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Born Elisabeth Betty Friedländer to a wealthy Jewish family, she joined Die Dame after completing her studies in typography and calligraphy at what was then called the Prussian Academy of Arts in Brandenburg. She flourished at Die Dame, where she put her typography training to good use by designing titles for features and fashion shoots, while enjoying Berlin's avant garde cultural scene.



IN THE BEGINNING

One of her teachers at the academy, the eminent German typographer Emil Rudolph Weiss, believed that Friedländer had the potential to design on a more ambitious scale. He introduced her to Georg Hartmann, the owner of the Bauer Type Foundry, in 1927 and convinced him to commission Friedländer, who was still in her twenties, to design a typeface. She embarked on over a decade of intensive work to become, very probably, the first woman to design an industrial typeface.

It was a mammoth endeavour. Winning a commission to design a typeface for the prestigious Bauer Type Foundry in Frankfurt, would have been a dream for any young graphic designer. And Elisabeth Friedländer, as she was then called, was no exception. After accepting the commission, she embarked on the project with relish.

Even so, she could have been forgiven for feeling daunted by the amount of work involved in designing multiple sizes, weights and sizes of letters, numbers, commas, brackets, hyphens, currency symbols and other characters. Equally onerous was the need to ensure that they'd all look as though they belonged together. Not that she is known to have complained about it, but yet another challenge must have been convincing Bauer's exclusively male workforce that a woman really could design a typeface.

The result is a thing of beauty that also fulfils its practical function of conveying information clearly, legibly and engagingly with stunning efficiency. Sinuous and elegant with subtle allusions to historic and contemporary styles of typography, Friedländer, as it was originally called in deference to the tradition of giving typefaces their designers' surnames, was the product of a decade of work by her, helped by Bauer's owner, Georg Hartmann.









Abhandlung uber Deutsche Gartenbaukunst
Sachfische Textilwaren-Industrie in Chemnitz
Filiale der Deutschen Reichsbank in Koblenz
Zweites Volkskonzert in der Philharmonie
Internationale Buchgewerbe-Causstellung
Erste Handelsschule in Munchen
Lager der Niederlandischen Reedereien
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Corps 20 Friedländer Kursiv 20. Februar 1930



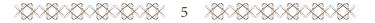
SERVIVING FASCISM

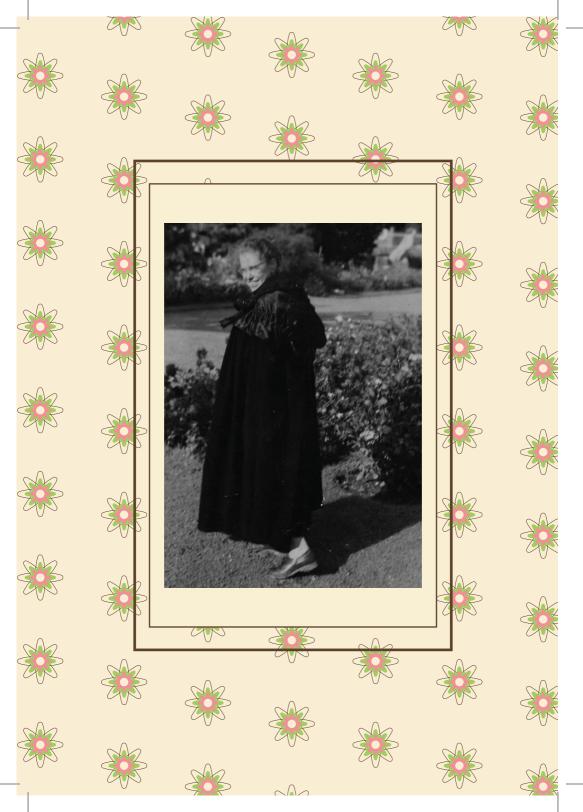
So devoted was he to the project that, as the Nazi Party escalated the pressure on Jewish businesses, like Bauer, Hartmann realised that giving a new typeface an archetypal Jewish name like Friedländer could prove problematic. Rather than abandoning it, he renamed it Elisabeth, in another nod to its designer. Hartmann loved it and described it as one of the finest and loveliest types ever produced, even using it on his personal stationery. But by the time Elisabeth went into full scale production in 1938, its namesake had been living in Milan for two years. Having fled the threat of Nazi persecution in Germany, she was urgently trying to secure a visa to live and work in the US.

