

Tanja Poppelreuter

University of Salford, Manchester | United Kingdom

German-speaking Refugee Women Architects before the Second World War

Among the approximately 130,000 European refugees who fled to the United States between 1933 and 1945 were a small number of women architects, six of whom are the topic of this paper.¹ Marie Frommer (1890–1976) and Liane Zimmler (1892–1987, née Juliane Angela Fischer), belonged to the first generation of women architects and studied during the Imperial Era. Elsa Gidoni (1901–1978, née Mandelstamm), Karola Bloch (1905–1994, née Piotrkowska), Hilde M Reiss (1909–2002) and Elisabeth Close (1912–2011, née Scheu) studied after the First World War.

As part of a larger research project this paper introduces to a fragment of the multi-faceted careers of these architects but omits those women architects who arrived in the USA after the Second World War. It belongs with current studies on transnational exchanges between architects where the subject matter is not determined by geographical and cultural boundaries but is instead situated in complex networks. In outlining these networks, the individuals, groups and events who commissioned, supported, employed and collaborated with exiles can inform a further interrogation about the transformation and transfer of knowledge and ideas in between practitioners and places.²

There are some women architects recorded that have studied and practiced prior to the 1890s in Germany and Austria but the number of women who entered architecture and architecture schools

1 My special thanks go to the International Archives of Women in Architecture (IAWA) at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA and to the Milka Bliznakov research prize that the author won in 2016. The prize and the content of the archives made this paper possible.

2 Stefanie Barron, *Exiles + Emigres* (Los Angeles: LACMA, 1997); Despina Stratigakos, "Reconstructing a Lost History," *Aufbau* 22 (October 2002), 14; Despina Stratigakos, "I Myself Want to Build: Women, Architectural Education and the Integration of Germany's Technical Colleges," *Pedagogica Historica* 43, no. 6 (2007), 727–56; Corinna I. Bauer, "Bauhaus- und Tessenow-Schülerinnen: Genderaspekte im Spannungsverhältnis von Tradition und Moderne" (PhD dissertation, University Kassel, 2006).

begun to increase from this time onwards. By the beginning of the Weimar Republic in 1918 a few women studied at Technical Universities (Technische Hochschulen, TH). Architecture schools here offered four-year courses towards a *Diplom-Ingenieur* (chartered engineer) degree.³ Marie Frommer enrolled in 1911 at the TH Berlin-Charlottenburg as one of three women and graduated in 1916 with a diploma. From 1917 to 1919 she wrote her doctoral thesis *River Courses and Urban Development* under Cornelius Gurlitt at TH Dresden and became the first women architect in Germany with a doctoral degree in this subject.⁴ Zimbler studied around 1912 at the School of Applied Arts (Kunstgewerbeschule) in Vienna (and perhaps also in Munich) and here possibly under Oskar Strnad who was a pivotal member of the Viennese School of Architecture (Wiener Schule der Architektur).

Prior to the First World War women had to find gaps in the system in order to enrol⁵ so it can be assumed that Frommer and Zimbler had support from their families and perhaps from within the universities when choosing this profession. During the Weimar Republic and in Austria after 1918 it was now permitted for women to study at a TH and several schools such as the TH in Berlin-Charlottenburg and the Bauhaus offered opportunities to study architecture.

Frommer, Gidoni, Bloch and Reiss studied at the TH Charlottenburg albeit at different times and for different length of time. Gidoni was born in Riga and had attended an art school in St Petersburg before enrolling here sometime before 1928 but she left without a degree.⁶ Hilde Reiss enrolled as an auditor for a short period in 1928 and Bloch began her studies at the TH Vienna and transferred to TH Charlottenburg in 1930. At the TH Charlottenburg well-known architects such as Hans Poelzig (between 1923 and 1935) and Bruno Taut (between 1930 and 1935) taught subjects such as structural engineering and public housing.

That four out of the six women in this study enrolled at TH Charlottenburg should not be misconstrued as a sign that this school was favoured by female students – it is instead indicative of the lack of research on female students at other architecture schools.

