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## Continental Britons: Jewish Refugees from Nazi Europe

'Finchleystrasse', the bus conductors used to call out, back in the 1950s, as the buses swept down the Finchley Road towards the tube station, and 'Johann Barnes', as they came to John Barnes department store, where Waitrose now stands. The German-speaking refugees from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia who fled to Britain to escape the Nazis after 1933, predominantly Jews, brought a dash of colour and exoticism to the monochrome conformity, the cultural insularity and ethnic homogeneity of British society in the period either side of the Second World War. For at that time the refugees from Central Europe were still the first outriders of a swelling tide of migrants to make their own distinct contribution to the social landscape of the day.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in their principal areas of settlement, especially North-West London, where their culture, their way of life and – not least – their accents made a significant and vivid impact. Few will be surprised to learn that the organisation that has represented the Jews from Central Europe since mid-1941, the Association of Jewish Refugees in Great Britain, now in its sixtieth anniversary year, has been located in four offices, all of them on or adjacent to the Finchley Road along the short stretch between Swiss Cottage and Frognal.

No less striking was the impact of the refugees on British art and culture, on British intellectual and academic life generally, and on a whole range of areas of British society, from photo-journalism to psychoanalysis, from art history to publishing, all of which would have been incalculably the poorer without the refugees' contribution. Who but the refugee art historian Nikolaus Pevsner could have written the classic *Buildings of England*? Who but the refugee bridge champions Rixi Marcus and Fritzi Gordon would for years have represented Britain at women's international bridge tournaments? Who but the refugee ornithologist Ludwig Koch would have created a sound archive of British birdsong?

The focus of this exhibition is not only on the relatively small number who achieved prominent public success, as Nobel Prize winners, peers of the realm, world-famous artists or founders of great enterprises. It seeks to chronicle the experiences and achievements of the mass of ordinary refugees, most of whom had to struggle to overcome the obstacles they faced in securing a new and settled existence in Britain. Their success is not to be measured in conventional terms of 'high achievement', but in the very fact of their having made a new life here: in creating the conditions for a stable existence for themselves and their families, and in particular for their children, who have in the main been able to build on that inheritance, as British-born descendants of Central European stock. It goes without saying that not all refugees attained even this degree of successful adaptation to life in Britain; traumatized by the circumstances of their brutal ejection from the land of their birth and unable

as émigrés to gain a firm footing in unfamiliar and sometimes uncaring surroundings, some of them eked out miserable and impoverished lives, ending in despair, even in suicide.

But by and large the story that the exhibition has to tell is one of achievement against the odds, of a series of mostly unsung but nonetheless very real triumphs over adversity. The images shown, taken both from family and private life and from the commercial, professional and public spheres, reflect the everyday experiences of the ordinary refugees, what Wolfgang Benz has called 'das Exil der kleinen Leute' – in both its positive and its negative aspects. It is also important to remember that the refugee experience extended well beyond North-West London. Already from an early stage, refugee entrepreneurs, for example, were setting up businesses and founding industrial projects far from the metropolis; notable among them were those who took advantage of government incentives to create employment in areas hard hit by the economic depression of the 1930s, like the North-East, Cumberland and South Wales. The Society of Jewish Refugees was founded in Glasgow well before the AJR in London, and Morris Feinmann House was set up by the Manchester Refugees Committee some years before the equivalent old age homes for refugees in London.

Though small in number compared to subsequent waves of immigration – the Jews from Central Europe who settled permanently in Britain numbered some 50,000 – the refugees from Hitler were to prove disproportionately rich in their potential for achievement. This is partly to be explained by the fact that they were not economic migrants escaping from grinding and primitive poverty, but refugees from political persecution who had, as a group, already held established occupational and professional positions in developed economies and whose families had acquired educational, intellectual and cultural resources that marked them out as socially and economically upwardly mobile.

Already in July 1948, the monthly magazine of the Association of Jewish Refugees, the *AJR Information* (now *AJR Journal*), was puzzling over the settlement patterns of the refugees from Hitler. Their determination to reside in middle-class areas betokened a self-image and sense of identity far removed from that of the Jews from Eastern Europe who, fleeing the pogroms of Tsarist Russia from the 1880s, settled first in areas like the East End:

In Germany, the Jew was assimilated and belonged to the middle class; even when losing his fortune, he did not become a proletarian but a petty bourgeois. In the London East End ... he belonged to a Yiddish-speaking proletarian stratum, though at a later stage either he or his children managed to improve their position ... The dispossessed refugee did not start at the lowest rung of the ladder in Whitechapel, but,

penniless as he was, took his furnished room in Hampstead or other North-Western parts of the town.

The different road to integration into British society taken by the later of these two waves of Jewish immigrants does not indicate any innate superiority of one group over another. Rather, it raises the issue of the social, cultural and economic situation from which the refugees from Central Europe had come, for it was that situation in their countries of origin which largely determined the way in which they lived, worked and set about building new lives in the adopted homeland where they had found refuge.

