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Review:

Jews and Photography in Britain, Michael Berkowitz

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Jews and Photography in Britain, Michael Berkowitz (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), ISBN 978-1-477-30556-0, pp. 392, \$45.

Michael Berkowitz begins the preface of his tour de force on Jews and photography in Britain with an unusual, but apt, anecdote. In 2012, he met Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, at Buckingham Palace thanks to an admittedly chutzpahdik letter that Berkowitz sent initially to the Queen, asking whether she or Prince Philip cared to comment on their close relationship to the photographer Baron (Baron Sterling Henry Nahum), who had died in 1956. At their meeting, Prince Philip not only confirmed his close friendship with Baron but also, displaying his own well-documented chutzpah, challenged Berkowitz with a few direct questions about his project: “Why Jews and photography? Aren’t Jews everywhere in the arts and professions? So what?” (p. xxi).

I hope that Prince Philip has by now read the book, because Berkowitz provides excellent, nuanced responses to each of his inquiries, and then some, in this richly detailed study of a woefully under-researched topic. Photography has fallen between the cracks of modern Jewish history, not only because it was not considered a full-blown art form, but also since so many photographers rarely self-identified as Jews or photographed explicitly Jewish subject matter. Moreover, historians of photography have tended to foreground national before ethnic or religious differences. But Berkowitz addresses these challenging gaps with a vast array of research culled from archives in London, New York, California, Texas, Germany, and Israel. He combines this research with his extensive knowledge of modern European history to show how Jewish photographers in Britain managed to harness their status as outsiders to succeed in the field in the face of both explicit antisemitism and unspoken prejudices. Impressively, he engages each photographer’s Jewish self-identification far beyond the typical offhand mention, making sure we understand “how Jewishness and attitudes toward Jews had informed their perspectives and may have boosted or blocked their careers” (p. 1). The result is a fascinating and insightful examination of a rich area of British and Jewish cultural history.

The introduction begins with the bold claim that “Jews were not necessarily the most revered, talented, or illustrious photographers, but they were prime movers behind nearly all things photographic in

Britain until at least the 1970s” (p. 1). In subsequent chapters we learn that British Jews cornered the market as studio photographers and in photojournalism and spurred the development of myriad other related fields, such as the collecting and curating of photographs, as well as researching, writing, and publishing about photography. Thus, the book’s chapters focus not only on studio portraiture and photojournalism in the early to mid-twentieth century, but also on efforts to raise photography’s status as a field in Britain. The introduction provides an instructive analysis of the pervasive links between Jews and photography in British popular culture. Discussing novels like Amy Levy’s *Romance of a Shop* (1888) and Louis Golding’s *Magnolia Street* (1932), and films such as Michael Powell’s thriller, *Peeping Tom* (1960), and Sandra Goldbacher’s drama, *The Governess* (1988), Berkowitz’s analyses show how Jews and photography provided rich fodder for the engagement of a wide range of issues including assimilation, financial ruin, sexuality, pornography, art, and the Holocaust. This exploration also provides an excellent foundation for the discussion of the significance of gender in the field, a topic Berkowitz makes sure to consider throughout the rest of the book.

Chapter One provides a thoroughly researched history of British Jews in studio photography, highlighting how immigrant Jews in particular excelled due to their ability to network in this new profession. It focuses on the Australian-born Henry Walter Barnett (1862–1934), whose Jewish contacts and connections, along with his intimate relations and business dealings with non-Jews, brought him success in Britain as he “strove for photography to be respected as both dignified labor and art” (p. 52). His life and work provides an excellent contrast for the successes – and failures – of individuals discussed in the next chapter on photojournalism. By deftly tracing Jewish networks beyond Britain, Berkowitz brings to light keen insights about the significance of this subfield. Only after the Second World War did photojournalism earn respect as dignified and authoritative from the efforts of photographers like Robert Capa, Stefan Lorant, Helmut Gernsheim, and Tim Nahum Gidal. Berkowitz highlights the degree to which these photographers’ Jewish self-identification influenced their involvement in the field, and how their status as outsiders – along with the tensions among them – significantly affected photography’s development in Britain. Their extensive correspondence adds depth, while Berkowitz’s critical analysis aids our understanding of their outlooks, opinions, and attitudes.

