

# Where's Willibald? A bittersweet NYU Institute of Fine Arts interlude 1963-1965

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*Remembering the brilliant medievalist Aenne Liebreich (1899-1939/40?) – Henri Focillon's research assistant. She committed suicide in Paris upon Germany's French conquest.*

As a Yale undergraduate ('52), my excellent art history teachers conveyed European visual culture with rare depth, their mastery largely due to study under the twentieth century's major art historian, Henri Focillon (1881-1943). With Nazism's rise, he came to teach at Yale in 1939, dying in New Haven four years later. Despite his inspired Continental tutelage – ever delivered in French – a trans-Atlantic divide often distanced an alien Catholic world from Mother Eli's still surviving, relentlessly Puritanical founding ethos.

When in my sophomore and junior years, I could take graduate seminars with such visiting German-born luminaries as Erwin Panofsky (1872-1969) and Richard Krautheimer (1897-1994), their relaxed, almost proprietorial air toward European arts was a welcome surprise, though I too was a German refugee, having fled Hamburg as a Jewish babe-in-arms in 1933.

At that time, Yale, as with all fashionable American private universities, hired few Jewish (let alone refugee) professors, these seldom if ever in the humanities. Protestant refugees did better, notably Werner Jaeger at Chicago and Harvard (1888-1961) and Wolfgang Stechow (1896-1974) (of Jewish ancestry) at Oberlin. Superstar Erich Auerbach (1892-1957) languished at Penn State following wartime Turkish asylum until Erwin Panofsky came to his rescue, inviting him to Princeton's Institute, after which he went on to Yale.

With Jaeger, Paul Oskar Kristeller (1905-1999) at Columbia, and Panofsky at Princeton's Institute, three of the world's leading humanists were in the United States by the later 1930s. That Macy's – New Jersey Strauss-family – financed study centre proved a waystation for many refugees from Fascism and Nazism en-route to American academic appointments. This passage was almost always eased or initiated by Panofsky's solicitude. As a permanent, founding member of that Institute he never failed to appreciate his own good fortune coincident with Nazism's rise and his exile.

Most openings in the United States for uprooted scholars came from women's colleges including Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Mills, Smith, and Vassar, along with state and city colleges and universities. Refugees' fates differed widely. Like Aenne Liebreich, Edouard Zilsel (1891-1944), French author of the major study of Genius, killed himself while at Mills College, panicked by the prospect of a German victory. Adolph Goldschmidt (1863-1944), finally was given refuge in Switzerland and killed himself upon learning that his beloved sister had been gassed.

Some German museum people were able to continue their careers in America. Frankfurt's Swarzenskis junior and senior (1876-1957, 1903-1985) found curatorial appointments at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. The stolid, imperturbable Jacob Rosenberg (1893-1980), a specialist in graphic and Northern arts from Berlin's national museum, was accepted by Harvard's partially Paul (Goldman) Sachs financed Fogg Art Museum. Baptized and boring, Rosenberg was married to the leading German philosopher Husserl's daughter. The Prussian arrogant brothers, Dietrich (1918-2009) and Bernard von Bothmer (1912-1993), probably forsook Germany on principle, the 'Greek von B' curating at the Metropolitan and the 'Egyptian' one at the Brooklyn Museum. Among Panofsky's Hamburg students who left Germany out of principle was William Heckscher (1904-1999). Suspicious of his virtue, the British interred him, as did the Canadians. When Panofsky learned of Heckscher's ill fate, he invited him to the Institute and he then went on to a stellar career at Duke University.

When, at Krautheimer and Panofsky's urging, I was invited to join the Institute of Fine Art's faculty in 1958, this proved a liberating step of lifelong duration. Diplomatic, diffident, a bandleader in his youth and a divine's son, Craig Hugh Smyth (1915-2006) was then the Institute's second director. He succeeded another Princetonian, the solicitous, clubby, vastly generous if disarmingly bibulous Hispanist Walter W.S. Cook (1888-1962).

Smyth, having first worked at the National Gallery and then at the Frick, asked me to found a 'Museum Training Program,' along the lines of Harvard's Sachs-devised program role. I had chosen Harvard's dreary art history graduate school for that very museum training course before returning to Yale to teach and be its Print and Drawings Curator.

NYU's first art department, founded by the inventor and painter Samuel Finley Breese Morse (1791-1872), was at Washington Square.<sup>1</sup> A century later this program would include such luminaries as the great scholar and architect Fiske Kimball (1888 – 1955), he the re-discoverer of the Rococo, teaching alongside Richard Offner (1889-1965), the world's leading expert on Trecento painting. Both men moved uptown to the University's recently established graduate school of art history in the 1930s, soon housed in a Warburg townhouse on East 81<sup>st</sup> Street.

