The gallery owner, art dealer, publisher and collector Alfred Flechtheim was already one of the promoters of international modern and avant-garde art movements in the years preceding the First World War and was one of the most influential pioneers for these movements being noticed and recognized in Germany. Public attacks from conservative and “völkisch” (nationalist) circles were soon directed at him, not least for this reason. After the takeover by the National Socialists, the anti-Semitic attacks were intensified and the art-hating defamatory statements were increasingly aimed at destroying his professional existence.

He was seen as a prominent exponent of “Jewish Cultural Bolshevism” and was accused in propaganda of “corrupting” German art and culture. Alfred Flechtheim became the “Kunst-Jude” (“Art Jew”). Had he remained in Germany, his freedom would have been restricted and his life may even have been at risk. His legendary business model, which had been so successful up until the outbreak of the world economic crisis and which was based on the sale of art which was labeled by the new rulers as “degenerate” and “un-German” or as a scam and as the work of dilettantes, now no longer had any prospects. The path to exile was unavoidable. Here, Alfred Flechtheim shared the fate of many emigrants who were unable to succeed in their professions abroad to the same extent as they had previously been able to do in Germany. His attempt to establish himself as an art dealer, initially in Paris and then later on in London, failed.

In previous decades, the way in which Alfred Flechtheim’s life and work has been presented has focused in particular on the relationship between the defamation of his person and the condemnation of modern art by the National Socialists. His fate was interconnected with that of the artistic avant-garde of the first third of the 20th century in Germany. The National Socialist attacks against the artistic and cultural politics of the “Systemzeit” (“System Period”)¹, which refers to the period from 1918 until the National Socialist seizure of power in 1933, were directed at him even after his death, when the campaign against “degenerate art” reached its culmination at exhibitions under the same name shown between 1937 and 1941 in Munich, Berlin and other cities.

As a rule, however, the collector Alfred Flechtheim remained in the background, when the highs and lows in the résumé of the trendsetting pioneer, impulsive businessman and brilliant host were mentioned. Questions were rarely asked as to what had happened to the works of art he had not acquired with the intention of reselling, but rather for the purpose of developing and expanding his own collection. The relationship between the fate of the collector and that of his collection was clear. Nevertheless, the question as to the whereabouts of the pieces once privately owned by Flechtheim remained for the most part unanswered.

“Eine Sammlung löst sich in nahezu nichts auf” (“A collection dissolves into almost nothing”) is the title of a chapter in the 2008 study, *Alfred Flechtheim und George Grosz*.

¹ “Systemzeit” – in Nazi language, a derogatory term used to designate the time of the Weimar Republic (translator’s note).
Zwei deutsche Schicksale (Alfred Flechtheim and George Grosz. Two German Fates), by Ralph Jentsch. The author praises the quality of the collection, which included works by the most important artists of the 19th and 20th centuries (in particular Picasso, but also van Gogh, Cézanne and Renoir, as well as Kandinsky, Klee, Beckmann and Munch) and yet states the current location of only one painting, “La Noce” (1911-1912) by Fernand Léger.

Which works, however, can be attributed to Alfred Flechtheim’s collection and were privately owned by him? When were they acquired by him? When and under what circumstances did he feel forced to sell pieces from his collection? Which paintings or sculptures or other objects came into his possession when he was not in a position to pay the purchase price in full? Which art dealers or artists asserted or could have asserted claims against Flechtheim for this reason?

Was Alfred Flechtheim able to take a large part of his collection abroad when he had to leave Germany or did most of the works remain in Bertha (Betti) Flechtheim’s flat in Berlin? The couple divorced in 1936 in order to protect Betti Flechtheim against liability for his debts. What happened to the works of art after she took her own life in 1941? Was the Flechtheim Collection eventually confiscated and liquidated by the National Socialist authorities then?

These questions once again became current and more volatile than ever, as the law firm representing Flechtheim’s heirs questioned several museums both in Germany and abroad in 2008 as to whether the acquisition of works currently in their possession with a Flechtheim provenance can be proven not to have been connected with Flechtheim’s persecution by the National Socialists and his subsequent loss of property.

