

Lisel Haas - photographer (1898-1989)

Lisel Haas was born to Jewish parents in Mönchengladbach. She developed her photographic skills working as a portrait photographer and also as a photojournalist and theatre photographer. Her special interest was urban childhood and many of her photographs from her time in Germany feature children. Once the Nazis came to power they began to identify and isolate sections of society which did not fit in to their idealised world. In 1938, along with other Jewish businesses, Haas was issued with a notice on 18th October, stating that she must display a notice in her photographic studio's window saying that it was a 'Jewish business'. The ensuing campaign of suspicion and hatred led inevitably to businesses and homes being attacked, culminating in "*Kristallnacht*" (9th -10th November 1938) when the violence reached unprecedented levels. Haas duly abandoned her studio and left Germany with her father. Originally, they applied to the United States for asylum but were turned down. Turning instead to Britain they arrived in Birmingham in December 1938.

Her talent and ability were evident enough for her to obtain work in 1940 with Birmingham Repertory Theatre as an official photo call photographer – in which role she stayed for many years. She photographed almost every production there at a time when many promising young actors appeared - including Paul Scofield, Albert Finney, Ian Richardson, and Derek Jacobi. After the war she expanded her work and set up a photographic studio with her German (non-Jewish) partner Grete Bermbach at her home in 12 Grove Avenue, Moseley. Haas worked from here until she left Birmingham in 1962. Through the medium of photography, Haas attempted, as she told a Jewish Women's Group In Birmingham to create a '*universal language through which we are able to remember events and personal memories*'. She believed that 'life' provided the link between her and her sitters, and gave the pictures their force and effect. Photography, she felt, was charged by life and by living.

The continuing theme of portrait photography of individuals and families was a constant in her life. Haas apparently only returned once to Germany, on a trip to collect some possessions which had been kept by a non-Jewish German woman during the war. The erasure of any memories or legacy of her time there was nearly complete and then total by the time her niece, Dorothy Williams, visited Mönchengladbach some years later in search of the family home. The house had been given a new name and number, and all traces of the Haas studio past had gone.