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“Reason for Dismissal? — Jewish Faith”: Analysis of Narratives in the SPSL Immigration Applications by German-Speaking Neurologists

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Abstract

Two months after Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) had been proclaimed the Reich chancellor, the first anti-Jewish law was passed in Nazi Germany, based on which “non-Aryan” academics and researchers were dismissed from their state-supported positions. These scholars were desperate to flee Germany, due to the appalling treatment they had been subjected to regardless of their academic status and scientific achievements. The growing socio-political tensions in Germany attracted considerable attention from British scientists, who — led by Sir William Beveridge (1879–1963) — established the Academic Assistance Council (later known as the Society for Protection of Science and Learning; SPSL). Between 1933 and 1945, the SPSL assisted several thousand scholars in need by providing stipends and placements at universities or research institutions in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. Among the fortunate émigrés were world-renowned professors as well as upcoming young scientists. Regardless of their level of expertise, these young academics and physicians were equally distressed by the way they were treated and desperate to flee Germany. The SPSL immigration questionnaires and other supporting materials provide an insight today into the events, which the applicants experienced at the time. They furthermore present their hope to rebuild their lives and careers in their new host country in considerable detail.

This article analyses the work and family life of German-speaking neuroscientists as well as the political context and SPSL responses to Nazi and British policies. It focuses on applicants’ social and scientific context at the time, by also emphasizing how the drastically worsening situation in the Third Reich affected refugees’ morale and increased their efforts in escaping the country. The case of émigré neuroscientists is particularly insightful, as this group encompassed an interdisciplinary and heterogeneous group of psychiatrists, neurologists, psychologists, and experimental biologists, which allows for useful cross-comparisons.¹

“It is heartbreaking what is happening on our continent. We cannot keep turning our backs on this. We can — and must — do more. If every area in the UK took just 10 families, we could offer sanctuary to 10,000 refugees. Let’s not look back with shame at our inaction.”

Yvette Cooper, British Labour Party Politician and Shadow Home Secretary of Britain, commenting on Syrian refugee crisis, 3 September 2015

¹ This article is an extended version of a paper presented at the 2016 Humanities and Social Sciences Congress at the University of Calgary, 28–30 May 2016. The author is grateful for the recommendations and suggestions from two anonymous referees and wishes to thank Frank W. Stahnisch, for his editorial read and constructive comments, and Paul Stortz, who revised the English language of the final article.

Introduction

While discussing the issue of the Jewish refugee crisis, which emerged in Europe in the 1930s after Adolf Hitler had gained power in Germany, one should emphasize considerable societal and political changes that had previously occurred after the First World War. The Great Depression and the growing fear of Bolshevism awoke far-right tendencies across Europe. Defeated in the First World War, Germany was forced to take sole responsibility for the war and to pay extensive war reparations, which contributed to mass unemployment. The sudden transformation of German political structures from both the far right and the far left — and from a traditional monarchy to a parliamentary republic — led to a ruthless fight for power among German political factions, creating chaos and corruption.² Therefore, the early 1930s campaign of the Nazi party (NSDAP), which promised to decrease unemployment and bring Germany back to its prestigious political position in Europe, gained substantial public support. It led the party and then Hitler himself to political victory. Nazi policies attracted much attention at home and abroad. International observers focused primarily on the economic achievements of the newly established Third Reich, turning a blind eye on persecution of Jews and political opponents.³

Meanwhile, Fascist organizations and legislation had been established in several countries worldwide. In Poland, for example, several universities introduced so-called “ghetto benches,” seating on one side of the lecture theatres, to segregate Jewish from Gentile students. Moreover, Polish-Jewish students’ transcripts were further marked with “J” for “Jude.”⁴ Nazi sympathies also spread to Britain, where in 1932 Sir Oswald Edward Mosley (1896–1980) created the British Union of Fascists, which existed until 1940.⁵

Weeks after Hitler had taken control of Germany, the first concentration camp was created in Dachau in Bavaria.⁶ On 7 April 1933, the Nazi government passed the Law for the Re-establishment of a Professional Civil Service (*Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*) according to which those of “non-Aryan descent” were barred from being employed in any branch of the civil service, and those already employed were dismissed. The contracts of thousands of tenured academics and researchers were terminated. Consequently, an ever-increasing number of Jewish medical scholars tried to escape the Nazi terror in Central Europe.⁷

The dismissal of German academics and scientists in 1933 accompanied other alarming events, including the boycott of Jewish businesses which took place across Germany, and the introduction of the Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935,⁸ stripping Jews of their German citizenship and prohibiting them from sexual relations and marriage with German Gentiles. The growing concerns about the terror following *Kristallnacht* of 9 November 1938 also sparked protests from many international public groups against the Nazi persecution of Jews.⁹ Consequently, a number of organizations were established worldwide to assist Jews in their efforts to immigrate to safer designations. One of the most successful organizations was the

² Albrecht Ritschl, “Reparations, Deficits, and Debt Default: The Great Depression in Germany,” in *The Great Depression of the 1930s: Lessons for Today*, eds. Nicholas Crafts and Peter Fearon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 110–39.

³ Cf. Andrew Nagorski, *Hitlerland: American Eyewitnesses to the Nazi Rise to Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 113–29.

⁴ Monika Natkowska, *Numerus clausus, getto ławkowe, numerus nullus, “paragraf aryjski:” antysemityzm na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim 1931–1939* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1999), 7–9.

⁵ Colin Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society, 1876–1939* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 91–96.

⁶ Harold Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau: The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp, 1933–2001* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 21–23.

⁷ Andrew J. Sherman, *Island Refuge: Britain and Refugees from the Third Reich, 1933–1939* (Ilford: Frank Cass, 2013).

⁸ Gisela Bock, *Zwangssterilisation im Nationalsozialismus: Studien zur Rassenpolitik und Geschlechterpolitik* (Muenster: MV Wissenschaft, 2010).