For the museums, libraries, archives and other addressed public institutions in Germany, the tasks resulting from the agreement on the Washington Principles (1998) regarding the treatment of cultural artefacts stolen by the National Socialists and, based on these, the Declaration of the German Federal Government, the Länder (Federal States) and the National Associations of Local Authorities on the Tracing and Return of Nazi-Confiscated Art (1999) were clearly formulated in the Guidelines on the implementation of the aforementioned declaration, published in 2001: “The Federal Government, the Länder (Federal States) and the National Associations of Local Authorities will bring their influence to bear in the responsible bodies of the relevant statutory institutions that works of art that have been identified as Nazi-confiscated property and can be attributed to specific claimants are returned, upon individual examination, to the legitimate former owners or their heirs, respectively.”

At this point, however, the difficulties facing some of the addressed public collections became clear. It was not so much the allocation of the individual works of art to the claimants which proved to be problematic, but rather answering the question as to which works, irrefutably lost by Betti and Alfred Flechtheim because they had fallen victim to National Socialist persecution, were located in which museums. In such cases, provenance research must be carried out in a particularly responsible and cautious manner: The history of the individual objects and the circumstances surrounding sales and acquisitions need to be researched in detail, while at the same time not giving the slightest impression that the history of those persecuted by the National Socialists is in question.

On the 10th of December 2008, the Post for Provenance Research (AfP) established in 2008 at the Institut für Museumsforschung der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (Institute of Museum Research for the National Museums in Berlin) invited the members of the work-
The professional exchange of information on the state of research and findings regarding the inquiries from the lawyers for Betti and Alfred Flechtheim’s heirs was also an important topic here. On the one hand, it was ascertained with a certain level of astonishment that up until that point, clearly no museum in Germany had itself become aware of the problematic nature of the Flechtheim provenance within the context of completing the tasks resulting from the Washington Principles and the Joint Declaration. On the other hand, many provenance researchers now became aware that the reassessment of the relationship between the fates of Betti and Alfred Flechtheim and the whereabouts of their art collection would be extremely complex and complicated.

As requested, the Post for Provenance Research (AfP) was happy to assume the role of moderator and coordinator with regard to all questions pertaining to the clarification of the circumstances under which German public institutions came to possess art and cultural artefacts apparently originating from the Flechtheim Collection. Between 2009 and 2011, several workshops were held where the participants shared their knowledge and presented their research findings. As a result, a coordinated joint work-sharing approach was agreed, which was concerned with the analysis of relevant archival resources in particular. Of course the Post for Provenance Research wanted to ensure that the available funds were not spent repeatedly on certain parallel research projects at the individual institutions. Furthermore, any open questions which could not be answered unambiguously and which as a rule had to be attributed to the extremely difficult situation regarding source materials were jointly named.

As several aspects of the analysis of the circumstances surrounding a probable confiscation of art objects from Betti and Alfred Flechtheim’s possession within the context of persecution go beyond the scope of provenance research, which to date has focused predominantly on art historical aspects and on the history of the collection, a cooperation with contemporary historians focusing on National Socialist persecution and expropriation measures was sought. In particular, the support of the Institute for Contemporary History Munich – Berlin and the Director of the Obersalzberg Documentation Centre, Dr. Axel Drecoll, deserves special mention here.

This intensified collaboration between renowned representatives of research in contemporary history and provenance research at museums reached its preliminary high point during the workshop on “Art Theft and Restitution” held on the 25th of October 2011 at the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich, particularly on questions regarding the systematic dispossession of Jewish entrepreneurs in the art trade under the National Socialist regime. However, some of the important questions (for example those regarding the analysis of the behaviour of the long-time employee of the Flechtheim Gallery in Düsseldorf Alex Vömel in 1933 and 1934, as well as the analysis of his take-over of the gallery) could not be clarified in full in spite of this academic cooperation.

A further push and many important stimuli for the reconstruction of the scope and profile of the Flechtheim Collection were provided by the publication of the biography “‘Es ist etwas Wahnsinniges mit der Kunst’. Alfred Flechtheim. Sammler, Kunsthändler, Verleger” (“‘There is something crazy about Art’. Alfred Flechtheim. Collector, Art Dealer, Publisher”), by Ottfried Dascher in the autumn of 2011. The works of art belonging to
the Flechtheim Collection now became tangible. The author’s proposal and wish, that the list compiled by him of works privately owned by Flechtheim would, “despite the not insignificant concerns regarding the methodology and content, in light of the gaps and unavoidable errors”, contribute to “increasing the significance of the provenance research”, was thankfully taken up and addressed.