After studying in Vienna Zimbler run an independent practice since the beginning of the 1920s. She enrolled again at the TH Vienna in 1931 and in 1938 became the first woman in Austria with a degree in civil engineering. Scheu Close, who was 20 years younger, also studied around 1930 at TH Vienna. She studied architecture because of her family background. In 1912 her parents had

commissioned Adolf Loos to build their home and she had grown up in his Scheu House. Her family was connected internationally and with the support of Edward Filene –owner of the department store Filene's in Boston– Scheu Close left Vienna to study at MIT in Boston where she graduated in 1935 with a Masters Degree.⁷

Reiss was highly flexible and changed courses several times. After studying at TH Charlottenburg she first enrolled at the State University for Crafts and Architecture (Staatliche Hochschule für Handwerk und Baukunst) in Weimar and in 1930 at the Bauhaus in Dessau where she graduated with a diploma in 1932.⁸

Bloch finally, was a member of the Communist Party and after the Reichstag in Berlin was burned in 1933 she and her future husband, the philosopher Ernst Bloch, fled to Zürich where she received her diploma from the ETH in 1934.⁹

During the Weimar Republic Women graduates had, as demonstrated by Corinna I Bauer, some employment opportunities and changes in the law now permitted women to work for civil services.¹⁰ Frommer, for example, worked for several architectural offices after 1916 – an opportunity that at that time might also have arisen due to many men having been drafted during the First World War.¹¹ From 1917 to 1919 she also had a position at the Dresden Municipal Building Department while writing her doctoral thesis.

In 1925 Frommer set up an independent practice in Berlin that executed a broad variety of commissions such as the *Leiser Silk Store* (1927) and the *Villa Majestic* (1929) in Berlin as well as the *Textilia Department Store* (1928–30) in Ostrava.¹²

About Zimbler's practice in Vienna Ursula Prokop explains that the economic situation in Vienna after the First World War depressed the building industry and Zimbler focused on conversions and modernisations of existing homes. Her clients seemed predominantly to have been representatives

3 Stratigakos, "I Myself Want to Build," 728.

4 Bauer, *Bauhaus-und Tessenow-Schülerinnen*, 348.

5 Ibid, 19 ff and 33 ff.

6 Despina Stratigakos, "Gidoni, Elsa," Oxford Art Online, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com:80/subscriber/article/grove/art/T2271571> (accessed January 19, 2018).

7 Sandra Gutiérrez Poizat, "Elizabeth Scheu Close 1912–2011," *Un dia Una Arquitecta*, <https://undiaunaarquitecta.wordpress.com/2015/05/06/elizabeth-scheu-close-1912-2011/#more-1667> (accessed January 25, 2018); Elizabeth Scheu Close, "Oral history interview with Elizabeth Close," interview by Jane Hession, Minnesota Historical Society, June 26, 2000, transcript, 13, <http://collections.mnhs.org/cms/largerimage.php?irn=10279658&catirn=10447443&return> (accessed, January 29, 2018).

8 Bauer, *Bauhaus- und Tessenow-Schülerinnen*, 218, 387.

9 Karola Bloch, *Aus meinem Leben* (Pfullingen: Günther Neske, 1981); Christiane Droste, "Women Architects in West and East Berlin 1949–1969: Reconstructing the Difference" (PhD dissertation, University of Westminster, 2014), 153–156.

10 Bauer, *Bauhaus- und Tessenow-Schülerinnen*, 43.

11 Ines Sonder, "Marie Frommer: Projects between Berlin and Exile in New York," *Frau Architekt*, edited by Mary Pepchinski et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsches Architekturmuseum; Berlin: Wasmuth Verlag, 2017), 141.

12 Ibid.

of the urban middle class and either employed married couples or single professional women.¹³ Her interiors were part of the then developing modern interior architecture in Vienna.¹⁴ Despite the depressed building industry Zimbler was prolific; in 1928 she opened a second office in Prague, published much of her work, and was an active public speaker as well as teacher; during the 1930s her activities were multifaceted and her practice operated internationally.

