

RESCUE WAS PREVIOUSLY OVERSHADOWED BY THE KINDERTRANSPORT

How UK's 'Kitchener Camp' rescue saved 4,000 Jewish men after Kristallnacht

Online exhibition reveals the sometimes tragic, sometimes jubilant stories of German Jews resettled by Britain in the early days of WWII, many of whom would fight with the Allies

By **ROBERT PHILPOT** | 3 July 2020, 11:53 am



Residents standing outside the first aid building at the Kitchener Camp, in 1939 or 1940. (Wiener Holocaust Library Collections)

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LONDON — At 10 a.m. on July 12, 1939, Lothar Nelken arrived at Berlin's Potsdam station. Rounded up and sent to Buchenwald in the aftermath of Germany's Kristallnacht pogrom, he was part of a large group of Jewish men who were about to commence a 36-hour journey to freedom and safety.

It was a journey that would take them across Germany to the Belgian frontier and then on to the coastal city of Ostend. "Within a short time we find ourselves on a beautiful ferry," Nelken recorded in his diary. "The Channel is nice and calm. In sunshine, we enjoy a pleasant crossing; much too short at three hours."

Arriving at Dover in southern England, the men were driven by bus the short distance to a previously disused World War I army camp on the outskirts of the Kent town of Sandwich. "We were welcomed with jubilation," Nelken's diary entry for the day concludes.

The Kitchener camp had, over the previous four months, blossomed into a small town housing Jewish male refugees. Many, like Nelken, had been arrested and sent to Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen and Dachau after Kristallnacht.

The camp was the concrete manifestation of a softening of the British government's hardline approach to those fleeing Nazi persecution. Amid public and parliamentary revulsion at the terrible events of November 1938, and under heavy pressure from the Central British Fund (CBF) for German Jewry (now World Jewish Relief), the Home

Office agreed to admit thousands of Jewish refugees, albeit under stringent conditions. As a result, the Kindertransport saw 10,000 unaccompanied Jewish children brought to Britain.

Less well-known or celebrated, however, is the equally remarkable story of the “Kitchener Camp” rescue. The subject of an online [exhibition](#) at London’s Wiener Holocaust Library, it undoubtedly saved the lives of nearly 4,000 German and Austrian Jewish men.



Lothar Nelken after his release from Buchenwald. (Courtesy family of Lothar Nelken)

Off the cuff accommodations

Although there are few official records remaining that document the rescue, Clare Weissenberg’s [Kitchener Online Project](#) has worked with the descendants of the men to piece together its story drawing on their letters, documents and photographs. A traveling [exhibition](#), now held by the Wiener Library, will be available to host once the UK’s lockdown restrictions are eased. That exhibition is a tale of hope, resilience and tragedy in equal measure.

The rescue itself was a huge logistical undertaking. The CBF had agreed to arrange the refugees’ transport and accommodation and, because the men wouldn’t be allowed to work, to provide them with financial support while they were in the UK. The Home Office had also demanded that the men leave Britain and emigrate within 12 months.

But, within barely six weeks of the Home Office giving the green light, the Kitchener Camp was up and running.

“Out of this chaos of old boilers and rubbish dumps there gradually arose a sense of orderliness,” the camp newspaper later reported. There were 42 residential huts, each divided in two, with bunk beds for sleeping; huts for catering, teaching, and recreation; stores, a post office, a cinema, two synagogues, and a hospital; as well as dentists, barbers, and tailors.

The Jewish Lads’ Brigade, a youth organization which ran summer camps, had volunteered to take charge of logistics at the camp. It also provided some of the key personnel, including the two Jewish brothers — Jonas and Phineas May — who ran it. Phineas May’s diary, as well as the newspaper he helped produce, “The Kitchener Camp Review,” provides an invaluable record of life at the camp.

“This was a day of conferences,” he wrote in the diary on March 6, 1939. “I had no sooner discussed one problem with somebody than someone else was waiting. One of the most difficult problems is to get our new post office running smoothly and this occupied a lot of time. There is also the question of the arrangement of a rota and system of English lessons.”



The Kitchener Camp Review was published monthly from March through November 1939, and was edited by Phineas May. The Review including articles and sketches was produced by the camp’s staff and residents. (Wiener Holocaust Library Collections)



Hugo Heilbrunn and members of Hut 32. (Courtesy/ family of Hugo Heilbrunn)

A new beginning

From the outset, though, the refugees themselves played a pivotal role in renovating and rebuilding the camp. Many of them had been through Jewish training schools, such as ORT, in Germany and were skilled in carpentry, plumbing, joinery and bricklaying. Others were put to work tilling fields or in the kitchens. Daily English classes were compulsory.

