny. Although historians have recognized the significance of key figures with central European origins, as well as groups of émigrés from Nazi Germany, as having had a tremendous impact on creativity in Britain, photography has elicited limited attention.

The current chapter will not try to fill this lacuna through detailing Jewish contributions. Its aim is to suggest that reigning interpretations of photography’s history are challenged when one considers ethnic and religious difference and transnational networks. Between 1935 and 1950, relationships between the fine arts and photography in Britain underwent profound transformations beyond technological advances. Historians and others concerned with British culture have scarcely recognized the place of Walter and Helmut Gernsheim in such processes. The Gernsheims did not simply transplant what they practiced and knew from Germany to Britain. Partly due to their marginal status, they adapted and re-created ways of conceiving photography’s role in, and relationship to, the fine arts, and photography’s place in a universal, humanistic culture.

Walter and Helmut Gernsheim were both embodiments of the transnational. Born in Munich, they migrated to London, from Nazi pressure, as young
men. But beyond the fact that they operated in different national/cultural contexts, they were ardent believers in “transnationalism” in an ideological sense. To the extent that he articulated his politics, Helmut Gernsheim supported the movement for a federated system of world government, which was loosely identified with pacifism. “I am,” Gernsheim wrote in 1951, “a keen Federalist and have recently been elected to the Committee of the Parliamentary Association for World Government.” It strove “(1) To promote the realisation of the necessity for world government among parliamentary associations throughout the world; (2) To seek ways of uniting all the forces moving towards world government”; and “(3) To assist by all possible means the creation of a world authority, based upon the rule of law.”

His correspondent, Hugh Harris, then the literary editor of London’s *Jewish Chronicle*, wrote that he was “in close touch with that and similar movements, as I am the Hon. Secretary of the Jewish Peace Society.” The other known manifestations of Helmut Gernsheim’s politics were his attempts to ensure that the Allies remained vigilant about postwar Germany being demilitarized, and for former Nazis being prevented from influencing German society and politics. Walter Gernsheim was so averse to nationalism—to any degree—that he struggled to accommodate himself to even the British wartime government. The brothers lived their lives, in large part, as intermediaries between cultures. Both attempted to connect their present and future with ages (and countries) distant and past, and they likewise sought to serve as interlocutors between public spheres that were not determined by conventional national boundaries. Walter Gernsheim was, literally, a translator before and after his career as an art dealer and photographer.

In the best of worlds, or at least a world without the Nazis, both men would have remained in Germany and settled into art history as a vocation. When first in Britain Walter ran an art gallery. He realized early on that there was little chance of a refugee making it as an art historian in 1930s Britain. Walter passed this insight to his younger brother, Helmut, encouraging him to learn photography. He inferred that the most practical way for a Jewish refugee to establish a livelihood in the arts in Britain was through photography. Each man not only entered the British arts scene but immeasurably enhanced it. In short: Walter pioneered and institutionalized a novel use of photography in art history. With his (first) wife he conceived of photographing Old Master drawings and selling them on a subscription basis, with the aim of serving a transnational scholarly community. As a refugee in Britain he began systematically photographing Dutch and Italian drawings, and illuminated manuscripts and prints of any origin, as a resource for scholars, museum profes-
sionals, and collectors. The meticulous cataloging dismissed the notion of “race” or essentialized national cultures out of hand. This is part of the reason why his collection, some of it dating from the 1930s, remains an immensely valuable source for scholars.

His brother Helmut, an immensely talented but still underappreciated photographer himself, was one of a small group who launched the field of the history of photography and systematic collecting of photography as akin to art. While Helmut sought to examine and focus attention on the achievements of British photographers, his work overall was transnational and immune to notions of a national or folk ethos. Combining the history of mechanics, optics, and chemistry, along with political, social, and economic history, Helmut Gernsheim’s studies of photography transcended national and even disciplinary boundaries. It is a supreme irony that in British society, where the word “brilliant” is overused, these path-breaking figures have no lasting memorial.

This is not to say, however, that they are utterly ignored. Helen Barlow, in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, is correct to note that “Helmut Gernsheim’s importance to photography cannot be overstated. The Gernsheim collection,” which is now housed at the University of Texas at Austin and the Reiss-Engelhorn Museum in Mannheim, “immeasurably enriches our photographic inheritance, and the scholarship that he built upon the collection was instrumental in establishing the academic history of photo-history.” Although Helmut is clearly more significant in the history of photography, Walter enabled Helmut’s career at crucial points, and was himself critical in integrating photography in fine arts scholarship. Compared to Helmut, who is not given enough attention, there is precious little about Walter. But in the summer of 1940, they both could be described as souls adrift.

Given the scope and complexity of their lives and work, this essay will concentrate on a particular moment when the youngest two of the three Gernsheim brothers were each at a juncture in which previously unimagined, transnational approaches to photography would emerge as their respective vocations. Let us begin with Helmut Gernsheim at the port of Liverpool in the summer of 1940. By that time he was an expert photographer and already quite accomplished as a “colour man” mainly for advertising purposes, and as a practitioner of the kind of neue Sachlichkeit photography pioneered by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy. Despite the National Socialist regime, Helmut had a mostly excellent experience in his professional training in Munich. In Liverpool, he boarded the ship Dunera, on which he came close to losing his life in the North Atlantic. If he had a camera with him, it was certainly confiscated or stolen. The rickety ship’s capacity was sixteen hundred persons, but well over two
thousand were aboard. Most were Jewish refugees packed among “genuine prisoners of war”—around two hundred Italians and two hundred and fifty Nazi soldiers. After being damaged, the Dunera was diverted to Australia, despite being ill-equipped to undertake such an arduous trip.