Ever resourceful, Elisabeth Friedländer immediately sought work as a freelance graphic designer after arriving in Milan in October 1936. As a Jew, she no longer had the right to work in Nazi Germany, so she decided to move to Italy as a stopgap while she secured a US visa. Armed with an impressive portfolio of work for Die Dame and glowing reviews for her industrial typeface, Elisabeth, she had no difficulty in persuading Mondadori, the Milanese publishing house, to commission her, as well as the Italian design journal, Domus.

She also received offers of work in the US from one of its largest US publishing houses, Random House, and the Bauer Type Foundry's recently opened New York office. But as Italy was becoming increasingly anti-semitic under Benito Mussolini's fascist regime, her visa application was impeded by successive delays, and she decided to move to England as a stopgap. Friedländer arrived in London in 1939, on the eve of World War II, on the only available visa offered by a Quaker charity which was helping Jewish refugees to live in the UK to work in domestic service.







LIFE IN THE UK

Friedländer took a job as a maid, until the poet and publisher, Francis Meynell, who was then working at the advertising agency, Mather & Crowther, offered to help. First, he found her work at the agency, then he introduced her to a friend, Ellic Howe, who admired Elisabeth. Howe persuaded his wartime employer, the Political Warfare Executive, a top secret British government agency, which was waging psychological warfare against Nazi Germany, to take her on. Friedländer spent the rest of World War II applying her knowledge of her homeland and her skills in typography and calligraphy to forging German identity papers, ration books and other documents for use by British secret services.

When World War II ended in 1945, Elisabeth Friedländer had been living in London for six years. Despite the covert nature of her work at the secret UK government agency, the Political Wartime Executive, she had made new friends in London's art, design and publishing circles. Rather than moving yet again to build a new life in the US as she had originally planned, she decided to stay in England and to establish a practice as an independent graphic designer. She even adopted an anglicised version of her original name, Elizabeth Friedlander, to do so.





FREELANCING

Among her first clients was the Curwen Press, an independent printer with a proud history of collaborating with talented artists and designers including Paul Nash and Eric Ravilious. Curwen commissioned her as a calligrapher to create decorative end papers for its books. She enjoyed the work and their collaboration continued for many years. Other larger printers also commissioned her calligraphy, including Linotype and Monotype.

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Friedlander had hoped to enjoy the same success in industrial typography in Britain as she had with Elisabeth at the start of her working life in Germany before the war, but both Linotype and Monotype were more interested in her elegant ornamental borders. Thankfully, another bastion of the British publishing and printing was interested in forging a long term relationship with her on more challenging assignments – Penguin.



Every graphic designer in post-war London longed to work for Penguin.



PENGUIN

The indomitable German designer, Jan Tschichold had been hired in 1947 with carte blanche to ensure that its books were models of modern design. Tschichold was a year older than Friedlander, and had admired her early work in Germany. In June 1948, he invited her to design the lettering for Penguin's titles and patterned covers (one of his few forays into decoration) for a new series, Penguin Music Scores.

It was conceived as a series of affordably priced, pocket-sized books of popular classical music scores by composers such as Bach, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Mozart and Wagner. As usual, Tschichold devised a rigorous design template, specifying that the books should be printed in the landscape format of larger B-size paper and would use two of his favourite serif typefaces, Garamond and Monotype Caslon Old Face. He then added a playful note by commissioning a bespoke patterned paper to be designed for the cover of each book and printed by the Curwen Press,

Friedlander designed the papers for the first ten Penguin Music Scores. The first three – Mozart's Symphony No.40 in G Minor, Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G and Beethoven's Overtures: Coriolan and Egmont – were launched in June 1949 for two shillings and sixpence each. Tschichold left Penguin that year, but his successor, Hans Schmoller, adhered to his design template in the other 24 books published over the next seven years. He continued to commission Penguin Music Scores covers from Friedlander, but also brought in other designers to the series, while offering her assignments on other Penguin books.





In June 1948, [Tschichold]
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Having started out at Penguin by designing playfully patterned covers for its Music Scores books in the late 1940s, Elizabeth Friedlander was then commissioned to work on Penguin Poets, the American Pelican Shakespeare, Penguin Classics, and Pelican History of Art. She loved working for Penguin, especially when she was invited to devise playful combinations of calligraphy and illustration for special projects, such as these jolly versions of its namesake symbol to mark its 25th anniversary. Penguin even indulged her by allowing her to use the Elisabeth typeface she had designed in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s on the cover of one of its Penguin's Progress journals.

