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 form 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
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 targets of attacks by anti-sema-tic, 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
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

Sources


