[Hi]stories of the German-Jewish Diaspora
A Publication Project

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A Safe Haven Full of Contradictions: German-speaking Jews and Their New Lives in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland provided refuge for around 80,000 German-speaking refugees, the vast majority of whom were Jewish. After the United States and Mandatory Palestine, the UK took in the largest number of Jews fleeing Nazi persecution in Central Europe between 1933 and 1945. Because of its geographical island location, most arrived in 1938/39, but it also meant that the refugees were safer than in those countries that had a land border with Nazi Germany.

A large number of German-speaking Jews settled in north-west London, which contained the greatest concentration of diasporic institutions associated with them in the UK. There, they established restaurants, cafés, and food shops that offered Continental delicatessen, as well as theatre clubs, art galleries, and bookshops, alongside furriers, tailors, and clothing shops.

In twenty-first-century memory culture, the UK's role as a safe haven is celebrated alongside the British role in the victory over Nazi Germany, but over the years, the historical reality has, in some cases, been replaced by an unrealistic idea about British altruism and humanitarianism. The majority of those who fled to the UK remained in the country after 1945, leading to the development of a Continental Jewish Diaspora, which in parts remains distinct from the Anglo-Jewish community to this day.

The Difficult Path to Sanctuary

German immigrants have arrived on the British shores and settled since the Middle Ages. In the nineteenth century, there were some notable entrepreneurs, and the German clerk was a notable category. It is less clear how many of these immigrants were Jewish.

The First World War was very difficult for people of German origin living in the UK; many were interned as 'enemy aliens', and some left the country. The numbers began to increase again in the 1920s and continued to rise even after 1933. Initially, the numbers of those seeking sanctuary from Nazi persecution were not very large: between 1933 and 1935, 4,500 refugees managed to find refuge in the UK, with another 5,500 arriving until early 1938.

It was obviously more difficult to reach the UK due to its island location compared with other countries which had a direct border with Nazi Germany. There was no visa requirement in those early years; those wanting to come to the UK had to make their case to border officials. After the

annexation of Austria and the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Nazis in 1938, the number of people trying to escape to the UK increased dramatically. In response to this development, the British government brought in changes to its immigration legislation in April 1938; not to make it easier to escape to the UK, but to make it harder. From April 1938, anyone wishing to enter the country was required to possess a visa.

Visas were only granted in very specific circumstances, mainly to those adults whose presence would be advantageous to British society or the economy. The UK authorities were willing to grant visas to well-known artists and academics who would enhance the standing of the British arts or academia. The Viennese psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) fell under this category. On 5 June 1938, the newspaper *Daily Mail* carried the headline: "Freud comes to London Poor and a Refugee: 'Here I can finish my life's work in peace.'" Many academics were supported by the *Society for the Protection of Science and Learning* (SPSL), which tried to find them positions at UK academic institutions. Its energetic secretary, Esther Simpson (1903–1996), an Anglo-Jewish woman from Leeds whose ancestors had come to the UK from Eastern Europe, made it her mission to aid her co-religionists facing persecution. This is an example of solidarity between the Jews of different origins living in the UK, which was not always the case: many refugees reported that the settled Jewish population was not as helpful as they had hoped when they first arrived in the UK. Despite assistance from the SPSL, for most intellectuals, artists, and academics, coming to the UK was not an easy but a very difficult route and depended on sponsorships being provided by universities or patrons. Many applicants were unsuccessful, and most were in insecure positions even if they managed to be admitted to the UK.

The second category of people to be granted visas were individuals who could convince the authorities that they had the expertise and the funds to establish a business which would employ UK workers. In many cases, they were encouraged to establish a manufacturing business in especially deprived areas.

The third category of refugees were those who were willing to work in sectors considered to be suffering from a labour shortage and in which it was possible to obtain a visa if they could find employment and submit the right paperwork. A small number of such jobs were available in sectors such as psychiatric nursing and agriculture. The largest sectors open to refugees who came through this path were in domestic service. Over 20,000 refugees, mainly women, escaped via this scheme. Since the 1920s, it had become increasingly difficult for households in the UK to find domestic staff due to the poor wages and strenuous working conditions. Admitting refugees on so-called domestic service permits was seen as alleviating this labour shortage.

