

# Justice for the Refugee:

The Refugee Experience in Great Britain During World War II

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# Imagine:

- Facing persecution at home
- Trying to escape violence and constant fear
- Seeking refuge
- Middle-class
- Educated professionals
- Limitations on where you can go
- Countries closing their doors

Who are you?

# WORLD WAR II REFUGEE SITUATION

# Demographics

- Middle-class
- Assimilated to Western culture
- Secularized
- Well-educated
- In-sync with urban culture
- Majority Jewish, also many leading academics, Catholics, political enemies of the Nazis

## NOT

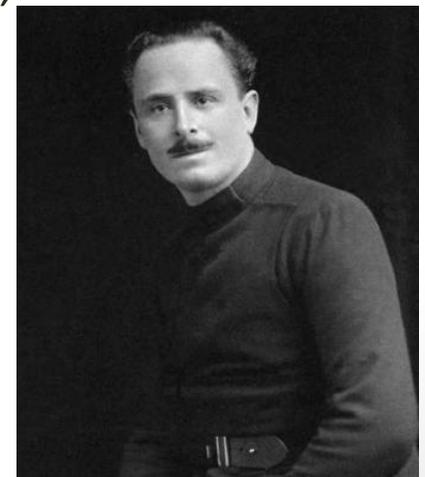
- Orthodox
- Poor (after 1939)
- Eastern European
- Traditional

# Inter-War Immigration

- Between 1933 and 1938, less than 10,000 Jewish refugees came to Britain from Germany
- Refugees filled niche fields or were able to create jobs: capitalists, entrepreneurs, academic and scientific experts
- Many women became domestic servants
- Immigration officers decided who came to Britain
- Immigrants couldn't work w/o permission from Ministry of Labor
- Refugees had support of English communities and organizations
- Rising anti-immigrant sentiments

# Immigration Regulations

- Context:
  - Global depression
  - High unemployment in Britain
- Government concerned an influx of refugees would fuel anti-semitic, anti-immigrant, pro-fascist campaigns
- 1938: British government began requiring visas from Germany
  - Many refugees found this process time-consuming, nerve-wracking and difficult



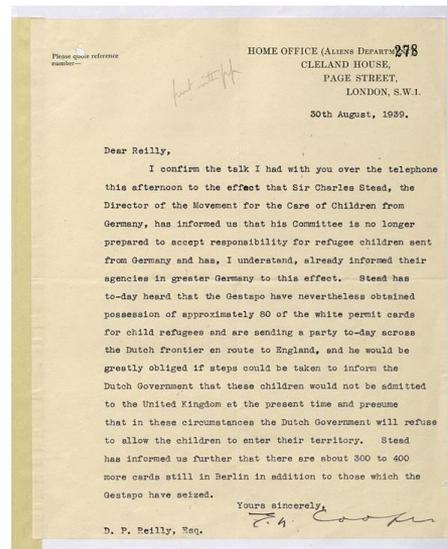
Sir Oswald Mosley

# Jewish Child Refugees (1939)



# Kindertransport

- Government program in conjunction with refugee organizations
  - Only 10,000 spots for Jewish children
- Parents register children to be sponsored and fostered by a British family
  - Very difficult and uncertain process
- Children had to be financially guaranteed by their host family



# Kindertransport: Experiences

- Most children ended up in good homes
- Mostly Jewish families

## HOWEVER

- Negative psychological effect
- Culture shock
- Reality did not reflect expectations



# Ingrid Jacoby



- Twelve years old
- Uncertainty regarding fate of parents
- Required to learn English and go to local school (St. Joseph's Secondary school)
- Feels very out of place
- Gradually becomes more comfortable
  - Refers to foster parents as “Mummy and Daddy” after a year
  - Feels inferior at times
- Settles into life
- Converts to Christianity
- Moves to Oxford after finishing school

# Role of British Government

- Very hesitant to accept large numbers of refugees
- 1938 – Required visas from Germany to enter the country as a refugee
  - Effort to decrease immigration
- Failed to decrease numbers
  - Between 1938 and 1940- 60,000 refugees entered Britain
- Attempted to send refugees to colonies
  - Failed: colonies could only accept a handful of specific professionals
- Organized groups to go to Palestine
  - Creation of Israel in the 1948

# Internment: Classification

- During World War I, the British government interned thousands of “enemy aliens”
- Classified foreign nationals into 3 categories
  - Category A: enemy aliens with known Nazi sympathies (interned)
  - Category B: enemy aliens with possible ties to mother country (liberties restricted)
  - Category C: enemy aliens who had no ties with mother country or were persecuted under the regime (allowed to carry out their lives)
- Immigrants and refugees had to go in front of a tribunal to be categorized

# Internment

- Process began in May 1940
- New Prime Minister Winston Churchill gave the order to “collar the lot”
- All category A, all category B and male category C enemy aliens from Austria and Germany living by the Southern and Eastern coast of Britain interned
- Initially sent to temporary camps