Helmut had not wished to share the dismal fate of his brother who was interned on the Isle of Man since early June 1940. Four years later, after he had begun work at the Warburg Institute as a photographer for the National Buildings Record project, Helmut implored Fritz Saxl, the director of the Warburg who succeeded Aby Warburg, to try to relieve the distress of his brother and sister-in-law. The Warburg Institute had been founded in Hamburg and eventually was incorporated into the city’s university. Although it never defined itself as a Jewish institution, it always had a significant number of staff and guiding lights who were Jews, and it owed its origins to the largesse of the famed Warburg banking family. It also was known, correctly, as a progressively minded
Fig. 6.2. Photogr. Abt. (“photography department”) Hermann Tietz [department store], Munich. These are the Gernsheim children, 1915: Hans to his mother’s right, baby Helmut in her arms, and Walter below, dressed as German soldiers in World War I. Hans is father of sociologist Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim and father-in-law of the late Ulrich Beck. Private collection.
academic research center that did not subscribe to any particular political ideology, and certainly rejected the kind of racism as practiced by volkisch “scholars.” Therefore the Warburg Institute was immediately threatened after the Nazi takeover, and when it was transplanted to Britain, it evinced the character of a “Jewish” institution.

Specifically, Helmut implored Saxl that the kind of photographic work in which his brother and his wife were engaged should be seen as contributing to the war effort. Saxl had, in fact, been instrumental in steering the Gernsheims on this course years before. Walter Gernsheim’s situation, however, was complicated. Part of the reason why he was left to languish for so long was because there was little understanding of who he was and what he did as a photographer. Although “the Gernsheim corpus” is now held in the highest esteem, the work he had undertaken since 1937 did not make any impression on British authorities in the 1940s. He seemed to be an eccentric or oddball.

Walter arrived in Britain in 1934 as a refugee from Nazi Germany. He probably had been baptized a Protestant. Upon entry to Britain, when requested to specify his religion on a curriculum vitae (CV) template, given the choices of “Jewish Orthodox, Jewish Reformed, Protestant, Catholic, [and] Other,” he opted not to choose any. Karl, the father of Walter, Helmut, and their older brother, Hans, was “a historian of literature who taught in an honorary capacity at the University Munich.” He was born a Jew and converted “to Protestantism before his marriage.” Karl, though, was among the less celebrated of the high-powered “hardy tribe” of the Gernsheims. (Helmut Gernsheim himself used this expression emphasizing the family’s unusual longevity.) The family’s most revered relative was Friedrich Gernsheim, a composer and scholar of music whose career occupies the greatest share of Helmut Gernsheim’s idiosyncratic version of the family history, which he published in the Leo Baeck Institute Year Book. Interestingly, Friedrich was possibly the most Jewishly engaged of Helmut and Walter’s relations, except for the smattering of rabbis. Friedrich’s legacy initially was most pronounced in Israel, but in the last decades he has been rediscovered as an important nineteenth-century Jewish composer. For the Gernsheims, attaining fame, wealth, and renown in matters scientific as well as the arts was the rule rather than the exception. But in the 1930s, the larger family group ran the gamut from so-called full Aryans, such as Walter and Helmut’s mother, Hermine Gernsheim, née Scholz, to “full” Jews, to those with only traces of Jewish lineage. An uncle, one of Hermine’s brothers, was “a committed Nazi.”

Given that Walter Gernsheim’s future father-in-law, Fritz Landauer, was famous as a modernist synagogue architect, it would have been odd to call
himself a Christian. He had, in a way, reentered the Jewish fold by becoming engaged to a Jewish woman.\textsuperscript{21} When Walter began studying art history, archaeology, and Slavic philology at the University of Munich in 1928, he had no reason to think his heredity would make a difference. But most of the professors with whom Walter studied were unlikely to enhance his academic career abroad. This partly explains his turn to photography.

Walter had worked under three distinguished scholars. The first was Erich Berneker, an ethnic German, born in St. Petersburg, who became a leading Slavicist.\textsuperscript{22} He died in 1937, and may have been ill a few years previously. The second, Ernst Buschor (1886–1961), was a historian of the art of antiquity. In the early 1930s, Buschor was enamored of Nazi thought, like most German academics. It has been noted, however, that his major work published in 1942, \textit{Vom Sinn der griechischen Stadbilder},\textsuperscript{23} did not seem to be tainted, to any great degree, by Nazi ideology.\textsuperscript{24} Walter’s more problematic mentor, who also raised eyebrows for his former student Nikolaus Pevsner,\textsuperscript{25} was Wilhelm Pinder (1878–1947). Pinder was an innovative architectural historian, especially in his attempt to show similarities between living organisms and architecture. His articulation of the essence of German art,\textsuperscript{26} though, recalled the antisemitic thought of Richard Wagner. Pinder was inconsistent as far as Nazi ideology and his relations with individual Jews were concerned. He did not share the distaste of Hitler and others for so-called degenerate modern art, and some suspected that his Nazi sympathies were lukewarm.\textsuperscript{27}

But Pinder vigorously championed the idea of the “Volk” in his academic work while it was fashionable. Even more troubling, though, was the lead role he played in publicly denouncing art historian August Liebmann Mayer.\textsuperscript{28} Pinder’s aim, at that time, was Mayer’s expulsion.\textsuperscript{29} Mayer escaped to France in 1934 but was caught in the Nazi net after the German occupation and murdered in Auschwitz.\textsuperscript{30}