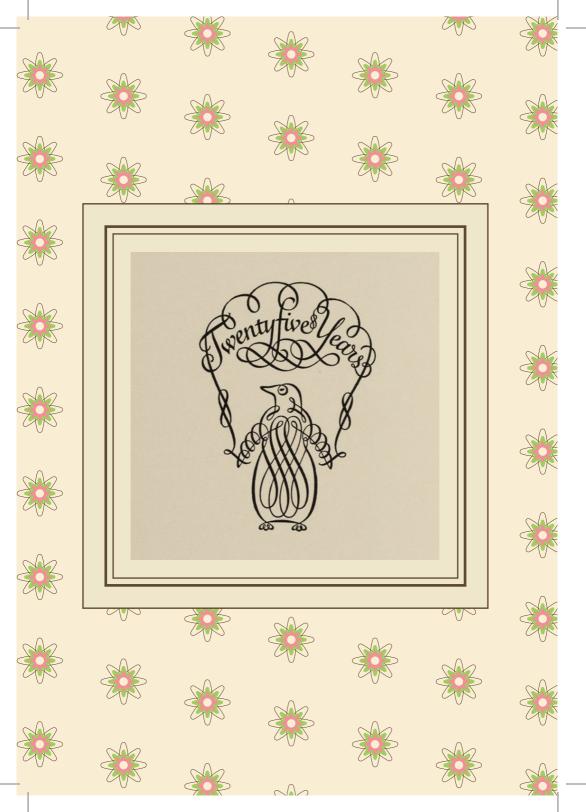
Friedlander had other clients too, notably Mills & Boon, the publisher of bestselling, slushy romantic fiction. Yet none of those projects were as important to her as her work for Penguin, save for her role as calligrapher of the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, where one of her assignments was to record the names of every Commonwealth army officer who was killed during World War II on the roll of honour. Friedlander began working for Sandhurst in 1951, and continued for many years. Even after she left London to live in Kinsale, a small town on the southern coast of Ireland, in the early 1960s, she often returned to England specifically to work at Sandhurst.





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LATER LIFE

When Elisabeth Friedländer, as she was then named, fled to Italy in 1936 to escape the repression of Jews, like her, in Nazi Germany, one of the few things she took with her was a violin. Made in 1703 by Klotz, one of the great musical instrument makers of the 18th century, it had belonged to her mother, who had given it to Friedländer. Having taken it to Italy as a memento of her mother and their family life in Germany, she brought it with her to England in 1939 and, finally, to Ireland.

Elizabeth Friedlander, as she was called by then, had moved to Ireland in the early 1960s to live on the coast near Cork with the Irish-Italian writer, Alessandro Magri MacMahon, a picaresque character she had met while they were working for British intelligence during World War II. After years of turmoil in which she had lived in four different countries, she stayed in Ireland until her death in 1983, three years after his.

For a woman of her time, especially for one who had faced the antisemitism, misogyny and viciousness of Nazism, before rebuilding her life in three different countries, while also working for British secret services during World War II, Friedlander achieved a great deal. Yet despite the acclaim for her beautifully resolved book covers for Penguin and calligraphy for Sandhurst, she never regained the dazzling success she'd enjoyed as a young designer in Berlin during the 1920s and 1930s, notably with her namesake typeface, Elisabeth.

Her achievements would undoubtedly have been greater had her career not been truncated by Nazism, yet Friedlander had the strength and conviction to live happily and productively. Each year she is honoured by the presentation of her Klotz violin to a particularly promising student at the Cork School of Music, near her Irish home in Kinsale. At the end of the year it returns to the school to be entrusted to another student in memory of the remarkable Elizabeth Friedlander.



Elisabeth Friedlander

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P.4 - Ramos, María. 2022. Dated proof from the Bauer Type Foundry using the original name of the typeface. Image in "New Borders: The Working Life of Elizabeth Friedlander." Alphabettes. Accessed March 12, 2025. https://www.alphabettes.org/new-borders-the-working-life-of-elizabeth-friedlander/.

P.6 - Alexander, Dan. n.d. Portrait of Elizabeth Friedlander. Image. Accessed March 12, 2025. https://dan-alexander.com/brnaindg/elizabeth-friedlander/.

P.16 - Ramos, María. 2022. Calligraphic Penguin and ornamental headings for leaflets and Penguin Progress (1960). Image in "New Borders: The Working Life of Elizabeth Friedlander." Alphabettes. Accessed March 12, 2025. https://www.alphabettes.org/new-borders-the-working-life-of-elizabeth-friedlander/.