⁹ Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 121–4.

British-based Academic Assistance Council (AAC), which in 1936 consolidated with others under the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL).¹⁰ This article investigates documents in the SPSL archive that record the personal and professional situations of refugee academics in Europe before and during the Second World War, along with the efforts made by SPSL to help them and the outcomes of these activities. In 1988, the SPSL deposited its archival document collection in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. This collection includes both administrative and personal files of individuals who received aid from the SPSL. In correspondence between applicants and the SPSL, is found first-hand accounts of the stressful experiences related to immigration processes of German-speaking neuroscientists.¹¹ The sources are limited in terms of the scientific and medical perspective they offer together with the personal narratives and descriptions. The number of German-speaking neuroscientists assisted by the SPSL is difficult to establish with precision; however, the SPSL collection in the Bodleian Library holds the files of 111 scholars in total.¹² Through their experiences and the need to reintegrate into their receiving scientific and professional communities, the émigré neuroscientists contributed to many new ideas in related research fields, such as neurology, psychiatry, and neuropathology, both during and after the Second World War, while visibly enriching the intellectual culture in their new home countries.

Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL)

Application Procedures

The Academic Assistance Council officially began operating on 24 May 1933, after the political philosopher and economist Sir William Beveridge (1879–1963) of the London School of Economics published an announcement of its founding, signed by several Nobel Prize winners from the United Kingdom. Beveridge had learned about the dismissal of German-Jewish academics during a trip to a conference in Vienna and was much appalled by the way the Nazi government treated its scientists. By August, the AAC had raised close to £10,000, which it used to provide one-year grants to academics in need. This help, however, was meant to be temporary, since Beveridge hoped that the “Jewish crisis in Germany” would end soon. The early AAC provided two types of stipends: £250 per annum for scholars with families and £182 per annum for unmarried academics. The idea was first to provide stipends and then to help find temporary placement for refugee academics at British universities and research institutes, because this employment was one of the requirements imposed by the British government.¹³

The news of the creation of the AAC spread very quickly in the scientific community. By late summer of 1933, the organization had already received hundreds of letters asking for help. Given that the situation in Germany was out of control, some professionals applied even before they were officially dismissed. Dr.

¹⁰ The activity of the Society for Protection of Science and Learning (hereafter SPSL) has never been suspended. In 1999 SPSL changed its name to Council for At-Risk Academics, which still exists. See <http://www.cara.ngo>, accessed 15 June 2016. For more information on the history of SPSL, see David Zimmerman: “The Society for the Protection of Science and Learning and the Politicization of British Science in the 1930s,” *Minerva* 44, 1 (2006): 22–45.

¹¹ The terms “neuroscience” and “neuroscientist” are used here as descriptive and thus ahistorical notions, encompassing contemporary neuroanatomists, neurophysiologists, neurologists, psychologists, and neuropathologists.

¹² There are files for seventy-one refugees in the field of neurology and forty in psychology in the archival collection. SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library (I.20.11 Neurology – Shelfmarks: MSS. S.P.S.L. 393, – 9 / I.17 Psychology – Shelfmarks: MSS. S.P.S.L. 343/7 – 348/7).

¹³ *Ibid.*

Alfred Storch (1888–1962)¹⁴ — who at that point was on a nine-month fellowship at the Muensingen Mental Hospital in Switzerland — wrote to the AAC on 28 August 1933:

It is necessary for myself to get any protection. . . . I would be very glad to receive any information of you, if it is possible to work in my proper department in an English Hospital.¹⁵

Each applicant had to follow strict rules when requesting aid from the AAC/SPSL, such as providing several professional references, a list of publications, and a completed application questionnaire. Most of the neuroscientists, along with other scientists and academics, began gathering their supporting documents months, sometimes even years, before submitting their final applications. The AAC/SPSL questionnaire consisted of four pages. The first page requested general information such as name, age, nationality, profession, specialization, place of work, and a list of people who would vouch for the applicant's level of expertise. Having famous referees and work contacts in the United Kingdom and United States was seen as an advantage for many academic refugees. The second page contained questions regarding (1) the reason for dismissal — usually the applicant's Jewish origin was given, and in about 12 percent of cases political inclinations was as the main reason for being fired; (2) the date of dismissal; (3) the applicant's financial situation — whether he or she had other income or was entitled to a state pension; and (4) whether the applicant had an offer of a professional position abroad. The vast majority of the émigrés (up to 95 percent) were male; the questionnaire also inquired about the status of family members to be supported by the ACC/SPSL. The clinical psychologist Olga Marum (1894–1944), from the Munich rehabilitation institute, which had been headed by the neurologist Max Isserlin (1879–1941), was a notable exception. She approached the ACC/SPSL on her arrival in Britain in 1937, obtaining a partial scholarship that supplemented her research fellowship in relation to her adjunct appointment with the University College London, lasting until after the end of the Second World War.¹⁶ Dr. Marum could not, however, fully reintegrate into the neurological and psychological communities in Britain and died tragically a year before the end of the war during a German V2 (“retribution weapon”) rocket attack on the city of London, the morning of 25 November 1944.¹⁷

All of this information was essential for the ACC/SPSL to evaluate the urgency of each applicant's case. The third page of the questionnaire dealt with religion and language skills — fluency and publications in English would assure that the candidate could adapt to life in an English-speaking country, and more importantly, could communicate with English-speaking colleagues. Additional questions referred to their marital status, and whether refugees had children. Finally, the questionnaire addressed the refugee's desired destination. Here the applicants could list countries they wished to emigrate to, and also to indicate which regions and destinations they would or would not consider, such as tropical countries, the Far East, the Soviet Union, and South Africa. Based on document analysis, this author has been able to establish for the first time that single professionals were more willing to relocate to countries outside of Europe, whereas neuroscientists with families were rather reluctant to travel to the British colonies due to “unfavourable

¹⁴ Dr. Alfred Storch was born in 1888 in Hamburg. He specialized in psychiatry and worked at the University Clinic in Tuebingen until his dismissal due to his Jewish origin. He immigrated to Switzerland where he worked at the Mental Hospital in Muensingen until 1954. He died in 1962 in Muensingen.