# Internment

- Sent to the Isle of Mann – a popular vacation spot
  - Interned stayed in hotels, hostels and boarding houses
  - Rationed, but adequate food
  - Curfew
  - Censored news
  - Entertainment options
  - Under 24 hour watch
- Over 27,000 people were interned in the summer of 1940
  - 4,000 women

# Reasons for Internment

- The British government released their reasoning behind their internment policy for refugees
  1. Most refugees were unemployed and a “drain on resources”
  2. Refugees could be targets of attacks by anti-semitic, anti-alien or pro-fascist groups during air raids
  3. Refugees requested to be interned
  4. Acting under military advisement

# Internment: The End

- Due to overcrowding and a lack of resources, some internees were shipped to camps in Australia and Canada
- September 1940, the British Government realized their mistake
- Gradual release of refugees
  - Category A immigrants remained due to their Nazi sympathies
- Public hysteria surrounding immigrants died down
- Re-integration
  - Some psychological damage and loss of trust in government
  - Most refugees were understanding and forgiving

# Roland Hill

- Born Ronald Hess, in Hamburg, Germany to Jewish parents
- Lived in Prague, Vienna and Milan during the 30s
- Converted to Catholicism while living in Vienna
- At 17, immigrated to Britain alone with nothing but a £5 note
- Stayed in a Catholic hostel and eventually moved to Bloomsbury House
  - Received a 25 shilling allowance per week
- Gained connections and friendships with prominent Catholic leaders

# Roland Hill's Internment



- Hill was interned due to ethnic profiling
  - A police officer came to pick up his friend and took Hill as well
- Initially taken to Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk, England
- Interned on the Isle of Mann as a “unfriendly alien”
  - Accommodations: boarding houses and hostels
  - Entertainment came from the refugees themselves
  - Observed that German Jewish internees were still very patriotic and attached to German cultural traditions
- After a month, Hill was sent to a camp in New Brunswick, Canada.
- In November, 1940 Hill was released and went back to England to join the Pioneer Corps

# During the War Years

- Refugees pleasantly surprised by the determination to defeat Hitler
  - “The Blitz brought out the best of them”
- Overall, warm and thankful to British people

# Role of Refugee Organizations

## National organizations:

- Jewish Refugee Committee
- National Refugee Committee
- Christian Refugee Committee
- Central British Fund

## Local organizations:

- Birmingham Jewish Refugee Club
- Manchester Jewish Refugee Committee

## • Provided:

- Socialization, Education, resources, allowance, religious services, assimilation advice
- Settle refugees into their new lives in England

Circular to Refugees from Germany and Austria.

In view of the present emergency you should :—

- (1) Conform to arrangements made for corresponding British population :—
- (2) Obey honourably all directions of the Police.
- (3) Be willing to undertake any form of work or service that may be open to you or that you are asked to undertake by responsible authorities.
- (4) **AVOID TALKING GERMAN IN PUBLIC.**
- (5) Not on any account attempt to go to Bloomsbury House or Woburn House for any purpose. If a maintenance allowance is due to you it will be sent to you at your last known address.
- (6) If you are in a private house or lodgings, remain where you are, unless forced to move by the authorities. If you are required to leave your lodgings or the home in which you reside, try to make other arrangements for yourself: failing that go to the local Refugee Committee, if there is one. In any emergency if there is nothing else that you can do, go to the local police and ask them to advise you.
- (7) Notify by post card at once to the German Jewish Aid Committee at Broadwood House, Lady Margaret Road, Sunningdale, Berks, any change of address, stating:  
Registration Number(s).  
Name(s) and Ages.  
Former trade or occupation.  
New address.  
Whether maintained :
  - (i) By a friend or relative.
  - (ii) By maintenance allowance.
  - (iii) In a Hostel.
- (8) If you are living in a Hostel, the Warden, or person in charge will make all arrangements for you and will, if necessary, seek advice from the local police or from the Committee at Broadwood House, Lady Margaret Road, Sunningdale, Berks. **You should, in any case, obey his orders implicitly.**
- (9) Arrange, if possible, to listen for radio announcements affecting refugees.
- (10) As many refugees are moving and may not receive their copy of this circular, will you please tell your friends of the foregoing instructions and also ask them to send us a post card giving their registration number(s) and latest address.

BY ORDER,  
OTTO M. SCHIFF.

Address in the event of emergency:  
BROADWOOD HOUSE,  
LADY MARGARET ROAD,  
SUNNINGDALE, BERKS.

# Birmingham Jewish Refugee Club

- Founded by Johanna Simmons in 1940
  - Daughter Ruth Simmons took over after her mother's death in late 1939
- Gave out refreshments at meetings for a penny
- Held weddings, Bat Mitzvahs, Bar Mitzvahs, other celebrations to integrate refugees
- Hosted Passover every year
- As people settled into English life, club eventually dissolved

**WHAT DOES  
THIS MEAN FOR  
TODAY'S CRISIS?**

# Today's Refugee Crisis

- 22.5 million refugees in the world
- US Travel Ban
- From Syria: 73% are women and children
- <https://www.voanews.com/a/british-government-resettle-unaccompanied-child-refugees/3319081.html>

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