The graduate school provided employment for refugee art historians from Nazi and Fascist Europe. Walter Cook was fond of saying, 'Hitler shook the tree and I picked up the apples.' By its timely foundation the Institute constituted an essential rescue operation for scholars, particularly German Jewish ones, largely funded by New York's Jewish philanthropists and art dealers such as A. M. Adler.

Among its most sympathetic and modest faculty members was Guido Schoenberger (1891-1974), an expert on Grünewald and specialist in Judaica. I can never forget that frail old man raising his quavering voice at an Institute faculty meeting to acknowledge Walter Cook's snatching him from Dachau's doors. Alfred Salmony (1890-1948), when on the Institute's faculty, was the sole scholar in the United States to teach the art of the Migrations. Martin

<sup>1</sup> For an illuminating discussion about the history and development of the Institute, see Harry Bober, 'The Gothic Tower and the Stork Club,' *New York University Arts and Sciences*, Spring 1962. Available at <https://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/fineart/about/history-bober.htm>.

Weinberger (1895-1965) was this country's leading Michelangelo expert, along with the Princeton Institute's Charles de Tolnay (1889-1981). A student of Panofsky's, the Hungarian soon intrigued, fruitlessly, to eliminate his benefactor.

Richard Ettinghausen (1906-1979) began his distinguished American teaching career in the fields of Islamic art and archaeology, after being forced out of Germany in the mid-30s. Born in Madrid, chunky, well-tailored Jose Lopez-Rey (1905-1991) a specialist in Goya and Velazquez, had been Minister of Culture under the Republic. Married to a wealthy Spanish duchess, he may also have been on Wildenstein's payroll. Like most Hispanists then teaching in America, this including Harvard's Chandler Rathvon Post, and the IFA's Cook, Lopez-Rey's scholarship was uninspiring. This contrasted markedly from that of Jonathan Brown (b. 1939), another Princetonian Hispanist, who directed the IFA and taught there beginning in 1973.

When I arrived at the IFA, then still located at the Warburg townhouse, few if any of its faculty or students used the excellent resources of Metropolitan Museum of Art, located just across the street. Conflicts between Teutonic practitioners of Kunstgeschichte and American-schooled masters of connoisseurship contributed to making Fifth Avenue almost un-bridgeable. Tensions lessened after the IFA moved to the (Tobacco) Duke's family's Fifth Avenue white marble palace, a vastly enlarged version of one in 18<sup>th</sup> century Bordeaux.

My own efforts in founding a 'museum education' program at the Institute, connecting art historical training with direct museum experience – usually at the Met – soon proved of such dazzling success that the directorships of the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., the Chicago Art Institute, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Getty were among the many desirable positions achieved by its graduates. This proved somewhat paradoxical since few if any of these prestigious posts could then have been mine.

A gifted young German scholar of French medieval art, Willibald Sauerländer (b. 1924) was a visiting fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in 1961, where he and I had come as Panofsky protégées. That great humanist urged my senior Institute of Fine Arts colleagues to include the budding European academic among their roster. Willibald (or any other accomplished medievalist) was then sorely needed since our only instructor in that field – and then one of the Institute's three American-born faculty – proved radically unsatisfactory on many counts. The second American was the awesome, aristocratic Alexander Coburn Soper (1904-1993), a great expert in Chinese, Indian and Japanese arts. The third, Robert Goldwater (1907-1973), politically extremely conservative, like his distant relation the Arizona politician, was especially concerned with tribal cultures. He also directed Nelson Rockefeller's short-lived museum devoted to that area and briefly and unhappily, the Institute.

Born into the Weimar Republic, Sauerländer survived the requisitely, relentlessly pernicious professors of the Third Reich, anti-Semitism their second nature. He was drafted into Germany's army in the War's last years. The breadth of his Francophile interests – from Gothic to Poussin – along with a well-informed admiration for his senior 'American' colleagues made Willibald's a uniquely welcome presence, this true too for his charming wife Brigitte who came to the United States with Willibald and their son. She, like my wife Benita, was a professional translator from the French.

Sauerländer's Christian name, that of an Anglo-Saxon saint, also belonged to one of

Germany's greatest humanists, Willibald Pirckheimer (1470-1530), a Nuremberg merchant prince who was not only Dürer's best friend but also his probable lover. Dürer's Willibald and art history's even looked slightly alike, both heavy-set, thick-necked, with small, wise eyes.