¹⁵ SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Folder Adolf Storch, Letter to the AAC by Adolf Storch, 28 August 1933 (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 399/1).

¹⁶ See Olga Marum's file, SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 523/4).

¹⁷ See also in Felicitas M. Starr-Egger, “Women Refugee Academics at the University of London,” in *Exile and Gender II: Politics, Education and the Arts*, eds. Charmian Brinson, Jana Barbora Buresova, and Andrea Hammel (Amsterdam: Brill, 2017), 96–113; esp. 105f.

climate" that was "too hard for their wives."¹⁸

High Demand and Limited Resources

By 1935, the Nazi racial policies had become more oppressive. While in 1933, the ACC had refrained from commenting on the terror imposed by the Nazi regime on its Jewish citizens, by 1935 it not only openly condemned the Nazi government for its actions against academics in Germany, but also began emphasizing the racial aspect that had increasingly become apparent. On 16 January 1936, the SPSL secretary, Esther Simpson (1903–1996),¹⁹ sought from the philosopher George Stout (1860–1944) of St. Andrews University help for neurology professor Erwin Strauss (1891–1975)²⁰ stressing that the reason for his dismissal was "his non-Aryan ancestry."²¹ At that point, the crisis was no longer temporary, and more extensive funding was needed. The SPSL began to approach banks and other major financial institutions, but with little success. Another problem was finding permanent academic or medical placement, which proved to be very difficult since few British institutions were able or willing to guarantee a placement. Anti-Semitism drove some institutional refusals, yet most of the institutions were themselves genuinely struggling financially at the time. In some cases, refugee scholars were allowed to use institutions' facilities free of charge. Despite such major obstacles, however, by 1937 the SPSL had been directly or indirectly involved in supporting eighty scholars from across the disciplines related to neuroscience. A year later, the number of those permanently placed had increased to 127.

The high demand for the SPSL's services during its first years of operation put much pressure on the organization's finances. Thus, the SPSL began to be more selective, and it opted to help those whose situation was most urgent. The policy of the British government to admit the best in the field did not help in this respect. Favoured were, for example, promising scientists from whom British psychiatry could benefit.²² While analysing the SPSL questionnaires of German-speaking neuroscientists, one can observe that most scholars coming to North America were between twenty-eight and forty-one years old. Applications from younger neuroscientists were, however, processed more quickly, since most from Germany arrived in 1933 and those from Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938. Younger neuroscientists, particularly those who were unmarried, were more open to work in tropical British colonies and, like Leopold Deutsch (b. 1907),²³ willing to temporarily accept unpaid work.²⁴ And here ageism in the scientific establishment was quite prevalent. Older scholars experienced serious problems and delays awaiting immigration. For example, psychiatrist Max Schacherl's (1876–1964)²⁵ application from 1938 was initially

¹⁸ SPSL Collection, Folder Samuel Last, Questionnaire (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 396/5).

¹⁹ Esther Simpson was born in 1903 in Leeds. She studied modern languages at the University of Leeds. Simpson was hired as the SPSL secretary in July 1933. She retired in 1978 after over forty years of service. In 1956, she received an Order of the British Empire Award. She died in London in 1996.

²⁰ Prof. Erwin Strauss was born in 1891 in Frankfurt am Main. He was trained as a neurologist and worked in Berlin until his dismissal in 1938. He later immigrated to the United States where he settled in Kentucky. He died in 1975 in Lexington in Kentucky.

²¹ SPSL Collection, Folder Erwin Strauss, Letter to Stout by Esther Simpson, 16 January 1936 (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 399/3).

²² Cf. Paul Weindling: "Medical Refugees in Britain and the Wider World, 1930–1960: Introduction," *Social History of Medicine* 22, 4 (2009): 451–9.

²³ Dr. Leopold Deutsch was born in 1907 in Galocz in Austria-Hungary. He specialized in psychiatry and neurology and worked in Vienna until his dismissal in 1938. Deutsch then immigrated to Britain in 1939.

²⁴ See Leopold Deutsch's file, SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 393/7).

²⁵ Dr. Max Schacherl was born in 1876 in Vienna. He specialized in psychiatry and neurology and worked at the Kaiser Josef Hospital of the Austrian capital. He was dismissed after the *Anschluss* of Austria in 1938. As a result, he immigrated to London but returned to Austria in 1946, where he died in 1964.

denied by the SPSL due to restrictions on the number of admitted Austrians. The information in his file shows that he came to Great Britain using his own resources. Schacherl was nevertheless unable to find paid work even after the Temporary Registration Order had been enacted.²⁶ His assessing officer attributed this to his advanced age and poor knowledge of English; younger German scientists tended to speak and write better English.²⁷

While dealing with financial difficulties, the SPSL began approaching other organizations to secure funding for scholars in need, including one of the major international agencies for the advancement of science, the Rockefeller Foundation. By then the foundation had a long tradition of sponsoring medical research conducted by German-speaking professionals and scientists. The organization, however, operated according to fairly strict rules: a potential candidate was expected to hold a permanent position within a research institution, a considerable obstacle given that most refugee scholars managed to secure only temporary positions. A second limitation was nationality; stateless applicants were not considered, including many Jewish scientists who had been stripped of their nationality by the Nazi regime. In response to these challenges, the SPSL hoped to create a cooperative arrangement with the Rockefeller Foundation. Such a plan had never been tried before, since for almost two years the foundation had opted to act independently. Meanwhile, the intensification of Nazi discrimination against Jews and political opponents influenced the foundation to ease its conditions. Consequently, several scholars who previously had received the foundation's support were awarded research grants that enabled them to continue their research mainly in the United States, and also to a lesser extent in Britain.²⁸