After graduating from ETH Zürich Bloch also worked briefly at Jacques Groag's office in Vienna. She moved to Paris where she worked for Auguste Perret before going to Prague in 1936 where she collaborated with the former Bauhaus student Friedl Dicker on as yet unidentified projects.¹⁵

Bloch's flexibility, albeit caused by political events, was not uncommon; the professional activities of women architects during the Weimar Republic were often diverse. Many worked within varied fields and were engaged with a range of clients. They were nevertheless seldom able to establish themselves within the field of architecture.¹⁶ It seems therefore significant that Frommer, Zimbler and Gidoni were able to establish independent practices, but it also gives an indication on how Bloch was able to find employment at established and renowned practices in Vienna and Paris. Where Reiss worked in the one year after graduating and before emigrating is to date not known.

Together with women entering architecture, their roles and the specificity of their contributions to architecture became a focus of debates during the 1920s. It is therefore not surprising that some of the women architects in this study engage with this topic. Frommer and Zimbler were members of the Soroptimist Club, an international organisation that had been founded in 1921 in Oakland, California by professional women. Frommer was among the founding members of the Berlin branch in 1930.¹⁷ Zimbler was also a member of several other similar associations in Vienna.¹⁸ In the 1930s she prepared the exhibition *How Do Women Visualise? (Wie sieht die Frau?)* (Fig. 1) that addressed gender specific ideas of aesthetics and women in the arts¹⁹ and that was part of the International Women's Congress in Vienna.

Bloch and Reiss were members of the Communist Party in Berlin and Bloch took courses at the 'Masch' (Marxist Labourer School) where she met the architects Hannes Meyer and Gyoergy Lukacs.

13 Ursula Prokop, "Liane Zimbler," *Architektenlexikon*, <http://www.architektenlexikon.at/de/727.htm> (accessed January 23, 2018).

14 Sabine Forsthuber, "Vom Kunstgewerbe zur Innenarchitektur," *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Denkmalpflege* 42 (1988, Special issue), 171 ff.

15 Bauer, *Bauhaus- und Tessenow-Schülerinnen*, 218, 339 and 387; Droste, *Women architects*, 153 ff.

16 Ibid, 48.

17 "History," Soroptimist International, <https://clubberlin.soroptimist.de/geschichte/> (accessed February 3, 2018); Sonder, "Marie Frommer," 143.

18 Forsthuber, "Vom Kunstgewerbe zur Innenarchitektur," 174 ff.

19 Ibid.



Fig. 1. Liane Zimbler, *Wie sieht die Frau*, Exhibition catalogue, Vienna, 1930.

Courtesy of IAWA, Blacksburg, VA. Ms1988-005, Box 1 Folder 12.

Due to her husband's work as a philosopher Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer also belonged to their circle of friends.

As members of the Communist Party Reiss and her friend Waldemar Alder, also a former Bauhaus student, distributed leaflets in Berlin that opposed the 1933 elections (*Reichstagswahlen*). After the Reichstag was burned her parents urged her to emigrate and Reiss fled from Berlin to New York.

With Hitler seizing power in 1933 the political situation in Germany changed dramatically.²⁰ Architects were affected when the 2653 members of the Association of German Architects (Bund Deutscher Architekten, BDA) were subsumed into the newly founded Reich Chamber of Fine Arts (Reichskammer der bildenden Künste). Well-known Jewish architects such as Erich Mendelsohn lost their membership immediately. Lesser known ones were included but from 1935 members were compelled to produce proof of Aryan ancestry after which they were gradually excluded for their 'lack in suitability and reliability'.²¹ The exclusion from the association was tantamount to an occupational ban.²²

20 Claus-Dieter Krohn, "Emigration 1933-1945/1950," *European History Online*, <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/krohnc-2011-en> (accessed January 10, 2018),

21 Anke Blümm, "Im Namen der Baukultur 1933-1945: Der BDA im Dritten Reich," *Bund Deutscher Architekten BDA, Aufbruch in den Untergang 1933-1945* (Berlin: Bund Deutscher Architekten, 2017), 11, https://bda-bund.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/BDA-Chronik_Band-04_1933-1945.pdf (accessed January 20, 2018).

