

Foreword

In a recent biography of a professional photographer and retoucher born in Hungary around the turn of the century, the poet George Szirtes remarks of his late mother that "photography runs right through Magda's life." She was roughly a contemporary of Gerty Simon, whose fascinating career is presented in this volume. In contrast to what we observe and learn here of Gerty's vast oeuvre, Magda's early photographs have been lost, and she was never able to reconstruct her career, as did Simon, in London. It is indeed telling that in Szirtes' story about his mother, the omnipresence of Jews, and Jewish women in photography, is simply taken for granted.¹

The notion of 'photography running through one's life' describes thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of Jews whose livelihoods were in the realm of European photography before the Nazi rise to power. To be sure, a hallmark of modernity since George Eastman's creation of the Brownie is the fact that nearly everyone takes photos and enjoys looking at pictures. Jews were no different. But in Europe, from the late nineteenth century until the Holocaust, Jews were far more likely to be found as photographers, picture-agents, editors, retouchers, and photo-lab technicians than their gentile counterparts--and there was a significant share of women among them. The fact that photography was on the edge of the arts, and of dubious respectability as a vocation for men, helped make it possible for women to break in. Jewish women such as Yva (Else Ernestine Neuländer, 1900–1942) and Ilse Bing (1899–1998) were among the Germany's most prolific advertising photographers, and even those unfriendly to Jews eagerly sought the expertise of noted portraitists such as Lotte Jacobi (1896-1990) and Elli Marcus (1899-1977).

It is only quite recently that the greatly disproportionate number of Jews in

European photographic trades, before the Holocaust, has been noticed as historically significant. A list compiled by the Rebekka Grossmann numbers some two hundred scholars and curators who are working on, or otherwise concerned with the Jewish engagement with photography. I would hazard to guess that at least a third of these projects underway are about individual female photographers or groups of women.

Collections of the work of Jewish women photographers, such as Eva Kemlein, Lore Krüger, and Lou Landauer, have been donated to, or acquired by galleries and archives, and previously little-noticed troves are finally being investigated and exhibited throughout the world. A sprawling 2012 exhibition at Vienna's Jewish Museum showed that a clear majority of the 'quality' studios in that city, before 1938, were owned and operated by Jewish women.² Even though we are now aware that Jewish women in photography were normal, as opposed to an oddity, the serious study and appreciation for those who plied their craft and talents is surely welcome. This original take on the life and work of Gerty Simon reminds us that photography is worth revisiting as a sizeable and critical aspect of Jewish social and economic history. And this volume is furthermore a means to study and celebrate an exceptional and creative artist.

¹ George Szirtes, *The Photographer at Sixteen: The Death and Life of a Fighter* (London: Maclehose Press, 2019), 119.

² Meder, Iris, and Andrea Winkelbauer, eds. *Vienna's Shooting Girls: Jüdische Fotografinnen aus Wien/Jewish Women Photographers from Vienna*. Vienna: Jüdisches Museum Wien and IPTS-Institute für Posttayloristische Studien, 2012.