The Jewish refugees from Nazism in Britain and the Holocaust

By the outbreak of war in September 1939, some 60,000 Jewish refugees from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia had fled to Britain. These refugees are of particular importance when it comes to investigating what was known in Britain about the Nazi persecution of the Jews and the Holocaust, and what those who had information about these subjects were able truly to comprehend. For the Jewish refugees were the only group in Britain to have lived under the Nazis, to have had direct experience of Nazi persecution, and to have acquired – painfully – some idea of what the Nazis were capable of, especially in their treatment of Jews.

The Jewish refugees from Hitler were thus uniquely well placed to grasp what might be taking place in Nazi-controlled Europe, to comprehend the reality of what we now call the Holocaust, and to inhabit what the French camp survivor David Rousset called 'l’univers concentrationnaire’, a universe that most people found impossible to access. To ascertain how much that group of refugees knew, and how much they comprehended, about the Holocaust, I have researched the circulars that the AJR, the principal organisation representing the Jewish refugees from Nazism in Britain, distributed to its members during the war. These circulars, the forerunners of our Journal, provide a unique insight into what the acknowledged representative organisation of the Jews from Central Europe in Britain knew, and did not know, about the Holocaust.

The Jews from Germany and Austria in Britain were, of course, aware that persecution on a massive scale was being visited on the Jews of occupied Europe. But a generalised awareness of Nazi atrocities was very different from a proper understanding of the systematic policy of mass killings on an industrial scale that was the reality of the Holocaust. For throughout the war, and even beyond, the circulars maintained the hope that substantial numbers of survivors would emerge from occupied Europe. In June 1943, the AJR appealed for large numbers of its younger members to volunteer for training for post-war relief work so that they could participate in the ‘sacred duty’ of rehabilitating the survivors of Nazi rule. The expectation was plainly that considerable numbers of volunteers would be needed to cope with the liberated Nazis, to have had direct experience of Nazi persecution, and to have acquired – painful experience of Nazi treatment of Jews.

The Jews from Germany and Austria in Britain were, of course, aware that persecution on a massive scale was being visited on the Jews of occupied Europe. But a generalised awareness of Nazi atrocities was very different from a proper understanding of the systematic policy of mass killings on an industrial scale that was the reality of the Holocaust. For throughout the war, and even beyond, the circulars maintained the hope that substantial numbers of survivors would emerge from occupied Europe. In June 1943, the AJR appealed for large numbers of its younger members to volunteer for training for post-war relief work so that they could participate in the ‘sacred duty’ of rehabilitating the survivors of Nazi rule. The expectation was plainly that considerable numbers of volunteers would be needed to cope with the liberated Nazis, to have direct experience of Nazi persecution, and to have acquired – painful experience of Nazi treatment of Jews.

The front page of the circular of August 1943 concentrated not on the vast extent of the mass killings but on the relief and rehabilitation of the survivors: ‘The revelations of the horror camps, in which were imprisoned so many Jews, have shocked humanity. All people of goodwill will wish to succour those who have been so maltreated. It is hoped it may be possible to make arrangements whereby the relatives of those suffering people may be reunited with their own folk in this country, and that they may be able to make a new start either in this land or in some part of the Empire.’ As a commentary on the consequences of the Holocaust, this must strike us as Remarkably understated, given that, for all its pathos, it shielded away from the mass extermination of the Jews of Europe.

From June 1943, the circulars carried information about the camps, under the heading ‘Jews on the Continent’. At first, information about the Nazi camps was both sparse and vague: it came mainly from Theresienstadt, where conditions were alleged to be tolerable – this was, we now know, largely a Nazi fiction – and from Holland, from where news of the deportation of Jews had reached Britain. Otherwise, the more detailed reports related to Jews who had managed to reach neutral countries, or were in camps in southern Italy liberated by the advancing Allies. Only in August 1944 did substantial reports about the Nazi camps begin to appear, by which time most of the extermination camps had either ceased to function, had been liberated by the Red Army, or, in the case of Auschwitz, was to stop the gassing of Jews: ‘there cannot be too many trained helpers willing to undertake hardship and privations for the sake of those who are now going through suffering and despair and who will need all the assistance we can give them once the war is won’ (pp. 7f).

The AJR also plainly expected that after the war substantial numbers of refugees would be reunited with family members trapped in Europe. That purpose would be served by the Transmare index of addresses of refugees abroad that the AJR had compiled: ‘Such a register would be at the disposal of all those Jews on the Continent who after liberation of a territory from Nazi rule will be anxious to find their relatives in this country. By collecting these addresses and keeping the register up to date we hope to contribute substantially to the re-union of families after the war’ (December 1943, p. 2).

Even in June 1945, after the end of the war, the front page of the circular
internment camps where communication with the inmates was possible and from where internees, including Jews, were released in exchange for Germans held in Allied countries. These reports in the circulars were, of course, reliant on whatever information filtered through to the person who wrote them; if they were inaccurate or incomplete, that is only to be expected under the circumstances. But the juxtaposition of the report from Birkenau with that from the Upper Bavarian internment camps is nevertheless striking, even jarring, to us: it illuminates vividly the gulf between our era, where the Holocaust forms part of the historical heritage, and the mental world of an earlier era still innocent of the true import of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The remaining circulars, which continued until October 1945, contained little more detailed information from the camps in the East. The last reference to Auschwitz appeared in October 1945, with a brief and not altogether accurate explanation for this absence of information: ‘we have to make it clear that Auschwitz was not a camp where people were supposed to stay for any length of time, but a distribution centre from which people were sent to working parties or to death camps’ (p. 5). That Auschwitz was itself a death camp of almost unimaginable dimensions seems to have been beyond the writer’s mental grasp.

My purpose has not been to ask or answer questions about who had what factual information about the Holocaust during the period of its implementation, but rather to ask an anterior question: what would people in Britain, in this case the Jewish refugees from Hitler, have made of that information? That question addresses the mental or psychological world of the recipients of the information and it relates not to what they knew but to what they were able, or willing, to comprehend.

Anthony Grenville

This article is adapted from a paper given at a conference at Staffordshire University on 30 November 2014, on the occasion of the plenary meeting of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance in Manchester.