Despite mentioning Pinder in his academic lineage, Walter Gernsheim could not use him as a reference in 1935. He must have felt secure enough that Buschor and Berneker would supply him with positive evaluations, along with Rudolf Kömstedt of Cologne, less famous than the others, who apparently was not as smitten with Nazi ideology as was Pinder.\textsuperscript{31} The final two names he listed became far more significant in the re-creation of his career: Professor Erwin Panofsky, who was then at Princeton University, and Professor Fritz Saxl of the Warburg Institute London.\textsuperscript{32} In retrospect, the most interesting thing about Walter Gernsheim’s presentation of himself during his early months in London, 1934–35, is that there is no mention of any expertise or even interest in photography—which would become the thrust of his career.
When Walter arrived in London in 1934 he was engaged to be married to a Jewish woman, daughter of the architect Fritz Josef Landauer, Gertrud (also Gertrude), whom he apparently met in Munich. As of 1935, under “permanent address” Walter listed “The Warburg Institute,” which probably was the closest thing he had to a home. He was living off of £2 weekly from the Academic Assistance Council, the forerunner to the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning. This was the main body that would attempt to render him aid. Although Walter said he would “like best to stay in England,” he indicated that in addition to the United States, he was willing to relocate to “the Far East, the U.S.S.R., and South America.”

He soon realized there was little chance he could make a living as an academic art historian, a path that had already stalled in Germany due to mounting antisemitism. He had no income or official position to report for 1932–33.

With the assistance, if not outright suggestion, of Fritz Saxl, Gernsheim sought to provide for himself by merging his knowledge of art history and photography. A role was created for him that involved photographing works of art for scholars other than himself, and for academics generally. In early November 1934, Walter Gernsheim thanked the Academic Assistance Council for sponsoring his “subsidiary work at the Courtauld Institute,” apparently the cooperative photographic venture between the Warburg Institute and the Courtauld. Saxl was instrumental in arranging Gernsheim’s initial appointment as well as its extension. A long memo in 1935, apparently from the Council, depicted Gernsheim’s job “prospects” as dismal. He was “determined to continue studying art history. No money. Lives on charity of friends and this is not assured for any specific time.” There was “[a]bsolutely no use for Gernsheim to return to Germany he says as his family could not support him and he could not find work. [C. M.] Skepper [from the Academic Assistance Council] suggests re-training. Gernsheim protestant faith so Palestine, he says, out of the question.”

Asserting that he was “Protestant” at this point probably was a means of eliminating the option of Palestine in anyone’s mind, to which he was totally uninterested. (His brother Helmut, in contrast, claimed to admire the Zionist movement.) “Gernsheim wants to earn money teaching languages. German, French, Italian, Latin. Also German literature. Skepper said A.A.C. not likely to help.” Refugees who could teach languages were plentiful.

But the mention of “retraining” most likely encouraged Saxl to suggest that Gernsheim move in a photographic direction. He was, it seemed, at the end of his rope. Given that this was, at best, a tenuous proposition, Walter assumed that he would have to find another means to earn a livelihood, which he would do by founding an art gallery. Not surprisingly, support for this came
from a Jewish connection arranged through Saxl—Otto Schiff (1875–1952), who was one of the most effective advocates for refugees and exercised his own private charity with discretion. Walter Gernsheim himself might not have known that critical funds came from Schiff. Later, however, when trying to reestablish the “Photographicum” project, he specifically mentioned that “Mr. Otto Schiff took a personal interest in our scheme. . . .” As proprietor of a gallery, Walter held exhibitions of “Old master drawings” (February 1 to March 6, 1937), “drawings of the Bolognese school” (May 10 to June 19, 1937), and “representative drawings by living French sculptors” (June–July 1938). He also exhibited photographs of his brother, Helmut, in October 1937.

Most likely this was the first time, in London, that old master drawings and avant-garde photography had been displayed in the same space. Many of the photographs shown were probably those Helmut used in his first book, *New Photo Vision* of 1942, the ideas for which had germinated in Australia, to be discussed below. Not even the Gernsheim brothers themselves appreciated how revolutionary this was. London had no equivalent to either Alfred Stieglitz or Julien Levy, who were the first to present photography with painting and sculpture. It seems that no one bothered to review it.

In writing about architect Fritz Josef Landauer and his industrial-designer son, Walter Landor, both of whom are praised for their creativity and modernist sensitivity, there is only a passing reference to Fritz’s daughter, and Walter Landauer/Landor’s sister, Gertrud. It stands to reason, however, that given her father’s association with the Bauhaus and international movements, Gertrud may have imagined the potential for merging photography and art. She received her MA degree at the Courtauld in 1934, when the various photography schemes were launched. Certainly photography was significant in her father’s world. While in Germany, Walter Gernsheim increasingly employed photography in his research and trained himself with proficiency. As such, Walter and Gertrud may have come up with the idea together.