When the young German scholar came to the Institute, one of the two most well-known scholars at the time was the sexist Karl Lehmann (1894-1960), he demanding humility from his women students. His Samothracian archaeology revolutionized knowledge of a major ancient Greek monument. The other was the childless, dramatic and vain Krautheimer, then entrusted with excavating Rome's shrines of early Christendom – including Saint Peter's. He was also a great scholar of early Florentine renaissance sculpture, with his shy wife Trude. Unusually egoistic, Krautheimer was detested by modest Walter Cook, so he could only leave Vassar for the Institute upon its Founding Father's death.

With Sauerländer's arrival at the Institute in 1963, most of the its senior refugee scholars were suddenly united in a common cause, one close to mutual obsession – *would Willibald stay in the United States or return to Germany?* So keen was the anxiety it threatened these great professors' very self-worth, as if identifying their past, present and future value with whatever decision he might make. Pernicious issues of loyalty or affirmation – ever amoral and unworthy – reared their ugly heads. Why and how could or should these great men feel their very achievements threatened or betrayed by such ignoble anxiety as to whether or not Willibald would elect to stay in their midst? Unwittingly, Sauerländer further fuelled his Institute's senior colleagues' concerns by sharing his conflicting desires with them, they suitably thrilled by such confidence of academic conscience, yet made increasingly fearful.

Young enough to be their son, would Sauerländer abandon them and return to his homeland, from which they themselves had been exiled under the most painful, humiliating circumstances? Might he surrender to Teutonic noblesse oblige, a Wagnerian Eternal Return to Germany, and by so doing, restore long lost lustre to some once prestigious art historical institution, so enabled to rise from retribution's ashes? If so, their own hard-won American foothold would be lessened, radically devalued by Sauerländer's 'desertion.'

Perhaps the excitement and privilege of association with the Institute's greatest and oldest professor, Walter Friedlaender (1873-1966) could exert the requisite pressure on Willibald to ensure that he stay in the United States. Uniquely sophisticated, he proved a living fossil from Germany's equivalent to an enlightened *Ancien Regime*. First a Sanskrit scholar, Friedlaender then went on to dazzlingly novel art historical studies in 1895, re-evaluating the Carracci, exploring Poussin and generating a pioneering awareness of Mannerism. Ailing and possibly impoverished, the still libidinous divorced Friedlaender was ever the Institute's most knowing, insightful presence. While German scholars of the generations following his own usually proved irredeemably bourgeois, lacking their senior's pre-Freudian freedom, Friedaender spoke with an assured candour, enjoying a refreshingly complete command of mankind's foibles.

Panofsky and Krautheimer would come to worship at their elder's humble shrine, a Madison Avenue studio apartment. Born rich and married to wealth, they worried about their unmarried senior's possibly precarious finances. Predictably, Sauerländer responded to the seductive Friedlaender's magic, co-editing a collection of essays in honour of Friedlaender's

ninetieth birthday in 1965 and arranging for his return to Germany for an honour-showered visit to his *alma mater* and site of his former professorship.

Oblivious to his inadvertently disturbing impact, Sauerländer aroused a host of pernicious issues peculiarly endemic to German Jewish being, these including self-hatred, competitive national pride, snobbery, denial. Suddenly no faculty meeting could convene without strategizing new and better campaigns to attach Sauerländer to the Institute.

What could each and every one of us do to cement an enduring alliance? How might the brilliant young German be made more at home, more welcome, more appreciated? Urgency and desperation were in the air. I hated witnessing how much hung in the balance as Willibald chose whether to throw his lot in with our own too often tragic Chosen People or return to his own unspeakably horrendous immediate heritage.

These senior scholars' adulation for one gifted young German was in dismaying contrast to their striking indifference toward such gifted home-grown Institute graduates as Howard Saalman (1928-1995) or Leo Steinberg (1920-2011). Both were ignored by their adviser Richard Krautheimer, who had supervised their renaissance architectural history dissertations. He was probably jealous of Leo's elegant good looks, eloquent English and effective literary style. Steinberg's father had briefly been a prominent figure in the early Soviet judiciary, another black mark against him. Similarly, Saalman's Eastern German birth and 'ordinary' city college American education presented 'unfortunate factors' to Krautheimer.

Both pre-eminently eligible scholars were overlooked when it came to hiring junior faculty, this appointment going to an American-born graduate from a fashionable university, Steinberg and Saalman's refugee status probably diminishing them in their equally German refugee professor's elitist eyes.

Was my own young academic nose put out of joint by my senior colleagues' naked favouritism for a gifted German? Did this once Golden Ivy be-Leagued Boy envy Willibald's dazzling desirability? You bet. I could scarcely hope to compete with the potential cachet of this stellar young German army veteran, who would later direct Munich's Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte.

