THE REFUGEES WHO TRANSFORMED
BRITISH CULTURE

Insiders/Outsiders is a year-long festival celebrating the contribution to British life of the refugees who fled Nazi Europe. It is a timely commoration, says Daniel Snowman.

A ll migrations bring ‘culture’ with them, as much of British history testifies: consider the legacy of the 400-year Roman occupation, the Irish following the Great Famine, Jews escaping Russian pogroms in the later 19th century and many other migrations since. So what of the culture brought to Britain by the refugees from Nazism? What resulted when people schooled in Expressionism, Bauhaus architecture, Schroenberger Modernism and Weimar-era cabaret began to mix their labours with the arguably more genteel culture they found in Britain: a world of Bloomsbury, Garden Cities, the BBC and the old-world revivalist architecture of Edwin Lutyens or the musical pastoralism of Vaughan Williams?

This story is primarily about men, notwithstanding the elegant pottery of Lucie Rie, the paintings of Marie-Louise von Motesiczky, the photography of Dorothy Bohm, the outstanding designs of Dorrit Dekk and the creative output of Fritz Busch, for example, who were the artistic founding fathers of Glyndebourne, or the choreographer Rudolf Laban, all of whom initially tried to make some accommodation with the Nazi regime but soon found this impossible.

Most of the refugees were, of course, Jewish, but many only nominally so. “To my father, being German came first. He thought of himself as a German, and only then as a Jew,” said the economist and former chairman of the Royal Opera House, Claes Möser, talking to me in the 1990s.

The art historian Ernst Gombrich described how his Jewishness had anything to do with his scholarly interests. Who cares, Gombrich would ask, whether this or that historian or philosopher had been Jewish? He added that such questions were mere preoccupation of the non-Jewish Jew, in which he considered those he called the great Jewish ‘heretics’ (Henri Matisse, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud et al) and wondered what, if anything, they had in common.

Deutscher argued that these people gained their strength from the fact that they dwelt on the borders of various civilisations, religions and cultures. The fact that Marx, Gustav Mahler and the rest transcended the jet black separation line enabled London to reach out across cultural boundaries of mind, place and time and arise from deep within Jewish tradition. A view that put a modern gloss on the image of the Wandering Jew. In Judith Kerr’s semi-autobiographical novel When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit, the girl asks her father when on their way to exile in Britain: “Do you think we’ll ever really belong anywhere?” The father replies: “I suppose not. But we’ll belong a little in lots of places, and I think that may be just as good.” Nor did all those we are considering come to Britain as refugees. Friedrich Hayek (the economist whose work influenced Margaret Thatcher), or the film producer Alexander Korda, initially came to Britain to work and as the situation in Europe deteriorated, opted to stay. The Vienna-born biochemist Max Perutz first came as a student and the historian Eric Hobsbawm as an adolescent under the care of an uncle who had worked in the UK. Some were refugees elsewhere before settling in Britain: the conductor Georg Solti, and the philosophers of which were refugees) for many years recorded for Deutsche Grammophon.

Many were from educated, middle-or upper-middle class families: not, by and large, your ‘huddled masses yearning to breathe free’. Most wanted to do whatever they could for their country of adoption and they helped professionalise aspects of British cultural life. Art history, for example, previously a genteel pursuit preoccupied with questions of aesthetics, became a highly professionalised academic subject as pioneered by Gombrich and his colleagues at the Warburg Institute, while the somewhat amateurish atmosphere at the Covent Garden opera house that upset Solti when he arrived as music director in 1961 was transformed under his leadership to become, by the time he left a decade later, one of the world’s finest.

Furthermore, the émigrés helped cosmopolitanise the still insular culture of Britain. Nikolai Peyser, in a succession of writings, introduced the ideas of Walter Cronpun and the Bauhaus to a generation raised on the Tudor/Baroque revival and the Garden City ideal, while Martin Eskin at the BBC brought the work of Central European playwrights to British audiences. The émigrés may have become ‘insiders’, but their special strength was the way they were able, at the same time, to retain the vision of the ‘outsider’.

Today, must have passed away. My children, now in mid-life, are not interested in the legacy of Expressionism or Modernism or architecture or the work of Oscar Kokoschka. Nor, frankly, was the contribution of the Hitler émigrés the be-all and end-all of the rich cultural world of 1930s and 1940s Britain: a world of Laurence Olivier and Peter Brook, of Michael Tippett and Benjamin Britten, Henry Moore and Bridget Riley, Fonteyn, Neurey and Kuspaity Ans. The refugees from Nazism helped irrigate the cultural current, immeasurably enriching it, yet they did not constitute the river itself.

The traditional panorama of British history tends to highlight the nation’s insular independence from the continent, how Britain has never been successfully invaded since 1066. But when it comes to culture well, the British have always thought foreigners rather good at this. In the 18th century, no gentleman was deemed fully educated unless he spoke French, while in the 19th and into the 20th any British musician worth his salt had to study in Germany. The story of these émigrés can be seen as another chapter in that story of successive waves of immigrants from Europe to Britain. Fifty years ago, a project like Insiders/Outsiders would have been impossible to undertake: most of the individuals highlighted were in mid-career. Fifty years from now, the story will have slipped into an ever-receding past, one historical episode among many. Now is the perfect moment to take stock of its significance. ■

This is a shortened version of Daniel Snowman’s introduction to the Insiders/Outsiders Festival companion volume Insiders/Outsiders: Refugees from Nazi Europe and their Contribution to British Visual Culture, ed by Monica Donoghue, L nord Humphries 2010. £40. JR readers can get a special offer of £10 off the RRP. Visit www.lordhumphries.com and use code JR10 at checkout. Offer valid until 30 June.