Many of the large number of women who found positions as maids, housekeepers, or cooks and the smaller number of men who accepted employment as butlers or gardeners were not experienced in domestic service. In fact, it was not uncommon that those desperate to escape from persecution took positions despite the fact that their only experience of domestic labour was as employers of domestic staff rather than as the ones who actually carried out the work. Continental Jewish organisations offered courses to prepare potential domestics for their role. The *Central Office for Refugees* in the UK issued a leaflet in 1940 entitled "Mistress and Maid:

General Information for the Use of Domestic Refugees and Their Employers," which instructed the refugee domestics on how to behave in their new positions pointing out that the newly employed domestics should only speak when spoken to and carry out requests as if they were an order immediately and without question.

The fourth category of refugees who were allowed to find sanctuary in the UK were unaccompanied child refugees who came via the 'Kindertransport' scheme. It was, in fact, a visa waiver scheme in operation between December 1938 and September 1939. Those under 18 who were admitted to the UK for education or training purposes did not need a visa. The 'Kindertransport' scheme was developed by the government in response to public pressure following the November pogroms in 1938, which had been widely covered in British newspapers.

Fig. 1: Group photo of Annemarie Fleck (1926–2010), who can be seen above, second from the left, with other children on her arrival in England, Stroud, May 5, 1939; *Jewish Museum Berlin*, inv. no. 2018/125/35, donated by Diane Shavelson.

While the government policies were not, first and foremost, guided by altruistic principles and the desire to save as many persecuted Jews as possible, many members of the British public were willing to spend money, time, and energy to help. This was especially evident in the case of child refugees. The Anglo-Jewish community and the Quakers took a leading role in supporting adults and children. British volunteers from all backgrounds donated money to fund the journey and raise a guarantee of 50 pounds that had to be lodged for each child refugee to indemnify the government against any future expenses that might arise from their presence.

Many British citizens, most from a non-Jewish background, volunteered to become foster carers and raise the children in their own homes. Some involved themselves in the huge organisational task of admitting and placing 10,000 unaccompanied refugees under the age of eighteen within the short space of nine months. This is a significant number; however, due to the fact that the

child refugees had to leave their parents and families behind, given the time and financial pressure and the lack of governmental support, many of the ‘Kindertransport’ refugees experienced additional trauma after their arrival in the UK. Some of them were broken by this trauma. The fate of Ernst (1925–1941) and Rudolf Farnbacher (1925–1946) from Augsburg is particularly tragic. The Farnbacher twins committed suicide in 1941 and 1946, respectively. Their parents were both murdered in Auschwitz.

These strict and often inhumane regulations led to a situation where many of those desperately seeking refuge were refused entry to the UK. However, despite these strict criteria, it is estimated that a further 80,000 refugees from Europe arrived between the annexation of Austria in March 1938 and the start of the Second World War in September 1939. Some sanctuary seekers had relatives who were British citizens and were in a position to support them financially, such as the educator Martha Steinitz (1889–1966), who left Germany in 1924 and later brought over her three sisters.

In some cases, the officials in charge of granting visas were lenient and somewhat bent the rules. One notable example is Frank Foley (1884–1958), who worked as a passport officer at the British Embassy in Berlin and is said to have saved many lives by issuing entry documents to individuals who did not qualify according to the letter of the law. In other cases, the applicants were economical with the truth. Fanny Höchstetter (1902–1994) was a former civil servant from Southern Germany. When she applied for a domestic permit to take up a position as a maid in a private household, she used a reference from her uncle, which praised her housekeeping skills. In reality, Höchstetter detested housework and had little experience. Unsurprisingly, after arriving in the UK, she did not get on well with her employer and felt that she was being mistreated. After the start of the Second World War, the regulations that domestic permit holders had to stay with their sponsoring employer changed, and they were allowed to change the type of their employment and their employer. Höchstetter quit her domestic service position and ended up working in a hotel in Llangollen in North Wales.