In over three years of internment on the Isle of Man, Walter Gernsheim tried repeatedly to gain his freedom and return to photographing art, for “the Ministry of Labour” to “consider to give permission for us now, to pursue the work we were doing in common interest with The British Museum and other institutions. You will remember that this work is based mainly on export—I hold a War Office Permit [allowing for labor as well as exporting]—and therefore [it is] in the national interest not only on the strength of its documentary value but also from an economical point of view.” Walter argued that the same logic behind the National Buildings Record project, which sought to de-
Fig. 6.3. Photograph by Helmut Gernsheim in *British Art and the Mediterranean*, ed. F. Saxl and R. Wittkower, Section 32–33, 34, “Henry III. Detail of bronze effigy by Torel.” Gernsheim writes in *Beautiful London*: “In Edward the Confessor’s Chapel is the earliest royal effigy in the Abbey. It is the work of William Torel, a London goldsmith (1291–92) and is of gilded bronze. The king’s crown, ornamented with trefoils, was formerly adorned with jewels.” This image was reproduced in several publications, including Helmut Gernsheim, *Beautiful London* (London: Phaidon, 1950), plate 40. It seems that Gernsheim had to climb on top of the effigy in order to produce such a spectacular photograph. He was probably the first to ever perform such gymnastic feats in England in the service of photography. (Courtesy of Warburg Institute.)
tail the architectural and artistic treasures of Britain while they were threatened by Nazi bombardment, should be applied to his enterprise. In addition to claiming Otto Schiff’s support, Walter stated that “Sir Kenneth Clark, who was a subscriber for the National Gallery, would be able to extend his help to me.”

Clark had, indeed, been the key establishment figure in the transfer of the Warburg Institute to London, motivated mainly by his esteem for Aby Warburg. But his sense of fraternity was not unbounded. Clark did not offer the lifeline desperately needed by Stefan Lorant, an émigré photo editor, when he wished to remain in Britain. And Clark did not extend any effort to Helmut Gernsheim in the 1950s and early 1960s, when Helmut attempted to turn his photography collection into a center for the study of photography and its history. Clark believed it was unfortunate that such a fascinating subject was largely in the hands of a person he found “unattractive.” Besides having the taint of anti-Semitism, this assertion also was dishonest, in that Clark and others refused to give Helmut Gernsheim credit for conceiving of a field that simply did not exist in Britain before his arrival.

Fritz Saxl strongly confirmed that “[B]efore the war Mr. Walter Gernsheim and his wife had started a scheme under which they took photographs of old master drawings preserved in this country.” Although there is no sense of how, or how long it took to cultivate their clientele, Saxl elaborated that they had “a fairly large circle of subscribers, public galleries, and universities almost exclusively in the United States who were regularly provided with these photographs.” Even if Panofsky did not actively help, his name would have been meaningful as the preeminent successor to Aby Warburg in the United States. Possibly they were using the premises of the art gallery for photographic work, or the facilities of Gertrud’s father’s architectural firm. Their endeavor “was sufficiently remunerative for Dr. and Mrs. Gernsheim to earn their living.” The contemporary photographic enterprises focused on the history of art and architecture were intended mainly for the institutions in which they were founded, and in the case of what came to be known as Foto Marburg, nationally derived and focused. After the Nazi takeover, this branch of the university enthusiastically served to record and consolidate the plunder of the Third Reich. “Photocampaigns” devised by Foto Marburg for the Baltics and France were expressly antisemitic. It is telling, though, that their wartime photographic unit included thirty-five prisoners, that is, men and possibly women working as slave-laborers. We do not know anything about their fate. Gertrud and Walter Gernsheim’s project had no national boundaries in terms of subject matter, although business could not have been transacted with German universities, or with any institutions within the Nazi orbit, until after the demise of the Third Reich.
Ironically, Walter Gernsheim was arrested in June 1940 while he was on a visit to Aberystwyth, making photographs as specified in a government contract. The work, then, “came to an end.” Saxl contended, “[T]here is no doubt that this is an extremely valuable scheme, and its importance was acknowledged by a War Office permit which Mr. Gernsheim holds. It is of value not only to the American institutions which through him received material that would otherwise be inaccessible to them, but also to this country, from the point of view of export.”

When Walter and Gertrud Gernsheim were released from internment November 15, 1944, they had no means of support, and the Ministry of Labour had “not given definite written permission to continue” their “former photography of Old Masters,” although a recommendation was expected to be forthcoming from Kenneth Clark. Few pulled more weight. To the Ministry of Labour, the Gernsheims believed themselves to be “entitled to exceptional treatment in the matter of freedom from labour controls.”

The records do not specify exactly why the authorities changed their minds, but the intervention of one particular interested party, David Daube, seemed to matter. Daube, who is largely forgotten in Britain, also was a refugee from Nazi Germany. He too was interned, albeit briefly, on the Isle of Man. Daube wrote to “Joe” Skemp at the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning, whom he knew personally. Skemp, a “keen Baptist” and scholar of Greek philosophy, began in 1936 to take an active role in refugee relief. At that time Skemp was at Manchester University, while remaining a fellow at Cambridge, as was Daube. Daube asked that the Gernsheims be allowed to pursue their research. “Mrs. Gernsheim is an old friend of my wife’s. We hope that after so many years of hardship and isolation, it will be possible for them to resume the work for which they are so highly qualified.” Gertrud Gernsheim was the daughter, and Daube’s wife, Herta Aufsesser, (likely) the sister, of Jewish refugee architects from Germany. Like Gertrud’s father Fritz Landauer, Hans Aufseeser, later Tindall, brother-in-law of Daube, was a distinctly modernist architect and designer.