22 Blümm, "Im Namen der Baukultur," 15.

Between 1933 and 1938 many, among them Bloch, found exile in neighbouring countries such as Czechoslovakia, France, Switzerland or the Netherlands.²³ Frommer fled to London in 1936, Gidoni fled to Tel Aviv in 1934, Bloch to Switzerland. The USA was for many their second or third exile and triggered in 1938 by events such as the annexation of Austria into Germany and the atrocities of the so-called *Reichskristallnacht*. As a result, the USA but also Latin America, South Africa and Shanghai – where no visa was required – became a destination for a great number of refugees.²⁴ In 1938 Bloch left Prague, Zimble left Vienna, Gidoni left Palestine, Frommer left London in 1939 and they all went to the USA.

At that time, offers to come to the USA and the integration of refugees were supported by politics. Even though numbers of immigrants were limited each year, Claus-Dieter Krohn explains that such restrictions did not apply to scholars and intellectuals because of efforts to transform the country from a business-oriented one to a modern cultural nation.²⁵ Since Franklin D Roosevelt's economic program 'New Deal' foreign scholars were regarded as a valuable sources of knowledge.

Philanthropic organisations such as the Rockefeller Foundation supported the process, attracted displaced intellectuals and facilitated their integration.²⁶ Other networks such as the Soroptimist Club also aided refugees; Frommer, for example, gave the address of Marion JE Smith, a club member, as her first address in New York. Zimble might also have received aid from the club as the Soroptimists in Vienna are said to have rescued refugees.²⁷

Among the places and initiatives that gave refugees opportunities was the New School for Social Research in New York where by 1945 more than 170 refugees had held teaching positions²⁸ – among them was Reiss who taught Interior Planning from 1938 to 1940.²⁹

Apart from Chicago, where some of the former Bauhaus Masters would establish the New Bauhaus in 1937, and Los Angeles, many exiles settled in the metropolitan area between New York and Boston.³⁰ Frommer and Gidoni would remain in New York; Bloch and Reiss worked here before opportunities in other cities arose.

Reiss, who was the first one to arrive in New York in May 1933, appears to have found work

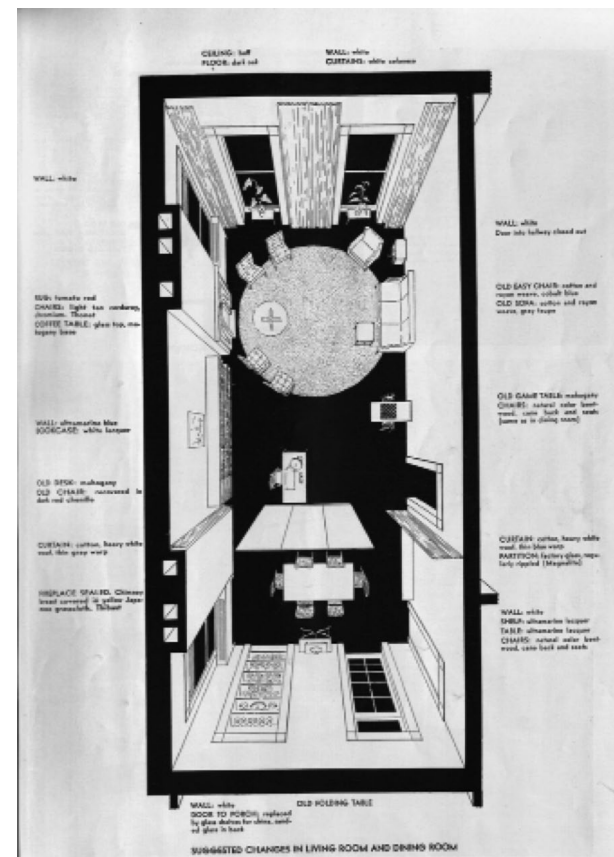


Fig. 2. Hilde Reiss and Lila Ulrich, Interior for a House in Brooklyn. Source: "A Century Intervenes," *Arts and Decoration* (March 1935), 15.

quickly. Before commencing her teaching positions at the Laboratory School of Industrial Design (1936) and at the New School of Social Research, she worked in the offices of Gilbert Rhode and Norman Bel Geddes and collaborated with the former Bauhaus student Lila Ulrich, who was an American citizen. In 1935 Reiss and Ulrich published the interior decoration for an apartment and plans for a house conversion in Brooklyn in the magazine *Arts and Decoration* (Fig. 2).