After the *Anschluss* (annexation) of Austria on 12 March 1938, the crises deepened. A new approach was needed to find placement for the refugees at academic institutions and, in the case of psychiatrists and neurologists, possibly at medical research institutes both in Britain and abroad. Experiencing increasing financial problems and hostility toward the refugees' cause, the SPSL began to encourage applicants to seek help elsewhere:

We shall do our best to help you, though it is only fair to warn you that conditions now are very difficult indeed. If you have any contacts in U.S.A., we would advise you to get in touch with them without delay, as there are better prospects in that country than in Europe.²⁹

Obstacles

The Hostility of the British Scientific Community toward Jewish Medical Professionals

The British general public was rather sympathetic toward Jewish refugees arriving in the early 1930s. Britain required a number of manual workers and domestic servants, and therefore the newcomers were

²⁶ In January 1941, this Temporary Registration Order was passed, acknowledging foreign professional qualifications and allowing, for example, the employment of refugee scientists and physicians in the British armed forces. Paul Weindling, "Medical Refugees as Practitioners and Patients: Public, Private, and Practice Records," in *Yearbook of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies*, eds. Andrea Hammel and Anthony Grenville (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 141–54; esp. 142.

²⁷ SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library, Max Schacherl Folder (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 398/5).

²⁸ Paul Weindling, "'An Overloaded Ark?': The Rockefeller Foundation and the Refugee Medical Scientists, 193–345," *Studies of History of Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 31, 4 (2000): 477–89; here 481.

²⁹ SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library, Ernst Straussler Folder, Letter to Dr. Straussler by Esther Simpson, 25 November 1938 (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 399/5).

expected to fill those vacancies. Within five years, this positive attitude began to change, from rather reserved to openly hostile, especially when the number of refugees steadily rose after the *Anschluss* of Austria. Scholars like Louise London have argued that the British government's immigration policies were focused on maintaining low unemployment, and altruism toward persecuted European Jews was not on their agenda. Additionally, by limiting the number of admitted German and Austrian Jews, the government allegedly prevented domestic anti-Semitism from escalating.³⁰

The living situations and personal fates of the refugee scientists and doctors further allow us to gain valuable insights into the social atmosphere and political situation of wartime Britain. The British Medical Association (BMA) strongly resented medical refugees, since they were seen as potential competition for jobs. Thus, the BMA and the Medical Practitioners' Union pressured the Home Office to keep the number of admitted medical professionals to a bare minimum. Italian professionals, unlike Germans and Austrians, were much favoured, as they had had less previous exposure to undesirable political, eugenic, and racial views. In addition, the British medical establishment managed to impose quite strict requirements, such as requalification, on refugees' ability to practise in Great Britain. Thus, in order to practise medicine, refugees were obliged to sit for additional exams in anatomy and physiology. A further difficulty was that medical licencing had become decentralized, for example at the Scottish medical schools or the Royal Colleges of physicians and surgeons in England and Wales. In England, with the highest concentration of medical refugees, the requalification process lasted two years, but in Scotland, only one year. Hence, many émigré physicians chose to re-qualify in Scotland, using the extramural program of the Royal College in Edinburgh as their point of entry into the community.³¹

The resentment of the medical establishment, however, went beyond even the common fear of unemployment. While the medical education system in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s remained unregulated, the German system had long been standardized and was based on active research; thus, admitting large numbers of foreign-trained medical professionals threatened change to the "cosy," elite-oriented, and chauvinistic medical establishment in the British Isles.³²

The *Anschluss* of Austria and the ensuing new wave of refugees further deepened the hostility of the British government and medical establishment. Despite early signs of sympathy in the general public toward Austrian physicians, in late May 1938 a visa entry system was introduced, which regulated the arrival of all Germans and Austrians in Britain from that point on.³³ The Home Office followed the BMA's suggestion and capped the number of admitted Austrians at fifty per year. A further number of physicians, particularly women, managed to enter the country as domestic servants or as low-status nursing aides. Some medical professionals arrived completely at their own expense. Due to various limitations on the labour market, they were forced to work pro bono, as Dr. Schacherl explained in his letter to secretary Simpson dated 24 February 1942:

I am assistant to Dr. Hector . . . so I [have] the possibility for practise in my profession as a neurologist, but until now I hardly [see] a patient . . . I am not paid, but I would get three quarters of any amount I would get. So I have to wait for the amount. So I do.³⁴

³⁰ Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews of Europe, 1933–1948: British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees, and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–2.

³¹ Kenneth Collins, "European Refugee Physicians in Scotland, 1933–45," *Social History of Medicine* 22 (2009): 519–30.

³² Paul Weindling, "Medical Refugees and Modernisation of British Medicine, 1930–1960," *Social History of Medicine* 22 (2009): 489–519.

³³ Sherman, *Island Refuge*.

³⁴ SPSL Collection, Max Schacherl Folder, Letter to Esther Simpson by Max Schacherl, 24 February 1942 (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 398/5).