Skemp returned to the Gernsheims and learned that Walter would now be willing to teach classics as his form of “service.” Strenuous effort was expended to find him a position. Part of the reason for Skemp taking such pains to deal with the Gernsheims, who tried everyone’s patience, was due to the efforts of Daube, who since 1939 was “elected to a teaching fellowship” in law “at Caius College, Cambridge.” He was at that moment one of the rising stars at Cambridge and considered one of the sharpest minds of the academic legal community. Daube had a traditionally observant, Orthodox background in Germany and was perceived to be a voice of profound moral authority.
not known if the Gernsheims knew of this intervention. Throughout his life, Daube was dedicated to alleviating all forms of injustice. Like many other Jewish refugees who loomed large in interwar Britain and the immediate post-war period, Daube is rarely recalled, in part because he resigned the Regius Chair in Civil Law he had held in Oxford, since 1954, in order to assume a professorship and directorship of the Robbins Hebraic and Roman Law Collections at Boalt Hall, the University of California, Berkeley, law school. He was revered as one of the stellar “refugee scholars” at Berkeley. Daube’s influence, even in the 1940s, reached far beyond Jewish concerns. He was responsible, among other lasting achievements, for “work on the New Testament” from a legal-historical perspective “that was revolutionary.”

In any event, within less than three years the reestablished “Photographicum” boomed. This was, after all, a time of great expansion for American universities, as the GI bill meant that thousands of ex-servicemen would have the opportunity for higher education. In 1948, Walter Gernsheim wrote a letter to the College Art Journal. It was a way to publicize the project and also to castigate those who had not yet joined the bandwagon of the “Corpus Photographicum of Drawings.” Its confidence and authority could not be a more striking contrast to his utter despondence as an internee. This letter was apparently the first and last time he would address a broad public. “A fellow art historian confessed to me the other day that his work was seriously hampered by the inaccessibility of part of the drawings in his specialized field, whilst he found it very difficult to obtain photographs. So he asked me if I could think of any source he had not tapped yet. And there I was, having the whole material he wanted, and having found it as difficult to know about his work as he did to learn about mine.” Gernsheim correctly surmised that this was a two-way problem. Not only did he need to locate the possible institutions and clients interested in his service, but he had to figure out a means for people in the field to “discover” him.

Gernsheim found that he had to confront the blinkered idea of many scholars who in the course of their research thought they had gathered everything, “the specialized scholar who thinks he already has made a survey of the whole material in his field. Well, the work of no artist has been more exhaustively published than that of Dürer, yet only a few months ago, in a public collection, I photographed for the first time a Dürer drawing completely unknown in the literature.” Gernsheim admitted that “it is not always easy to get to know about all the existing material in a collection, even if all the desired information is readily given. I was hunting up and down a museum through various store-rooms and wings for a quattrocento drawing, the existence of which was known
to me. And when at last it had been pronounced untraceable, I found it in an inconspicuous place—on the wall.” Not worried about being taken as immodest, he asserted that “a surprising number of early Renaissance drawings have come to light through my work.” He self-consciously attempted to enhance and expand the field. Many Renaissance artists were “well published, but many were totally omitted,” and there were “unreproduced versos of reproduced rectos.” This sounds very simple, but it took someone to act on it. The fronts and backs of things deserved to be photographed, as they often contained important data or images. This was similar to his brother Helmut’s epiphany of having statues and buildings cleaned before taking their photographs. After one knows of it, it sounds absurdly obvious.

As had been the practice at the Warburg, Gernsheim stressed that scholars needed as much detail as possible. Concerning major artists, now scrutinized by growing numbers of students, “it is essential to make photographs available to all, to save the individual scholar the task of writing to all of the collections each time, or of travelling long distances, in order to find out at last that the drawing he was after had nothing to do with his artist; to enable him to make a program beforehand and to sift the essential from the unessential; and in many instances, to give the only documentary evidence of the existence of a drawing, which in our troubled age has become a cultural responsibility.” To be sure, it was a means for Gernsheim to make money. But this appeal for “cultural responsibility” and the need to spread scholarly resources as far and wide as possible was supremely transnational. Simultaneously, Gernsheim also was taking up the mantle of the Warburg Institute (in eschewing any “national” form of interpretation) and the democratizing efforts of scholars and even art patrons such as Paul Cassirer from before the First World War.72

But if this was all so important, such a vast advance that made the work of scholars more efficient and comprehensive, why the plea? Gernsheim could not admit outright what he knew: that photography, even as a means to better and more creative scholarship, was not as respectable as it should be. The reason for the relative ignorance of his enterprise, Gernsheim wrote, “lies in the very conditions of the undertaking. As I have no financial backing from any institution, the scheme ought to be self-supporting on the subscriptions but alas it is not; the subscriptions up to now covering only part of the expenses. So, with the funds at my disposal, having the choice between going ahead with the scheme at a loss—or publicity for the scheme, I chose the former hoping that in the end work will win.”73

One may assume that the project, while quite successful until the 1990s, was able to reap immense benefits with the advent of the internet. As of the
twenty-first century, scores of major universities and art centers house the collection. By 1954, Gernsheim’s sweep included the Warburg Institute, the “British Museum, the Louvre, the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence, and the museums of Besançon, Dijon, Lyons, and Rouen.” In the United States, at least four institutions carried complete sets: “the Cleveland Museum, the Frick Art Reference Library,” and under a shared arrangement, “the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress and the National Gallery” in Washington, DC.74

It seems that Gernsheim resumed his career as an art collector and dealer as well, in conjunction with the photography project. In 1976, he purchased Michelangelo’s Study of a Male Torso at Sotheby’s in London for £178,200, which was then “about $318,214, a record for an old master drawing at the time.” In 2005, in his nineties, Walter Gernsheim put the drawing on the market, with an expected sale at Christie’s in New York for around $4 million.75 The drawing, though, did not fetch the reserve price, with the highest offer of $3.2 million—but it does not diminish the ascension of such work. “Another Michelangelo drawing, The Risen Christ, sold at Christie’s in 2000 for $12.3 million, again a record for an old master drawing at auction.”76 It is remarkable to think that even the concept of an “old master drawing” would have barely registered in 1945, or even 1937, when the Gernsheims commenced the project. His foresight was incredible. One might say, though, that Walter Gernsheim helped to create the market for such work by giving it greater visibility and accessibility. In this case, the value of “the work of art through its mechanical reproduction” enabled its esteem, and even its cash value, to skyrocket. But while Walter and Gertrud Gernsheim languished at the Isle of Man and even after the end of the Second World War, the possibility to reestablish the project, and its potential to be a source of a decent livelihood, was an open question.