The next chapter turns to the Warburg Institute, the renowned research

centre devoted, *inter alia*, to the impact of images on cultural history. Although dedicated to non-Jewish topics, it was perceived as a Jewish foundation because of its origins in the Hamburg-based collection of the German-Jewish visionary Aby Warburg (1866–1929), which was relocated to London in 1933, as well as the Jews who later staffed it. Berkowitz expertly traces its development into a leading institute of academic research for the wider public that engaged Jewish difference in its utter rejection of race and British national chauvinism. As he notes, “The Warburg Institute was the anti-racist and anti-racialist institution par excellence. But no one seems to have noticed. This, it might be said, was one of the subtle ways in which its Jewishness was manifested” (p. 144). Berkowitz argues convincingly that, more than any other, the Warburg Institute elevated and professionalized photography in Britain, an aim integrally linked to its Jewish founders and staff.

Helmut Gernsheim (1913–1995), photographer, historian, and collector, is the focus of the book’s final three chapters. He too worked at the Warburg Institute. These chapters provide an engrossing mini-biography, explaining how Gernsheim’s status as a German Jewish refugee, as well as his prickly nature, remained central to both his career and his legacy. His status as a German Jew proved crucial for both his curatorial enterprises and his relationships with photographers and publishers. Gernsheim’s correspondence with well-known scholars of photography and art history like Beaumont Newhall and Kenneth Clark shows how the Jews’ status as outsiders in Britain undergirded the profession as well as Gernsheim’s attempts to historicize it. Careful analysis of letters and other documents reveals how Newhall’s philosemitism contributed to Gernsheim’s success. Yet Gernsheim faced much more negative attitudes at the Victoria and Albert Museum and from Kenneth Clark. Despite initial, polite interest and pleasant, superficial overtures, Gernsheim remained limited in his sphere of influence. “Gernsheim was simply not in the same club of men such as Clark, Hopkinson, and Gibbs-Smith. And as much as they respected Gernsheim’s expertise as a historian of photography, they did not accord it the same level of status, as equal to other fine arts, as did Gernsheim” (p. 221). For these reasons, Berkowitz argues, many have failed to give Gernsheim due credit for his contributions to the founding and fostering of the study of photography in Britain.

Berkowitz makes it clear that Gernsheim’s irritable nature often rubbed both Jews and non-Jews the wrong way. Nevertheless, Jewish difference nearly always played a crucial role in how others viewed him and his quest

to elevate the status of photography: he was either a quirky, charming, and inventive foreigner, or a crass, uncouth stranger foraying into a field where he did not belong. Berkowitz reserves his most damning condemnation for Britain's failure to secure Gernsheim's collection, on account of his status as a Jewish Other. Although he desperately sought a home in Britain for his vast collection of photographs, he found no willing financial backers; much of his collection is now at the University of Texas in Austin.

The central strength of *Jews and Photography in Britain* is its fine attention to detail and precision, which may also be its only weakness. The amount of archival material included is exhaustive and at times runs the risk of oversaturation. But the inclusion of so many important, interesting, and heretofore overlooked individuals and events far outweighs any negative effects. Moreover, Berkowitz's research is not merely comprehensive: it is also inspiring, pointing us to archives and collections for further investigation and persuasively making the argument for the need to take photography seriously as an important aspect of Jewish history. The beautiful colour and black and white photographs also helpfully illustrate the ideas and individuals in each chapter.

By the time Berkowitz returns to the relationship between Baron and the Duke of Edinburgh at the end of the book, it is clear why someone from the most rarefied circle in Britain might have become close to a Jewish photographer like him. Class played an important, if unarticulated, role in the success and failure of both individual photographers' careers, as well as in projects to establish a firm institutional grounding for photography in Britain. Jews were hardly the only group of outsiders in Britain to cultivate anxiety about their position in society but, because of the circumstances of their history, they were an emblematic one. Someone like Baron understood exactly what it meant to lack privilege but also knew how to fashion its image. Berkowitz's study provides proof of how Jewish difference affected the successes – and failures – of Jews involved in the rise of photography in Britain, and is in itself an excellent argument for the elevation of the place of photography in Jewish cultural history.

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