From Refugees to “Enemy Aliens”: Internment

The concept of internment of “enemy aliens” had been previously introduced by the British Empire as a security measure during the South African War (1899–1902) and the First World War.³⁵ However, its large scale and harsh implementation had harmed Britain’s international reputation. Therefore, during the months-long debates on the issue of “enemy aliens” over the summer 1939, the home secretary, Sir Samuel Hore (1880–1959), decided that Britain would implement a tribunal system relying on an individual assessment of each “enemy alien.”³⁶ According to this policy, foreign-born residents of Britain were judged upon their political inclinations and social connections rather than their nationality. Many politicians viewed this as time-consuming, unreliable, and costly. A total of 73,353 “enemy aliens” appeared before tribunals. The majority (64,244) were placed in category C — those loyal to Britain and free of any restrictions since they did not pose any threats to British society or, more importantly, to its security. A considerable number (6,782) were classified as category B — those whose loyalty was in doubt (including communists and socialists), and who were therefore subject to certain limitations, the most important being no freedom of movement. A very marginal number of “enemy aliens” belonged to category A — 569 persons who were known to the British authorities for their strong pro-Nazi sympathies and for which they were immediately interned.³⁷

In April 1940, the “phoney war” came to an end and along with it the general compassion toward German-speaking refugees in Britain. On 10 May 1940, King George VI (1895–1952) confirmed Winston Churchill (1874–1965) as the new prime minister of Britain. One of Churchill’s first initiatives was internment of “enemy aliens” in category B. Several days later, those in category C who were now thought to pose a threat to British society, through terror attacks or spying, were also interned.³⁸ At this point the targets of internment were mostly Germans and Austrians, regardless of their religion or political views. After Italy joined the Axis against the Allies on 10 June 1940, the British government reacted immediately by interning all male Italians aged between sixteen and seventy who had lived in Britain for less than twenty years.³⁹ Unlike Germans and Austrians, only a few Italians in Britain were refugees who had fled fascism in their country. In fact, most were economic immigrants who had lived in Britain for a long time, and were generally well integrated into British society. Around 4,000 men were arrested, among them approximately 1,500 “dangerous” members of the fascist party.⁴⁰

Finally, on 21 June 1940 an order was given to call all remaining male “enemy aliens” who were of military age.⁴¹ By July of that year, 27,200 people, including 4,000 women, had been interned.⁴² Individual assessment based on political views instead of nationality was quickly abandoned in the face of a

³⁵ Panikos Panayi, “An Intolerant Act by Intolerant Society: The Internment of Germans in Britain during the Great War,” in *The Internment of Aliens in Twentieth Century Britain*, eds. David Cesarani and Tony Kushner (London: F. Cass; Portland, OR: F. Cass, c/o International Specialized Book Services), 53–78; Elizabeth Van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War: A Social History* (Johannesburg, South Africa: Jacana Media, 2013).

³⁶ Tony Kushner: “Club Land, Cricket Tests and Alien Internment, 1939–1940,” in Cesarani and Kushner, *The Internment of Aliens*, 53–87; esp. 84.

³⁷ Zoë Andrea Denness, “A Question Which Affects Our Prestige as a Nation:” *The History of British Civilian Internment, 1899–1945* (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2012), 218.

³⁸ Ernest Robert Zimmermann, Michael Beaulieu, and David Ratz, *The Little Third Reich on Lake Superior* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2015), 24.

³⁹ Lucio Sponza: “The Internment of Italians 1940–1945,” in *Totally Un-English?: Britain’s Internment of “Enemy Aliens” in Two World Wars*, ed. Richard Dove (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 151–63.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴¹ Denness, “A Question Which Affects Our Prestige,” 250.

⁴² Peter Gillman and Leni Gillman, “Collar the Lot:” *How Britain Interned and Expelled Its Wartime Refugees* (London: Quartet Books, 1980), 173.

threatened Nazi invasion. Churchill's decisions to protect Britain by interning thousands of "enemy aliens" were met with serious obstacles, the most important being lack of accommodation and insufficient food supplies. Therefore, as early as May 1940 the cabinet began pressing governments of several Commonwealth countries, including Canada, India, Australia, and New Zealand, to share the burden of "unwanted enemy aliens."⁴³

The sudden change of attitude toward "enemy aliens" was partially dictated by the fear of the public opinion. The unexpected attacks in 1940 on Scandinavia, later on Belgium, and finally on France were shocking after the relatively calm "phoney war." Even more concerning was the rapid defeat of the Western Allies, which left Britain alienated and frightened. The British press maintained the rhetoric that the sudden capitulation of the Allies on the continent was caused by an infiltration into Britain of Hitler's spies, called "the fifth column." Thus, from that point onward every alien was under suspicion. Approximately 85 to 90 percent of the 80,000 "enemy aliens" who entered Britain in the 1930s were German-speaking Jews who had experienced Nazi persecution first-hand before fleeing for Britain. Previous empathy toward them was replaced with xenophobia and, in some cases, anti-Semitic prejudices. As historian Zoë Denness argued, the attitude of the British was mainly anti-alien. She based her analysis on Home Intelligence reports according to which British public opinion of the "enemy aliens" varied depending on "military developments."⁴⁴ For example, the attitude toward Belgians residing in Britain rapidly deteriorated after the defeat of Belgium. Likewise, the hostility toward Italians increased after Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) declared war on the Allies. Thus, the policy of interning Jewish refugees was based on their nationality rather than their religion.⁴⁵ Historian Gavin Schaffer, in contrast, brought out a very interesting point: during the public discussion about the internment of "enemy aliens," many accusations against Jews had surfaced, including their disloyalty, their unclear national identity, issues with social integration, and their putting self-interest first. The perceptions of Jews as newly stateless combined negatively with pre-existing stereotypes such as the "wandering Jew," compounding latent anti-Semitism.⁴⁶

Many scholars have analysed the British government's implementation of the internment policy. Charmian Brinson, for example, emphasized that many women were interned at the Rushen camp on the Isle of Man.⁴⁷ The common belief was that women would excel as members of the "Nazi fifth column," since they would be able to manipulate men through flirtation, sex appeal, and personal appearance.⁴⁸ Consequently, women of German and Austrian origin were subjected to tribunal evaluations, as were their male compatriots. The Rushen women's camp began operating on 29 May 1940. It held nearly 4,000 women in total, who had been previously categorized as A or B.⁴⁹ When the British government revised its treatment of the "enemy aliens," all women who had been involved in Nazi movements in Britain were nearly immediately placed in the internment camps.⁵⁰

Brinson further emphasized the prompt creation of an active pro-National Socialism movement in the camp. British administration, however, failed to control the situation, and as a result Nazi sympathizers

⁴³ Zimmermann, Beaulieu, and Ratz, *The Little Third Reich*, 23–44.