His brother Helmut saw no choice but to get away from London, and the country, in the midst of the Battle of Britain—in which he was neither invited nor allowed to serve as a soldier. He had an established profession, photography, but he was not in a position to render wartime service as an “enemy alien.” Helmut assumed that volunteering for an agricultural assignment in Canada would leave him in the good graces of His Majesty’s government when the hostilities abated.77 As Claude Sui has noted, the bizarre episode on the Dunera and the Hay camp helped fashion Helmut Gernsheim into the distinctive figure he was to become in the next decades in Britain.78 But he rarely spoke about this experience, and it is not mentioned in his substantial, sympathetic Dictionary of National Biography entry.79 Gernsheim did, however, dwell at some length on this in his interview with Val Williams, for the oral history of British photography project, in 1995.80
As mentioned previously, in the early years of Nazi rule Helmut Gernsheim studied art history. Overwhelmingly due to the advice of his brother, he learned photography, and specifically sought training in color photography. This was a field that was thought to be more open to those who had come to the country as German exiles, and by extension, a vocation that seemed relatively free of anti-Jewish prejudices. When the miserable Dunera finally landed in Australia, however, photography was not an option. The internees were there, after all, because it was thought that they presented a security risk. Everything of value they had on board was stolen by the troops “guarding” them. They would not, then, be free to use something like a camera—an instrument for subterfuge that was second only to a two-way radio or a firearm. But a prohibition from taking photographs did not take Gernsheim’s mind off of photography.

Later Helmut said that the Hay compound looked like a concentration camp, with an electrified fence, but its inmates were unmolested. Soldiers avoided entering the camp. It had, in fact, “been planned for Nazi prisoners.” Hay was tiny and insignificant, so remote from any metropolitan area, 750 kilometers west of Sydney, that that the term “isolation” did not do it justice. The extreme heat, parched desert environment, and sight of kangaroos made it even stranger. Although the conditions were harsh, there were a host of liberties offered to internees. Such excessively liberal perquisites were a result of the British having “admitted that a great injustice had been done to the internees” in the glare of Fleet Street. There would be no limit on the number of magazines and books an internee could receive, as long as these were deemed innocuous to censors.

Gernsheim had a number of friends and family members in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere, who were able to send him the books and periodicals he requested. Some of his relatives, especially in New York, were well-off and kept him supplied. One of his older cousins, Michael Gernsheim, who died in 1933, was a “founder-partner of the celebrated New York bankers Kuhn, Loeb & Co.” In addition to photographic journals, which would form the basis for much of his later work, he also received an English translation of Erich Stenger’s *Die Photographie in Kultur und Technik. Ihre Geschichte während hundert Jahren* (1938). There was a Jewish story here, as well, of which he may have been aware. The translator, who also wrote extensive additional notes, was Edward Epstean (1868–1945), who was translator for another seminal work, the *Geschichte der Photographie* (originally 1932) by Josef Maria Eder.

Knowing his obvious interest in photography, Helmut Gernsheim’s
friends and relatives also took the opportunity to send him books they thought would interest him. Perhaps there were times when they could not locate those he had requested. “A fellow prisoner,” Claude Sui writes, “lent him the paperback on photography by Lucia Moholy that he had already read in England.” He had known Moholy in London, who also landed there and made her living as a portrait photographer. Gernsheim suspected that she was more responsible than her famous husband for his revolutionary Photograms. Her book, along with the Stenger history, “awakened his interest in the history of photography and served as the basis for the lectures he held for camp inmates. These were his first steps as a historian of photography, and he began to take notes for his first publication, New Photo Vision.”

A number of refugees established study circles, gave lectures, and even offered lecture series that approximated adult education or even college courses. They built, Gernsheim recalled, “a kind of university.” The diversity of perspectives and life experience among the inmates was vast. Their ranks included “doctors, social democrats, Talmudists, anarchists, professors, communists, entrepreneurs, individualists, skilled artisans, Zionists, Catholics, missionaries for vegetarianism, artists of all varieties, and manual laborers” and a dozen or so professional photographers. Perhaps some of them were among the ten or twelve who attended Gernsheim’s classes. In his encounters with fellow internees he was pleased to learn that there was quite a lot of interest in photography.

He would not be able to teach photography, per se, as there were no cameras, equipment, and darkroom facilities available. (This later would be relaxed, and he would do some photography work at the camp.) But he could lecture about photography and lead discussions. Although Sui is no doubt correct that the camp ignited Gernsheim’s quest for the history of photography, it also is true that his twin passions for art history and photography coalesced in a different direction. It was in Australia, it seems, where Gernsheim began to formulate his complex view of photographic history and practice. The camp at Hay was not an environment where one had to watch what one said.

One of the few things that united the diverse Jewish captives was their sense of injustice at the hands of the British. Gernsheim certainly believed that Britain had a great and glorious photographic history, providing many of its path-breakers and most illustrious practitioners. Yet he found that its conventions since the First World War were retrograde, if not downright mediocre—especially compared to the scene he knew so well in Germany. His criticism and history became intertwined—which would become his trademark.