Those of my Institute seniors who had lost their first language, been betrayed by their first culture and abandoned by their first friends, found in Willibald the personification of a perfect post-war German world, one without persecution or exile. Here, individuals were recognized from the very start 'for their potential,' receiving nothing but advancement and encouragement. His fate was one they all deserved and some had briefly enjoyed.

Panofsky, the most welcoming of all Willibald's 'Americans', had lost no less than thirty-five relatives to his homeland's gas ovens. Did Sauerländer offer hope or denial? As was true for Panofsky's long concern with consoling Dürer studies at Princeton, 'Both' may be the ambivalent, ambiguous answer.

Following many months of faculty blandishments, wrangling, and suasion, Willibald's mind was finally made up. After two years of teaching at New York's Institute of Fine Arts, he must return to Germany, first to Freiburg, then to Munich's own Institute of Fine Arts. At that time the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte was directed by the celebrated Leonardo scholar, Ludwig Heydenreich (1903-1978). Born into a prominent Prussian military family, young

Ludwig was destined for the army, that option ending with World War I. He studied art history instead, becoming Panofsky's last and one of his favourite Hamburg students. A prominent army officer in World War II, Heydenreich was famous for supposedly preventing his compatriots from mining all of the beautiful bridges of Florence.

Panofsky could only bring himself to see Heydenreich decades after World War II, when returning to receive the Vaterland's leading academic honour, this presented by a major Nazi medievalist. Among his papers left in Germany, the honouree was most eager to recover his unpublished doctoral dissertation on Michelangelo, searching until death came in 1968. Though seemingly impersonal, these academic exercises proved, for many writers, their intellectual *Bildungsromanen*.

Years after Heydenreich's death in 1978, a safe he used at the Zentralinstitut – now headed by Willibald – was pried open. There the missing Panofsky dissertation was found, hidden from its author by his once favourite student. Since Germany has a long academic tradition of reverence for dissertation advisers, these designated as 'doctoral fathers', the 'dissertation son's' hiding of that long sought for document amounted to academic patricide. This revelation proved a German journalistic sensation, the sordid Story of the Broken Locker and Revelation of Betrayal featured in most dailies – Heydenreich's duplicity a ticking Nazi time bomb, still all too alive and well after so many years.

Some of these tragi-comic recollections came flooding back to me after fifty or so years, stimulated by a recent article by Sauerländer, written for a German Jewish scholarly journal.<sup>2</sup> This proved a moving memoir of his immediate post-war years. Suddenly liberated from Nazism's shadow, he recalled first meeting Jewish scholars in his discipline, some the living bearers of legendary names censored from German academic awareness, requisitely prefaced by two words 'the Jew...'.

Most memorable of Willibald's recollections was his accidental initial encounter with a young exile of unparalleled brilliance, Robert Klein (1918-1967). That stellar Rumanian was then waiting tables at the Jewish *mensa* where Sauerländer often went as a student in Paris. A refugee from his Communist nation, Klein interrupted Willibald's remarks on Vasari with strikingly prescient aperçus. Soon captivating the Parisian art historical community, particularly its devoutly Catholic leader Andre Chastel (1912-1990), Klein became among the most prominent figures to explore that discipline in profoundly novel fashion, concentrating on art theory, this close to his initial philosophical concerns.

During a fellowship to Harvard's Florentine renaissance research center I Tatti Klein committed suicide in Settignano's gentle hills in 1967.

Sauerländer's article is particularly moving for his recollection of time spent in New York, providing affectionate and discerning portraits of the Institute's refugee scholars for whom he would retain enduringly fond feelings. Those months let him share in, and better understand what his homeland had done, both for and against his new/old colleagues. Though

<sup>2</sup> Willibald Sauerländer, Interview with Christian Fuhrmeister in 'Begegnungen mit jüdischen Kunsthistorikern', in *Münchener Beiträge zur jüdischen Geschichte und Kultur*. Lehrstuhl für Jüdische Geschichte und Kultur an der Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität-München, 2012.

officially teaching American graduate students, that experience seems to have actually provided Willibald with his ultimate education – an almost mystical return to the best of Germany as filtered through the recollections of a nostalgic refugee faculty, nurturing him with a positive past. By offering to keep him in their midst, my colleagues presented Sauerländer with what seemed like a selflessly possessive passion.

Learning of Willibald's wife's death, I sent a condolence letter with some questions about his Institute life. He replied with great generosity. Happily, vivid, appreciative memories of his New York life are still Sauerländer's, now in his early nineties. So that's where Willibald is.

But what of his predecessor's betrayal of Panofsky, Sauerländer's greatest benefactor? What of an academic lifetime so often trapped between Manichean forces of Good and Evil? Living in Trump's America, any answer to these questions can only be less ready, less judgmental and more understanding.

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