⁴⁴ Denness, "A Question Which Affects Our Prestige," 251–61.

⁴⁵ To some degree this argument can be supported by the attitude of the Military Intelligence, Section 5 (M15) that "warned" the government that Nazi Germany created the Jewish issue in order to flood Britain with German agents. Denness, "A Question Which Affects Our Prestige," 246; also Zimmermann, Beaulieu, and Ratz, *The Little Third Reich*, 30.

⁴⁶ Gavin Schaffer, *Racial Science and British Society, 1930–60* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 80–82.

⁴⁷ Charmian Brinson, "'Loyal to the Reich': National Socialists and Others in the Rushen Women's Internment Camp," in Dove, *Totally Un-English?*, 101–19.

⁴⁸ Denness, "A Question Which Affects Our Prestige," 251–61.

⁴⁹ Women who had been placed in category "C" were not subjected to internment.

⁵⁰ The number of Nazi sympathizers in Britain had been on the rise ever since Hitler had seized power in Germany. By March 1939, membership of the "Fascist organizations" in Britain (both German and Italian) had reached 1,700.

managed to create several Aryan houses at the camp. The camp administration struggled with many practical and organizational problems, including a shortage of beds. Jews often had to share their rooms and beds with Nazi sympathizers, and consequently were exposed to constant harassment. Rushen camp was not an isolated case. Hostility toward Jewish inmates and the administration's lack of intervention were quite common in the British-run internment camps.⁵¹

German-speaking neuroscientists were subjected to the same treatment as other refugees, and many of them were interned as well (see Table 1). Their contribution to science was irrelevant. For some of them, and for the SPSL, verdicts of tribunals came as unpleasant surprises as expressed, for instance, by Esther Simpson in a letter to Dr. Hans Adolf Thorner (1905–1991) dated 24 October 1939:⁵²

The particulars which we sent to your tribunal have been returned to us today with the mark "B." If this is not a mistake, the tribunal has not exempted you from the special restrictions . . . in some places people like yourself who have been here six years and who are well established, and whose police records are absolutely clear, have not had the restrictions removed.⁵³

Refugees were placed in overcrowded camps that often lacked basic furniture and security. They were given poor-quality food and were exposed to much violence from the Nazi sympathizers.⁵⁴ Families of interned neuroscientists desperately sought help from the SPSL. On 1 July 1940 Anna Stengel (1893–1983?), the wife of Dr. Erwin Stengel,⁵⁵ a prominent Austrian psychiatrist and neurologist, wrote to secretary Simpson:

I believe it is my duty to inform you that we had to leave Bristol in 3 days as it became protected area. We went to [Wales] on the 14th of June and here my husband has been interned on the 29th of June. I have not heard of him ever since and do not know where he has been taken to. My husband was employed at the Mental Hospital in Bristol as [a] doctor for research.⁵⁶

Dr. Stengel's position was particularly difficult, as his wife explained:

He also should take the first part of his medical examinations in December 1940 and his final exams in June 1941 for the English Medical Degree at University of Bristol.⁵⁷

Given that a considerable number of SPSL applicants had been interned, precise procedures were being undertaken in each case. On 3 July 1940, Esther Simpson responded to Anna Stengel:

⁵¹ Brinson, "Loyal to the Reich," 102.

⁵² Dr. Hans Adolf Thorner was born in 1905 in Meissen in Germany. He specialized in psychology and neurology and worked at the University of Munich's clinical department of psychiatry and neurology. He immigrated to Britain via France in 1933 and worked in Peckham House Mental Hospital in London, England. He died in 1991.

⁵³ SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library, Hans Adolf Thorner Folder, Letter to Dr. Thorner by Esther Simpson, 24 October 1939 (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 399/6).

⁵⁴ Zimmermann, Beaulieu, and Ratz, *The Little Third Reich*, 25.

⁵⁵ Dr. Erwin Stengel was born in 1902 in Vienna in Austria. He specialized in psychiatry. After the *Anschluss* of Austria, he immigrated to Britain where he worked in Bristol and Sheffield. He died in 1973.

⁵⁶ SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library, Erwin Stengel Folder, Letter to Esther Simpson by Anna Stengel, 1 July 1940 (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 398/7).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

We are trying to obtain the release of people who were doing work of national importance at the time of their internment . . . I am hoping that special consideration will be given to medical people.⁵⁸

The situation of Dr. Herman Josephy (1887–1960)⁵⁹ was somewhat similar. Simpson was alerted by his wife and began immediate efforts for his release in accordance with British government procedures. On 17 July 1940, she contacted the director of the Psychological Laboratory in Cambridge, UK, Dr. Russell Davis (1914–1993):

The only way of obtaining his release is to us to be able to tell the Home Office that prior to his internment Dr. Josephy was engaged on work of direct national importance, and that his personal integrity and loyalty to this country are assured, also that he would be able to continue his work in a non-protected area.⁶⁰

Despite the SPSL's efforts, understanding, and compassion on behalf of interned refugees, not all institutions agreed to help. The rationale behind their reluctance might be the need to protect their own reputation, since the public felt apprehensive toward "enemy aliens" in general. On 11 July 1940, the superintendent of the Bristol Mental Hospital responded to Esther Simpson's request regarding Dr. Stengel:

I have a high opinion of Dr. Stengel's work, but it would be impossible for me to say that this was of immediate national importance.⁶¹

Table 1: Refugee Neuroscientists in Britain Who Were Placed in Internment Camps

Eric Guttman (1896–1948)
 Amadeo Limentani (1913–1994)
 Felix Post (1913–2001)
 Herman Josephy (1896–1971)
 Erwin Stengel (1902–1973)
 Favel Friedrich Kino (b. 1882)
 Eric D. Wittkower (1899–1983)

The internment of the German-speaking refugees affected their careers, and many of them even lost

⁵⁸ SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library, Erwin Stengel Folder, Letter to Anna Stengel by Esther Simpson, 3 July 1940 (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 398/7).