The Effect of War

The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 marked a major caesura in the lives of German-speaking Jews in the UK. Communication with enemy territory ceased, and the chances for onward migration became very limited. Many of those who had arrived in the UK, hoping for a quick onward journey to the United States, had to stay there long-term. Like other foreigners from Germany and Austria, the Jewish refugees were also now classified as so-called enemy aliens. The British government was worried that some of those residents in the UK might pose a security threat, and an internment scheme was implemented. All adults, male and female, were required to present themselves to tribunals, where they would be put into three categories, and restrictions would be imposed on them according to the perceived threat they might pose to the UK. This was a very imprecise operation, and many refugees were interned in camps. The largest was located on the Isle of Man, a self-governing British Crown Dependency in the Irish Sea, which had camps for men and, separately, for women and accompanying children.

Opinion is still divided as to whether this was an understandable reaction to the hostilities of the Second World War or an ill-advised decision by the UK government. Some internees were forcibly deported to British Overseas Territories such as Canada and Australia. Alfred Bader had arrived as an unaccompanied minor on a ‘Kindertransport’ from Vienna. He was interned on the Isle of Man and later deported to Canada in 1940. After the war, Bader moved to the United States and became a successful businessman and art collector.

The deportation journeys were often very dangerous, and the sinking of the *SS Arandora Star* due to a hit from a German submarine carrying internees, including Jewish refugees, on 2 July 1940 contributed to a change in British internment policy. Many detained refugees were consequently released.

Somewhat surprisingly, Continental Jewish refugees played a major part in British wartime propaganda. Due to their intercultural knowledge and their language skills, they wrote anti-Nazi propaganda leaflets, which were dropped by the British Forces over enemy territory, and recorded German-language radio broadcasts which were listened to in Nazi Germany.

Fig. 2: Andreas Odilo Plesch (1923–1998) from Berlin in Air Force uniform, England 1940; *Jewish Museum Berlin*, inv. no. 2004/112/58, Janos and Melanie Plesch memorial gift from Prof. Dr. Peter H. Plesch.

Other refugees volunteered to actively fight Nazism joining the British Armed Forces. Initially, they were only able to join a non-combatant unit called the *Pioneer Corps*, but later, young men could join the regular British Army. Women volunteered for war work as nurses or in other crucial areas of the economy. This is evidence that many Jewish refugees in the UK felt gratitude and loyalty to their country of sanctuary despite not always being treated kindly or fairly. At the same time, integration was a complicated matter, and many refugees never felt that they completely belonged. Even after years of residence, many refugees expressed an inability to feel British (or

English). This feeling is exemplified by historian Eva Reichmann's statement: "I am no longer a German, I will never be an English woman [...] I am a former German Jewish woman of British nationality."[1] Reichmann (1897–1998) fled Nazi Germany in 1939 and became the first Director of Research at the *Wiener Library*. This tells us something about the refugee's self-identity, as well as the essentialist understanding of British identity, which at that time did not allow for any hybridity.

A considerable number of refugees entered the UK in transit until they migrated to another country, usually the United States. Staying in the UK after the end of the Second World War was not as straightforward as it might look retrospectively. The refugees had been denied the possibility to apply for naturalisation during the war years, even if they were fighting in the British Armed Forces. There were significant sections of the British political spectrum, the media, and the public who were extremely hostile to Jews and people of German and Austrian origin. Suggestions were made that German and Austrian citizenship should be re-imposed on the Jewish refugees who had become stateless due to the antisemitic legislation imposed by the Nazis and that this would be a first step to an eventual repatriation.

The *Association of Jewish Refugees* (AJR) in London campaigned vigorously against this idea on behalf of its membership. The AJR was founded in 1941 to represent the Jewish refugees from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. The idea was eventually dismissed, and naturalisation resumed in May 1946. The procedure was comparably easy at the time, and the authorities were mostly sympathetic, although some applications were refused, especially those related to left-wing political activity. In 1947, over 17,000 naturalisation certificates were issued. The number of actual individuals who were naturalised was even larger, as spouses and children were included in one application. By 1950, almost all refugees who wished to be naturalised had become British citizens.