During the late 1930s Reiss worked with her American colleague William Friedman who also worked at Laboratory School and in 1938 they open a joint office as Industrial Designers on Lexington Avenue.³¹ Among their projects was the apartment for Frances M Pollak (1938) on Park Avenue that was published in *Interior Design and Decoration*³² and the *House Stein* in Pleasantville (1939) that the *Architectural Record*³³ (1939) published.

Gidoni came to New York in 1938 even though she had built an impressive portfolio of Modernist architecture during her four years in Tel Aviv.³⁴ In New York Gidoni, like Reiss, found work at Norman Bel Geddes' office and worked on his Futurama exhibit that was part of the General Motor's display for the 1939 World Fair. She then was employed at Fellheimer & Wagner and after the war worked for Kahn & Jacobs. By 1960 Gidoni was project designer at Kahn & Jacobs and responsible for large-scale projects such as the Travelers Insurance Co. building in Boston.³⁵

Not much is known about Frommer's practice during her early years in New York.³⁶ She was acquainted with Gidoni but it is not known if they collaborated on projects. Her architectural degrees were not recognised by New York State and she had to pass licencing exams which she obtained

23 Krohn, "Emigration 1933–1945/1950."

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 "History," *Soroptimist International*.

28 Krohn, "Emigration 1933–1945/1950."

29 Bauer, *Bauhaus- und Tessenow-Schülerinnen*, 387.

30 Krohn, "Emigration 1933–1945/1950."

31 Bauer, *Bauhaus- und Tessenow-Schülerinnen*, 219.

32 "Departure from the Conventional," *Interior Design and Decoration* (February 1939), 30–35.

33 "Plywood and Fieldstone Walls are Used in Same House," *Architectural Record* (March 1939), 44–48.

34 Stratigakos, "Gidoni, Elsa."

35 Stratigakos, "Reconstructing a Lost History," 14; Stratigakos, "Gidoni, Elsa"; Marilyn Hoffman, "Key Skills Linked: Huge Responsibility," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 27, 1960, 10.

36 An exception is a 1944 project with Paul Bry. Sonder, "Marie Frommer," 143.

in 1946 –now aged 56– and opened a practice in Manhattan. Among her projects were shop fronts, offices, houses and a department store (Fig. 3).³⁷

Zimbler settled in Los Angeles in 1940 and first worked for, and later owned, the interior design firm Anita Toor that she maintained until 1975. Her work related to her practice in Vienna and she mainly executed conversions and interiors.³⁸

Bloch built a house in Andover, New Jersey in 1939 and was employed at the offices of Stone & Webster and Leland and Larsen in Boston. In 1949 she returned with her family to East Germany and moved again in 1961 to West Germany.³⁹

Reiss also worked in a variety of different settings in the USA before settling in Palo Alto, CA in 1952. Among them was the Idea House II that she built in 1947 as a temporary model house on the grounds of the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis. After developing a travelling exhibition in San Francisco and working at Erich Mendelsohn's office in the early 1950s she opened a store for modern furniture and household goods in Palo Alto (1952) and in 1976 another such store in near Capitola.⁴⁰

Lastly Scheu Close, found her first position after graduating in 1935 at Kastner and Stronorov in Philadelphia⁴¹ and had a teaching position at the University of Minnesota before opening a practice with her husband Winston 'Win' A. Close in Minneapolis. It appears that among their first works was a design for a modern house for the Walker Art Centre. It may well have been that this was related to Reiss' Everyday Art Gallery for