## **German-Jewish Life before Hitler**

Jews have lived in Germany since Roman times, when they came to frontier settlements like Colonia (Cologne) in the wake of the legions that established outposts on the *limes*, the Empire's line of defence against the barbarian Teutons without. Thus it was that when the Nazis came to power in 1933, what they set about destroying was a centuries-old culture, justifiably proud of its traditions and closely intertwined with the German culture in which it was, in part, rooted.

For many hundreds of years, though, Jews and Germans remained distinct communities, divided both by the physical walls of the ghettos behind which the Jews were confined and by the separate legal status accorded to each group. Neither wished for close relations. For the Christian Germans, the Jews were the killers of Christ who clung obstinately to pagan beliefs and mysterious practices. Their interactions with the Jews tended all too often to be brutal and violent, as in the massacres of Rhineland Jews perpetrated in 1096 by the god-fearing promoters of the First Crusade, or acts of thinly disguised robbery, as in the countless cases of summary expropriation of Jewish wealth. The Jews, concerned strenuously to preserve their separate identity against the threat of assimilation, held to the religiously based customs and style of life that sealed them off from their gentile surroundings almost as effectively as the discrimination that they suffered and the closure of the areas where they dwelt.

In the late eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment, with its doctrine of humanism, secularism and equal rights, brought an end to Jewish spiritual and cultural isolation. The Jews of Germany, too, experienced their 'Aufklärung', the Haskalah, associated with famous names like Moses Mendelssohn, the friend and intellectual confidant of Immanuel Kant, the great philosopher of enlightenment. It seemed as if the barriers that had divided the Jews from their gentile neighbours could be swept away by the doctrines of universal civil rights, political democracy and constitutional liberalism emanating from the French Revolution and the American Declaration of Independence.

Images from Jewish family life in Germany and Austria.



Courtesy of Ronald Gerver.



Courtesy of the Jewish Museum.



Courtesy of the Anthony Grenville.



Courtesy of the Jewish Museum.

Jews were all at once free to participate in the vision of the universal brotherhood of humanity, as depicted on stage in Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*, where prejudice, violence and discrimination against Jews give way before the gentler powers of reason, tolerance and the forgiveness of past wrongs. Jews too experienced the sense of spiritual emancipation inspired by the new liberalism, which aimed to overthrow in the name of reason and justice the antiquated superstitions and the arbitrary abuse of power under which they had suffered over the centuries. In the name of freedom, all things became possible. Eagerly drinking in the words of Schiller's Marquis Posa to the royal autocrat, Philip of Spain, in his eloquent plea for freedom of thought in *Don Carlos*, 'Sire, geben Sie Gedankenfreiheit', Jews too came to believe that by freeing their minds they could be free to be themselves. To the sublime accompaniment of Beethoven's music, the sentiments of Schiller's 'Ode to Joy' were to usher in an era of equality, humanity and brotherhood; it might have been wiser to pay more heed to the tragic outcome of Marquis Posa's endeavours.

During the nineteenth century, the process of the emancipation of the Jews in the German-speaking lands progressed, slowly and with setbacks, but apparently irrevocably. The Jews, once granted equal rights and status, began to participate energetically in the society around them and to assimilate. Liberalism, and the emancipation it brought, set the Jews of Germany firmly on the path of assimilation, and that key strategy of assimilation was what the great majority of Jews held to, at least as long as they lived under conditions of political liberalism that enabled them so to do. Whatever assimilation meant, though, it did not mean the complete abandonment of Jewish identity and the total absorption of Jews into German society. Jews continued to worship and practise as Jews, to see themselves as Jews in certain key spheres of life, however much they claimed the right to be treated no differently from their fellow Germans in other spheres, and to participate on terms of parity in professional or political life.

That political liberalism faced an uphill struggle in Germany has long been a commonplace among historians. The failure of the revolution of 1848, which aimed to bring full parliamentary government to the German states, was followed in 1871 by the foundation of the German Empire, created by Bismarck on the battlefield and in the spirit of 'blood and iron', not by the will of the German people, constitutionally expressed. Bismarck built a pseudo-constitutional system behind which real power remained vested in the organs of the Prussian state, a military autocracy with parliamentary trappings.

The Wilhelmine Empire was to prove a breeding ground for an underground of illiberal, reactionary and discriminatory ideologies, not the least of which was the new form of racial anti-Semitism, according to which a Jew remained a Jew 'by blood', however assimilated and even when baptized. The slump of 1873, which ushered in a long period of economic depression, provided the trigger for a wave of anti-Jewish feeling to break surface. Jews



Courtesy of the Jewish Museum  
Lore Sulzbacher's parents on honeymoon in Venice,  
1910.



Courtesy of the Jewish Museum  
Gertrude Landshoff on her first day at school, c. 1902,  
holding her 'Schulüte', the cone-shaped box of sweets  
customary on that occasion.



Courtesy of the Jewish Museum  
Rabbi Ignaz Maybaum with batmitzvah girls, Bingen  
am Rhein, 1927.