Building New Lives

German-speaking Jews settled all over the UK; most did so in England but also in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The governmental census found that there were 300,000 Jews in 1933, which increased to 450,000 in 1945. The Jewish community in Scotland rose to 20,000 at the end of the 1930s due to the arrival of refugees from Nazi Germany and occupied Europe. No precise numbers are known for Wales, but many refugee industrialists settled and established businesses on the Treforest Industrial Estate near Cardiff. By May 1940, fifty-five firms started by Jewish refugees were in operation, employing around 1,800 local people. They helped reduce reliance on imports, in some cases establishing new technologies in Britain. In Northern Ireland, a refugee community was established on *Millisle Farm* in County Down, which consisted of adult and 'Kindertransport' refugees who lived together, worked the land, and kept livestock.

Given a choice, many Jewish refugees preferred urban centres with already established Jewish or refugee communities, the largest being in North London and Manchester. Hampstead in north-west London was the principal settlement area along the Finchley Road axis, nicknamed 'Finchleystrasse' owing to the large influx of German-speaking refugees. There, they established

restaurants with a distinctively Continental atmosphere, such as the *Cosmo* and the *Dorice*. At the same time, the antiquarian bookshop *Libris*, opened by Joseph Suschitzky (1902–1975) from Vienna, became a Mecca for connoisseurs of German literature. These refugee shops and meeting places on Finchley Road are no longer there today.

Fig. 3: Interior of the *Cosmo* restaurant and café, which was a famous meeting place for German-speaking emigrants in London, 1965. The *Cosmo* opened in 1937 as a coffee bar, providing its customers with familiar tastes by serving goulash, Wiener schnitzel or apple strudel. It closed down in 1998; photo by Marion Manheimer.

In the first years, most refugees were permitted to take only jobs that could not be performed by British citizens. Many men who came from professional and commercial occupations struggled to find stable employment, while many female refugees worked as cleaners or charwomen. The majority of German-speaking Jews in the UK who had a middle-class background, however, were eager to build a new life and worked their way up; they lived modestly, though they resided in middle-class areas. AJR's founding address was on Finchley Road, while the *Belsize Square Synagogue* was established nearby in 1939 as the *New Liberal Jewish Congregation*. The congregation derived from the Continental Liberal (or 'liberale') movement, which differs from Anglo-Liberal Judaism. *Belsize Square Synagogue*, which didn't have a non-German rabbi until the 1980s, exists to this day, and many of its members are children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren of the refugee founders. Many refugee marriages were celebrated there, given that the German-speaking Jews showed a preference for other refugees as spouses, while a significant number also married British partners.

The Second World War saw the establishment of refugee organisations. From 1941, the AJR campaigned for the rights of Jewish refugees, arguing for the removal of restrictions imposed on the Jewish 'enemy aliens' during the war years and for the release of interned refugees; after 1945, the AJR assisted with the search for information about the fate of family members and

friends left behind on the Continent; campaigning for the opportunity to apply for British citizenship; later also putting pressure on the Federal Republic of Germany regarding restitution payments, and (more recently) the right of refugees and their descendants to apply for German passports. Today, the AJR, whose membership has fallen to below 2,000, supports elderly refugees with assistance for care and financially; it provides a forum for their descendants and also funds research and educational projects aimed at the public. Since 1946, the AJR has published a monthly publication, the *AJR Journal*, which aimed to preserve the cultural heritage of German-speaking Jewry while also seeking to ease the process of the refugees' integration into British society.

The AJR had made it its mission to represent all refugees for whom Judaism is a determining factor in their outlook on life. Other organisations were founded during the war; these had many Jewish members, but their aim was more political, such as the *Free German League of Culture* (*Freier Deutscher Kulturbund*) and the *Austrian Centre* founded in 1939, both had left-wing leanings which were expressed with a varying degree of openness during the war years. Some groupings clearly attempted to convince refugees to return to Germany and Austria after the war to help establish new political and cultural structures.