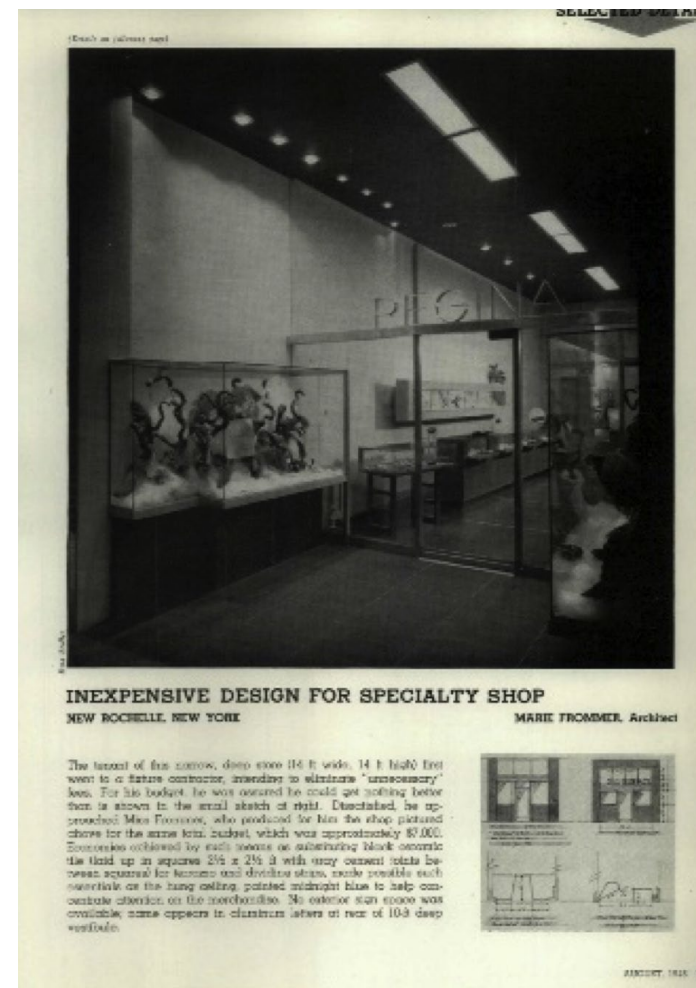


Fig. 3. Marie Frommer, Speciality Shop 'Regina', New Rochelle, New York, 1946.

Source: "Inexpensive Design for Speciality Shop," *Progressive Architecture* (August 1946), 73.

which Reiss and Friedman built the *Idea House II* in 1947. Among Scheu and Close's work in the 1940s and 1950s were the 1940/41 cabin *Skywater*⁴² on a hillside above St Croix River in Minnesota, the 1947 Rood House in Lowry Hill, Minneapolis, and 14 houses on University Grove.⁴³

Although this account of the careers and networks is cursory and by no means comprehensive it demonstrates connections between exiled architects, their American colleagues, as well as the role of existing networks in integrating refugees. Architectural practices such as Bel Geddes', New School for Social Research and the Soroptimist Club warrant further scrutiny to understand their roles as 'nodes' that helped connect architects, clients and employers. Research on women refugee architects is still at the beginning and in order to arrive at meaningful and convincing hypotheses about the work opportunities of women in exile as well as their roles in the development of Modernism further research is necessary.

37 Ibid, 143–145.

38 Prokop, "Liane Zimbler."

39 Droste, *Women architects*, 153 ff.

40 Bauer, *Bauhaus- und Tessenow-Schülerinnen*, 232 and 387 ff.

41 Scheu Close, Interview, 13–14.

42 Gar Hargens, Close Associates, "A Look at Mid-century Modernist Homes through the Works of Close Associates," *The Minnesota Preservationist* (March/April 2010), 10–12.

43 "Cabin, St. Croix River, Minnesota," *Progressive Architecture* (December 1948), 78; "Elizabeth Close, FAIA, Gold Medal Winner," *Sparks* 15, no. 8 (September 8 2002), 1. The website closehomes.org by Scheu Close's grandson Winston W Close contains publications and images of their practice: Closehome.org, <http://www.closehomes.org> (accessed May 21, 2018).