Given the books and other material he was regularly receiving, it became
clear to Gernsheim that he could offer not just a lecture but an entire course on photography’s history. Because most of the internees were from central or east-central Europe, largely middle-class Jews, it is little wonder they were sympathetic to Gernsheim’s perspective. One did not have to be an intellectual or critic to see Britain as backward. Especially with their bitter handling aboard ship, it would have been easy to agree that the British lacked sophistication in the arts generally, and photography in particular. One could hate the current state of Germany but still admire the photography it had bequeathed to the world.98

Shortly before embarking on his traumatic voyage, Gernsheim had an encounter with another “enemy alien” that was more catalytic than scholars and critics have realized. At the Huyton camp near Liverpool, Gernsheim shared a tent with Nikolaus Pevsner.99 Possibly they already knew each other. After all, Pevsner and Walter Gernsheim shared the same Doktorvater, and both Pevsner and Helmut later lived in London. There is not, however, much of a paper trail to their relationship. Yet they were quite close and seem to have influenced each other. Two examples of their explicit collaboration is Gernsheim’s book Focus on Architecture and Sculpture (1949), for which Pevsner provided the foreword, and Pevsner’s comments concerning Gernsheim’s plan for a national museum of photography in Britain.100

Most likely, in October 1941, Gernsheim was mainly imagining a book about photography in Britain. He ardently sought to become part of the British photographic establishment, but he also wanted to put it in its place. Over time, Gernsheim turned the history of photography into a cogent field. Although he did not entirely give up taking photographs himself, his energy was devoted increasingly to collecting photographs, curating exhibitions, and writing histories of photography. Helmut Gernsheim was aware that he was charting new branches of cultural production and knowledge. Of course there were others who had collected photographs. But when he began he did not know of anyone who had collected with an eye to assembling a historically representative collection and self-consciously erecting a comprehensive, transnational history of the field. These were, of course, complementary activities.101

As mentioned earlier, Helmut Gernsheim’s main institutional home during World War II, apart from the Dunera excursion, was the Warburg Institute. He had vigorously sought employment at the Warburg for three reasons: it already was known for offering assistance to refugees, as it did for Walter; the Warburg had established large-scale photography projects; and it was involved in the National Building Record program. His wife Alison had seen press reports about the latter and informed Helmut while he was still in Australia.102 Both of them assumed Helmut’s main occupation would be as a photogra-
At the end of December 1941, presenting himself to the Warburg Institute, Gernsheim summed up his career as follows:

I studied photography at the Staatslehranstalt fuer Lichtbildwesen in Munich for two years and took a final degree there with first class honours in all subjects, theoretical and practical. My main interest was always in architectural photography and art reproduction. Before I came to England in July 1937 I took a number of photographs, for the National Museum in Munich; for Dr. Schlegel, formerly of the Marburg Institute of Art I did a complete series of the Romanesque church of Altenstadt in Bavaria, a rather important work as it was brought before the highest authorities and gave occasion for renovation works which were carried out later on. I also collaborated with Dr. Walter Hege on his book “Bavarian Baroque and Rococo Churches” for which I prepared the Uvachrome Colour plates.

In this country I did all the photographic work for the Sabin Gallery, for Mrs. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Mr. Helmut Ruhemann, for the sculptor Georg Ehrlich and Ewein [Ervin] Bossanyi, occasional work for the Studio etc. I also have taken a number of photographs of St. George’s Chapel in Windsor which I should like to show you.

When war broke out I offered my services to His Majesty’s Government and was duly enrolled in the Central Register of the Ministry for Labour and National Service.

In August of last year I received an appointment as professor for photography at the Laboratory for Anthropology at Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A., but alas I had been interned in the general invasion fever in July and was on my way to Australia.

Four weeks ago I returned to this country from Australia having been released from internment by the Home Secretary for my special qualifications.

May I add in conclusion I am [the] brother of Dr. Walter Gernsheim, formerly of 5, Stratford Place, W. 1.\textsuperscript{104}
excellence. The photographs he produced under the auspices of the Warburg are only now being seen as utterly revolutionary, among the most creative architectural photography of all time.105

During their lives, the Gernsheims were often derided for self-promotion. This could be, however, the area where they possessed the least talent. Their incredible achievements did not translate into fame for themselves. Helmut in particular did not seem to understand how radical he was and the extent to which he threatened and unsettled the arts establishment in Britain.106 He was proudly British; his attempt to establish a center for photography was a way to express his gratitude to Britain for accepting him as a refugee and permitting him to forge a distinctive path for himself.107 Yet he could not conceive of a world where national boundaries were but the flimsiest and most ephemeral lines between humankind. Thirty years later, despite his collection and archives becoming prized possessions of prestigious institutions in the United States and Germany, and his brother Walter’s “corpus” enshrined as a mainstay of art history, both brothers in death are without a home country—transnational to the end.

NOTES

1. Helmut Gernsheim to Hugh Harris, May 6, 1951, Gernsheim Collection, Reiss-Engelhorn Museum, Mannheim, hereafter cited as R-E.
2. Hugh Harris to Helmut Gernsheim, May 8, 1951, R-E.
3. Helmut Gernsheim to the editor, New Statesman and Nation, July 18, 1953, R-E.
7. Most of the information about Walter Gernsheim derives from his file in the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning, as he attempted to find an academic appointment when he came to Britain in 1934 or 1935. See GERNSEIM, Dr. Walter (1909– ), File 1934–35, MS. S.P.S.L. 490/4, Society for the Protection of Science and Learning archives, 1933–1987, Bodleian Library, Oxford [hereafter cited as Walter Gernsheim, SPSL].
9. Walter Gernsheim, c.v. [first document in the file], SPSL.
10. There is no record of a book or even a dissertation, but there is a chance that his works were thoroughly destroyed along with other books by Jews.