Many refugee memoirs have recorded the struggle to adapt to a new surrounding in the UK with its unfamiliar language, climate, clothes, and customs. Even those refugees who had learned English at school had a hard time, while others, especially elderly refugees, were barely able to communicate at all. Speaking German was discouraged during the Second World War, although many adult refugees continued to do so in private. Older refugees often chose not to teach their children German or bring them up bilingually, hoping that this would ease their integration and, ultimately, their success. The overwhelming majority of the German-speaking Jews decided to change their names once naturalised, to acquire a British identity.

Fig. 4: The twins Günter (*1933) and Peter Sommerfeld (later Summerfield) celebrate the end of the war, London, May 1945; *Jewish Museum Berlin*, inv. no. 2005/139/102, donated by George and Peter Summerfield.

There was a sizeable number of writers and artists who spent at least some of their exile in the UK, such as the writers Stefan Zweig (1881–1942) and Hilde Spiel (1911–1990) or the artists Fred Uhlmann (1901–1985) and Eva Frankfurter (1930–1959). Spiel fled Vienna as a young woman in 1936. She had just published her first novel in German before leaving, but soon after her arrival, she changed to writing in English and worked for the British weekly *New Statesman*. After the Second World War, Spiel was disappointed and felt that she was not accepted by the British literary establishment. She moved back to Austria in 1961, which remained the exception. Most of the German-speaking Jews remained in the UK or migrated further because they could not envisage returning to their countries of origin. Nevertheless, like a number of other refugees, Spiel became a cultural mediator, writing for German and Austrian newspapers, such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, about British culture and for British newspapers, such as *The Guardian*, about Germany and Austria.

Memory and History

The fact that there can hardly be an area of British life on which Jewish refugees from Nazism did not have an influence has often been discussed and celebrated in academic publications and those for a wider audience. The publisher George Weidenfeld (1919–2016) who established the publishing house *Weidenfeld & Nicolson*, the entrepreneur and philanthropist Stephanie Shirley (*1933), the former Director of the Statistical Office Claus Moser (1922–2015), the high court judge Michael Kerr (1921–2002), his sister, the children's author Judith Kerr (1923–2019), and a number of prominent scholars such as the physicist and Nobel Prize winner Max Born (1882–1970), the historian John Grenville (1928–2011) and the art historian Ernst Gombrich (1909–2001) are examples for very successful refugees who had an impact on different areas of British life.

However, it has to be emphasised that most Jewish refugees who found sanctuary in the UK led more ordinary lives. It is a difficult balance to acknowledge these successes while being mindful of the challenges. Some refugees suffered from the after-effects of persecution, trauma, and grief, such as the already mentioned artist Eva Frankfurter, who had depression and took her own life aged only twenty-eight. She arrived in the UK as a child refugee together with her family in 1939. While trying to establish herself as an artist, Frankfurter worked at a Lyons Coffee House in Whitechapel, East London. East London had been a popular area of settlement for earlier Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, who other groups of newly arrived immigrants later replaced. The subject of Frankfurter's paintings were often other marginalised locals, such as the immigrants from the former British Empire.

Many refugees realised early on that one way of resisting the Nazi's attempt to eradicate Central European Jewry was by collecting and preserving eyewitness accounts and any family papers and other material that could be saved. The German-born publicist Alfred Wiener (1885–1964) established in 1933 what is now known as the *Wiener Holocaust Library* (WHL). The *Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies*, established in 1995, is located next door to the WHL in central London, as is the *Leo Baeck Institute* (LBI). The London Institute, with its renowned *LBI Yearbook*, is the leading research centre in the UK for the history of German-speaking Jews from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries. These institutions are part of a larger number of organisations that have contributed to high-profile research on the history of Jewish refugees from Nazism, the history of the Shoah, and commemoration in public life, especially since the 1990s.

Since 2001, the UK has commemorated the Shoah on 27 January every year, which is designated *Holocaust Memorial Day*. Commemorative events take place in schools, universities, and other public institutions. More and more, the descendants of refugees, the so-called Second and Third Generations, are taking a leading role in such events. They are well-integrated into British society, and most of them no longer share the same strong ties to the culture of their parents and grandparents.