The purchase of the painting, “Lighthouse with Rotating Beam” (1913) by Paul Adolf Seehaus, by the Kunstmuseum Bonn in April 2012 and the recommendation from the “Advisory Commission regarding the return of Nazi-Confiscated Art, especially with regard to Jewish Property” of the 9th of April 2013 that the Portrait “Tilla Durieux” (1910) by Oskar Kokoschka be returned by the City of Cologne are the first examples of “just and fair solutions” as defined under the Washington Principles to be reached between public institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany and Betti and Alfred Flechtheim’s heirs.

The public discussion prior to the decision of the Advisory Commission and the reactions to this have again shown how lengthy and difficult the paths to such solutions are in individual cases. Nevertheless, they must be found and further decisions are to be expected in the near future as to whether works from the Flechtheim Collection are to remain in German museums or are to be handed over to the heirs.

Under the title Alfred Flechtheim.com | Kunsthändler der Avantgarde (Art Dealer of the Avant-Garde), fifteen museums present a joint exhibition project with its own website. With the present anthology the third part of the project has been realized. Fourteen German museums and the Museum Rietberg in Zurich address the ongoing public discussion on the restitution of works of art in a very special way. This might be considered as courageous. In my opinion, this project also reflects what has now become a matter of course in how these institutions treat objects in their own collections, which might still be suspected of having been lost by their owners through unlawful confiscation against their will due to tyranny, war and other events. The repeated lack of transparency accusation made in previous years will also resonate now. The project Alfred Flechtheim.com | Art Dealer of the Avant-Garde means a public standpoint declaration by the involved museums. It is not only Alfred Flechtheim’s heirs and the lawyers appointed by them who will in all probability not agree with all of the museums’ positions. The negotiations and discussions between the institutions and those responsible politically, as well as the heirs and lawyers, must of course continue in confidentiality and in an atmosphere (so one hopes) of growing trust. Through the intermediation in the exhibition and with the publication of this volume a broad public interested in art history and history are able to join in on the dialogue.

In my opinion, a further aspect deserves mention, in order to acknowledge the work of the initiators and organizers of this project. The last time the life and work of Alfred Flechtheim was honoured to a comparable extent was in 1987 in the exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf on the 50th anniversary of his death. It is time once again to remember Alfred Flechtheim, though in a different way than before – different also because the fate of his widow Betti who should not be allowed to fade into the background behind that of the great collector and patron. In the introduction to his biography of Alfred Flechtheim, Ottfried Dascher quoted Thea Klestadt, the niece who died in 2005, who stated something to the effect that “The family did not necessarily want the paintings back, but would have liked for the museums of this world, where the paintings formerly owned by Flechtheim can now be admired, to have had the decency to mount a small plaque saying ‘Formerly of the Alfred Flechtheim Collection’”. This exhibition project is a step in this direction …
The website and the present anthology convey the current results and insights of historical research into Alfred Flechtheim’s life and work as well as on the many works of art, which share at least one thing in common: They all caught the eye of the passionate collector and art dealer.

My sincere thanks go to all project participants, the employees of the fifteen museums and their administrators for the extraordinary commitment in the past months. Thanks also go to the authors of the contributions in this publication and to the Koordinierungsstelle Magdeburg (Coordination Office for Lost Cultural Assets in Magdeburg) and last but not least to Dr. Andrea Baresel-Brand who edited the first version of the combined text to be seen here. Thanks to the editors and publishers of the series Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte who enabled the publication of the volume via the inclusion thereof in their publication series.

The entire project could not have succeeded, if Dr. Andrea Bambi, Head of the Office for Provenance Research at the Bavarian State Painting Collections, and Dr. Axel Drecoll had not come up with the idea for an exhibition and for holding a workshop at the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich, as well as the publication of this volume, and if they had not been so persistent in ensuring that their suggestions were implemented throughout the entire course of the project. For that, you both deserve a special thanks!

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