⁵⁹ Dr. Herman Josephy was born in 1887 in Germany. He worked as a professor in neuropathology at University of Hamburg. After he had been dismissed from his academic post, Josephy practised medicine until *Kristallnacht*, when he was deported to the concentration camp Sachsenhausen. Following his release in 1939, he immigrated to Britain. He experienced internment as "enemy alien." After his release Josephy immigrated to Chicago in October 1940. He died in 1960. Cf. Lawrence A. Zeidman, Anna von Villiez, Jan-Patrick Stellmann, and Hendrik van den Bussche, "'History Has Taken Such a Large Piece out of My Life' — Neuroscientist Refugees from Hamburg during National Socialism," *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 25, 3 (2016): 275–98.

⁶⁰ SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library, Hermann Josephy Folder, Letter to Russell Davis by Esther Simpson, 17 July 1940 (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 395/5).

⁶¹ SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library, Erwin Stengel Folder (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 398/7).

their positions. As the final paragraph of Simpson's letter to Dr. Stengel of 5 November 1940 indicates, regaining professional positions was a serious problem:

I'm afraid that we are up against this problem in the case of very many of our released scientists: in fact, the problem has become so great that we shall have to consider some action to be taken.⁶²

Dr. Stengel was released from the internment camp in late October 1940, to some degree due to the efforts of his wife and the SPSL. More important, however, was the progressively changing policy of the British government toward internees. A revision of the "enemy alien" policies followed the tragic sinking of the British passenger ship *Arandora Star* on 2 July 1940 in a German U-boat torpedo attack. The ship had departed from Liverpool for Canada with approximately 1,200 refugees and internees onboard; 717 Italians and 138 German and Austrian "enemy aliens" died in this tragedy.⁶³ The subsequent investigation emphasized that "enemy aliens" had been treated unfairly due to rather vague concerns of the British cabinet. Unlike Germans and Austrians, Italian internees had never been brought before tribunals, and hence the internment of many of the victims of the *Arandora Star* was entirely due to their nationality. Mounting criticism resulted in a reconsideration of each internee's case. Consequently, by the end of 1940, a total of 9,816 "enemy aliens" had been released from British internment.⁶⁴ This number grew steadily. Most of the German-speaking psychiatrists and neuroscientists previously interned were released within four months.

Keeping in Touch

The majority of émigré neuroscientists, when asked about their preferred destination, put the United States at the top of their list. Some files are rather fragmentary; but at least 55 percent succeeded in obtaining posts in various American institutions, in addition to Dr. Karl Stern (1906–1975)⁶⁵ and Dr. Erich D. Wittkower (1899–1983),⁶⁶ who eventually immigrated to Canada.⁶⁷ The fact that a great many psychiatrists and neurologists remained in Britain can be explained by the relatively supportive attitude of the medical establishment and the British government toward this particular profession. By contrast, psychoanalyst refugees, especially from the Viennese school, were victims of intensified restriction policies toward medical practice. Therefore, out of 120 émigré psychoanalysts originally admitted to Britain, only fourteen remained; the rest left, with a majority (eighty) immigrating to the United States.⁶⁸

⁶² SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library, Erwin Stengel Folder, Letter to Dr. Stengel by Esther Simpson, 5 November 1940 (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 398/7).

⁶³ Sponza, "The Internment of Italians," 154.

⁶⁴ Denness, "A Question Which Affects Our Prestige," 222.

⁶⁵ Dr. Karl Stern was born in 1906 in Cham, Germany. He specialized in neuropathology and neurology and worked at the University of Frankfurt am Main's Institute of Neurology. He immigrated to Britain in 1936 and later to Canada where he worked and lived until his death in 1975. See also the article on the topic by Daniel Burston, entitled "Dust and Fog, Fire and Salt: German-Canadian Psychiatrist Karl Stern's (1906–1975) Émigré Experience" in this special issue

⁶⁶ Dr. Erich Wittkower was born in 1899 in Berlin. He specialized in psychoanalysis and psychiatry and worked at Charité Hospital in Berlin. After being dismissed he left Germany for Switzerland. In September 1933, he moved to London to work at Maudsley Hospital. He later immigrated to Canada in 1950 where he worked at McGill University in Montreal. He died in 1983.

⁶⁷ SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford (Shelfmarks: MS. S.P.S.L. 398/9 and 398/10).

⁶⁸ Mitchell Ash, "Central European Émigré Psychologists and Psychoanalysts in the United Kingdom," in *Second Chance: Two Centuries of German-Speaking Jews in the United Kingdom*, eds. Julius Carlebach, Gerhard Hirschfeld, Audrey Newman, Arnold Paucker, and Peter Pulzer (Tuebingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1991), 101–21; esp. 103.

On 16 September 1943, Esther Simpson of the SPSL sent a letter to Dr. Erwin Stengel — who at that time resided in Edinburgh and worked at the Royal Mental Hospital — expressing the SPSL’s interest in the whereabouts of all professionals who had previously reached out to the organization for help. The SPSL had begun to gather information on applicants for its internal records; the organization had great difficulty in keeping records during the war. In fact, the SPSL was seeking information on people who it had been unable to assist, wondering “whether they had managed to escape from the Continent in time.”⁶⁹ This concern was understandable since in 1943 information about the extermination of Jews in Europe had already reached London. To re-establish contact with a group of applicants, the SPSL would send a list of names to one person with whom the society had been in frequent contact. Dr. Stengel is a case in point. His response on 28 September 1943 gives us insights into the networking processes between medical professionals that were maintained during the war. It is difficult to determine whether these contacts were maintained on a strictly professional level, or whether these people were bonded by personal character and their common experiences of Nazi persecution.