17. Barlow, Gernsheim, DNB.

18. Helmut Gernsheim, interview with Val Williams as part of the Oral History of British Photography project, recorded in March 1995; C459/66. An online guide is available to this extensive interview, comprising nearly twenty taped segments, prepared by the author. This interview will be cited as Williams/Gernsheim, followed by the tape number; Williams/Gernsheim, tape 1.


23. Ernst Buschor, Vom Sinn der grieschischen Standbilder (Berlin: Gbr. Mann, 1942).


32. Walter Gernsheim c.v., SPSL.
33. Walter Gernsheim c.v., SPSL.
34. Walter Gernsheim c.v., SPSL.
35. Letter from Walter Gernsheim to the Academic Assistance Council, stamped 7 November 1934, dated November 5, 1934, with a note from Saxl attached, SPSL.
36. Memo on pink paper, unsigned, most likely from Saxl concerning Walter Gernsheim, dated December 14, 1934. Walter Gernsheim file, SBSL.
38. Memo on pink paper, unsigned, most likely from Saxl concerning Walter Gernsheim, dated July 17, 1936. “GERNSHEIM” across the top, Walter Gernsheim file, SPSL.
39. A note indicating the termination of a temporary research fellowship from Munich, covering the period from November 1, 1934, to January 31, 1935, undated note, Walter Gernsheim file, SPSL.
40. Unsigned memo on pink paper, apparently from Saxl, dated July 17, 1936.
42. Letter from Walter Gernsheim, August 22, 1944, Walter Gernsheim file, SPSL.
43. Card announcing exhibition, Walter Gernsheim file, SPSL.
44. See, for example, *Exhibition of Drawings of the Bolognese School: May 10th–June 19th, 1937* (London: W. Gernsheim, 1939), Warburg Institute Library.
45. Sui, “Chronology,” in *Helmut Gernsheim*, 334; Williams/Gernsheim, tapes 1, 7, and 22.
48. The name “Gertrud Landauer,” “MA 1934” appears in a spring 2004 newsletter of the Courtauld Institute, in an effort to trace alumni with whom they have lost contact, available at www.courtauld.ac.uk/newsletter/spring_2004/cafs.shtml.
49. Helmut Gernsheim, biographical statement, Helmut Gernsheim Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.
50. Letter from Walter Gernsheim, August 22, 1944. Walter Gernsheim file, SPSL.
51. Letter from Walter Gernsheim, August 22, 1944. Walter Gernsheim file, SPSL.
52. Kenneth Clark to Gibbs-Smith, November 21, 1950, Tate Gallery Archive, Tate Britain, Millbank.
53. Fritz Saxl to Esther Simpson, September 11, 1944, file of GERNSHEIM, Dr. Walter (1909–), File 1934–45, MS. S.P.S.L. 490/4, SPSL.
54. Fritz Saxl to Esther Simpson, September 11, 1944, file of GERNSHEIM, Dr. Walter (1909–), File 1934–45, MS. S.P.S.L. 490/4, SPSL.

56. Ibid.

57. Fritz Saxl to Esther Simpson, September 11, 1944, file of GERNSHEIM, Dr. Walter (1909– ), File 1934–45, MS. S.P.S.L. 490/4, SPSL.

58. Undated memo from J. B. Skemp, “Dr and Mrs Gernsheim,” handwritten, Walter Gernsheim file, SPSL.

59. Skemp to Walter Gernsheim, January 18, 1945, Walter Gernsheim file, SPSL.


61. David Daube to “Joe” Skemp, January 19, 1945, Walter Gernsheim file, SPSL.


64. Skemp to David Daube, January 22, 1945, Walter Gernsheim, SPSL.


66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.


70. Letter from F. J. Landauer to Fritz Saxl, August 31, 1944, Walter Gernheim file, SPSL.

71. Walter Gernsheim, “Corpus Photographicum of Drawings.”


73. Walter Gernsheim, “Corpus Photographicum of Drawings.”

74. Albert G. Hess, 531.


76. Vogel, “Michelangelo Drawing.”
77. Account of Albert Karolyi, “3.9 Belief on Dunera that Internees Are Heading for Canada,” in *The Dunera Affair*, 191–92.
79. Barlow, Gernsheim, DNB.
80. Williams/Gernsheim, tape 3.
81. Helmut Gernsheim biographical statement, HRC; Williams/Gernsheim tapes 2 and 3.
82. Sui, “Chronology,” 336.
83. Wilcynski, 199 and 201.
84. Williams/Gernsheim, tape 3.
92. Williams/Gernsheim, tape 3.
95. Williams/Gernsheim, tape 3.
97. Williams/Gernsheim, tape 3.
98. Helmut Gernsheim, untitled poem about the Holocaust, R-E.
100. Helmut Gernsheim, “Draft Suggestion for the Foundation of a National Museum of Photography,” 24 May 1951, first of three drafts with comments and edits by Pevsner, GC, HRC.
102. Williams/Gernsheim, tapes 2, 3, and 4.
104. Warburg Institute Archive, General Correspondence, H. Gernsheim to F. Saxl, December 30, 1941.

106. Helmut Gernsheim to Arnold Paucker, November 21, 1975, Leo Baeck Institute Archives, Center for Jewish History, New York.