The 'Kindertransport' scheme is especially prominent in UK memorial culture and has often been commemorated in an unreflected celebratory manner. Only more recently have there been attempts to qualify the initiative, put it in its historical context, and bring some of the less-than-altruistic aspects to the attention of the wider public.

In the twenty-first century, anti-refugee rhetoric has been widespread in the UK. Many British citizens, including those whose ancestors fled from Nazism, ask themselves if UK society can learn from the stories of these historic refugees who found a safe haven here while acknowledging the contradictions and challenges that they faced.

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Further Resources

AJR Journal. Online access to the digital archive of issues from 1946: https://ajr.org.uk/ajr-journal/

AJR REFUGEE VOICES. Holocaust testimony collection of 310 filmed interviews with Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe who rebuilt their lives in the UK: https://www.ajrrefugeevoices.org.uk/

The *AJR's* "My Story" project, which tells the life stories of Jewish refugees and Holocaust survivors through individual life story books: https://www.ajrmystory.org.uk/

The *AJR's* permanent memorials to some of the most prominent Jewish émigrés, and places and buildings strongly connected to the Jewish refugees: https://ajr.org.uk/ajr-plaque-scheme/

Czechoslovak Refugee Voices (2008), directed by Bea Lewkowicz, tells the story of five refugees from Czechoslovakia who settled in the UK: https://www.ajrrefugeevoices.org.uk/czechoslovak-refugee-voices

Online exhibition featuring 80 objects from filmed testimonies of British Holocaust survivors and refugees: https://www.holocausttestimony.org.uk/80-objects

Celebrating 70 years of the *Leo Baeck Institute* London, short film, 2025: https://www.lbilondon.ac.uk/news/2025/03/celebrating-70-years-leo-baeck-institute-london

Podcast of the *Leo Baeck Institute London*: https://www.lbilondon.ac.uk/podcast

The series "Snapshots of German-Jewish History and Culture" aims to give an insight into interesting items from the LBI's London collection that illustrate many facets of the history and culture of Europe's German-speaking Jewry: https://www.lbilondon.ac.uk/snapshots

Map of the Finchley Road showing some of the refugee shops, restaurants and other institutions that flourished in the post-war years. This map was created by Anthony Grenville: https://www.ajrrefugeevoices.org.uk/finchleystrasse

A thematic walk through London, developed by the research project *Relocating Modernism: Global Metropolises, Modern Art and Exile (METROMOD).* The walking tour connects sites of exilic artistic production: https://walks.metromod.net/walks.p/17.m/london

Online event dedicated to the *Cosmo* restaurant and café to mark *Refugee Week* 2020, co-

sponsored by the *AJR* and the *Insiders/Outsiders Festival*, 18 June 2020: Ballad of the Cosmo Café Q&A

Anthony Grenville, *Continental Britons. Jewish Refugees from Nazi Europe*, published by the *AJR* and the *Jewish Museum London*, second edition 2021: Continental-Britons-web-friendly-PDF.pdf

Documents from the *Wiener Holocaust Library* which reveal and preserve the stories of the individuals and families that fled Nazi persecution and antisemitism in the years before, during and after the Second World War: https://www.refugeemap.org/

Garnethill Refugee Trail by the *Scottish Jewish Heritage Centre*, visualising places connected with Jewish refugees who came to Glasgow from Europe before, during and after the Second World War: https://sjhc.org.uk/jewish-glasgow-garnethill-refugee-trail/

Refugees from National Socialism in Wales. Learning from the Past for the Future led by Andrea Hammel, Director of the Centre for the Movement of People (CMOP), and Morris Brodie of Aberystwyth University: https://wp-research.aber.ac.uk/nsrefugeeswales/

Stephen Walton, "Edith Jacobowitz and Millisle Refugee Farm", in: *Imperial War Museums*, https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/edith-jacobowitz-and-millisle-refugee-farm

Notes

[1] Eva G. Reichmann, "Im Banne von Schuld und Gleichgültigkeit (1960)", in: Eva. G. Reichmann, *Größe und Verhängnis deutsch-jüdischer Existenz. Zeugnisse einer tragischen Begegnung*, Lambert Schneider: Heidelberg, 1974, 173 (Translation by the author).

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