After the Second World War had ended, the SPSL continued to gather information about its applicants. Thus, letters were sent out requesting “a brief list of appointments held, giving the dates of such appointments for [their] individual case records, and secondly a rather fuller account of [their] personal experiences.”⁷⁰ The SPSL worked closely with the Department of Resettlement of the Preparatory Commission of the International Refugee Organization. The secretary-general of the SPSL, Ilse Ursell (b. 1922), pointed out that the resettlement of medical professionals proved to be particularly difficult while they struggled to support themselves financially through their research posts and fellowships.⁷¹ In some cases the SPSL was unable to restore contact despite numerous attempts; one such case was Erwin Strauss.

Over the years some of the applicants developed a friendly relationship with the secretary, Esther Simpson. The SPSL collection provides evidence of correspondence exchanged over many years. Two scholars kept in touch fairly frequently, and their correspondence went beyond the standard updating of records: Erwin Stengel experienced numerous obstacles after he settled in the UK, and therefore he asked for help on several occasions. On 23 February 1956, he wrote:

Thank you very much for your kind letter on the occasion of my appointment to the Chair of Psychiatry at Sheffield. . . . I like other owe a great deal to your Society, which apart from helping individuals, has done so much towards creating the climate essential for an admission and progress in this country. I am [fully conscious] of the fact that we owe a very great deal to you personally. Your familiar signature brought back to me the occasions when, in years past, your letters had to warm my heart and to strengthen my morale.⁷²

Karl Stern’s relationship with Mrs. Simpson was particularly close. They addressed each other by first name — Tess and Karl — and ended their correspondence with warm words such as “with a thousand kindest regards, yours very sincerely” or “yours ever.”⁷³

⁶⁹ SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library, Erwin Stengel Folder, Letter to Erwin Stengel by Esther Simpson, 16 September 1943 (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 398/7).

⁷⁰ SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library, Erwin Stengel Folder, Letter to Stengel by Ilse Ursell, 10 November 1947 (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 398/10).

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² SPSL Collection, Folder Erwin Stengel, Letter to Esther Simpson by Stengel, 23 February 1956 (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 398/7).

⁷³ SPSL Collection, Folder Karl Stern, Letter to Esther Simpson by Stern, 12 May 1953; Letter to Karl Stern by Simpson, 12 May 1952 (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 398/9).

Conclusion

By 1945, over 2,600 scholars had registered with the SPSL.⁷⁴ Of these, 624 found placement in the United States and Canada and 615 in Britain. Given the high demand, restrictive immigration policies in 1930s, and limited financial resources, this outcome is a great success for this small organization. Many of the refugee scholars became members of the prestigious Royal Society and the British Academy. Among them was also a staggering eighteen Nobel Prize winners. While some files are incomplete, others present unique insights into not only refugees' despair and anxieties, but also their personal and scientific achievements.

As discovered in this article, the SPSL's help went beyond immigration processes and finding suitable employment for applicants. One of the biggest challenges that both the refugees and the SPSL faced was internment. While internment of "enemy aliens" was relatively common during the Second World War both in Europe and the British Empire, as well as in North America, only the British government considered Jewish refugees — who had actively fled Nazism in Europe — a threat to its national security. The very lived experience, the difficulty in finding adequate academic and professional work, as well as the social adjustment problems of the émigré neuroscientists allow us a better appreciation of the contemporary scientific and social context of wartime Britain. The SPSL, however, acting under tremendous pressure, secured the release of around five hundred refugee scholars, including approximately sixty neuroscientists.⁷⁵ In this context then, the British-based Academic Assistance Council that in 1936 became the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning emerged as one of the most successful aid organizations providing partial support and fellowships to many of the émigré neuroscientists who had fled Nazi-occupied Central Europe and found refuge in Great Britain during and after the war.

The story of the SPSL provides an important lens into the political conditions in Europe within which it was established and operated, as well as of the plight of Jewish refugees seeking to flee or being expelled from Nazi Germany, and the extent to which the AAC succeeded in helping neuroscientists. It analyses obstacles to the successful treatment of refugees, and the effects of government internment policies in the UK. Several individual cases have been used in documenting events and how the SPSL provided assistance, including follow-up after the war to help in assessing its success.

The post-immigration process of gathering data on applicants' fate and continuing careers in the 1950s provides us with important information about refugees' career development. Some neuroscientists nevertheless experienced employment difficulties after the war had ended. One example is Francis Reitmann (1908–1955), whose contract in Britain was terminated and who therefore decided to immigrate to the United States. Despite his extraordinary research results and supporting references, he could not find a new scientific position.⁷⁶ In 1945 the US stopped accepting refugee scholars altogether and reserved medical and academic vacancies for American neuroscientists returning as war veterans. But Reitmann was an isolated case. The majority of medical refugees previously supported by the SPSL established gratifying careers in their adopted countries following the war.

⁷⁴ David Zimmerman: "Protests Butter No Parsnips': Lord Beveridge and the Rescue of Refugee Academics from Europe, 1933–1938," in *In Defence of Learning: The Plight, Persecution, and Placement of Academic Refugees 1933–1980s*, eds. Shula Marks, Paul Weindling, and Laura Wintour (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29–44.

⁷⁵ Marks, Weindling, and Wintour, *In Defence of Learning*, 1.

⁷⁶ SPSL Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford, File of Francis Reitmann (Shelfmark: MS. S.P.S.L. 398/2).