This was both a necessity and a conscious choice — “helping men to help themselves,” as Ernest Joseph, another Jewish Lads’ Brigade alum who helped organize the rescue, put it. On a practical level, the work provided training designed to assist the men’s ability to emigrate, which would not simply fulfill the Home Office’s stipulations, but also open up much-needed space for new refugees.

But, given the traumas the men had been through, including separation from their families, it was also felt that the daily work regime provided a distraction which boosted morale and helped mental well-being.



Victor Cohn in a truck at the Kitchener Camp. (Courtesy/ family of Victor Cohn)

Not all of them men agreed: some would later complain that the physical labor they had to undertake at Kitchener exacerbated injuries and illnesses inflicted upon them in the concentration camps from which they had only recently been released.

Others, however, relished work such as renovating new huts, regarding it not only as a form of escape, but also as their contribution to rescuing men still desperate to get out of the Reich. Some simply appreciated that the sixpence a week they received for the work allowed them to buy “tea and crumpets.”

“ It provided a place of safety until the men could emigrate onwards”

“How the rescue was regarded among these thousands of men seems to have differed according to life experiences, character traits, state of health, age, friendships, and whether family members in continental Europe were safe,” the exhibition suggests. “Kitchener was far from luxurious and there must never have been a moment’s quietness or privacy. But this was always intended to be a short-lived stop-gap. It provided a place of safety until the men could emigrate onwards.”

Language also caused occasional unintentional misunderstandings. “All men have been issued with a badge giving their hut number,” Phineas May recorded in his diary on May 29, 1939. “KC stands for Kitchener Camp, but we didn’t know that in German ‘K’ is the first letter of Concentration and therefore it equally stands in German for Concentration Camp.” His brother, he continued, had told the men that if anybody objected to wearing the badge they need not. “There was much laughter,” he wrote.



Residents standing outside the first aid building at the Kitchener Camp, in 1939 or 1940. (Wiener Holocaust Library Collections)

It wasn’t all work, however. Oscar Deutsch, the founder of the Odeon cinema chain, donated a 400-seat cinema to the camp. There were chess, photography and athletics contests and even a “best-kept hut” which boasted a prize of tea in Ramsgate.

The men weren’t confined to Kitchener — although they were not supposed to live or work outside of it and were meant to return there by 10 p.m. each night — so they were free to wander the beautiful coastline or go swimming. Some visited shops and pubs in Sandwich — which itself only had a population of 3,500 people — and football matches against local teams were arranged. In contravention of the rules, some of the refugees also found work on local farms.

The camp also had frequent visitors including local people, politicians and dignitaries, such as Cosmo Lang, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Refugees who acted as tour guides often received tips from those they had shown around. “The English people were kind and friendly to us,” Herbert Weiss, a refugee, recorded in later testimony.

The visitors were also attracted by the entertainment — including concerts ranging from classical to Music Hall — which was provided at the camp by the refugees, among whose number were musicians who had played in Vienna and Berlin Philharmonic orchestras.



Phineas May conducts an orchestral recital with residents of the Kitchener camp, in 1939 or 1940. (Wiener Holocaust Library Collections)

Phineas May drily noted of one concert in June 1939: “Spent morning dealing with 100 details and temperamental artists who were going to perform in the Classical Concert. About 800 visitors and we made £5 from the programmes. The music was very good — if rather above the level of the audience — but we were congratulated on our efforts to improve the musical tastes of the neighbourhood.”

The coming of war in September 1939 brought with it new anxieties for the Kitchener refugees. It snuffed out the hope and expectation of those with wives and children still in Germany that their families would soon be able to follow them to Britain and it brought suspicion and new restrictions on the men themselves.

The government moved swiftly to interview and classify the thousands of German nationals resident in Britain. The tiny minority designated “Category A” — “enemy aliens” in the bureaucratic parlance — were interned; “Category B,” whose cases were harder to assess, were allowed to remain at liberty but were subject to certain controls; and the vast majority, “Category C,” or “friendly Aliens,” were free to continue life much as before. Like most German Jews in Britain, almost all of those at Kitchener were designated “Category C” and had the words “Refugee from Nazi oppression” stamped on their identification papers.

While some of the men had, as required by the Home Office, already migrated by the outbreak of war, many were still waiting to leave. Despite the danger to shipping from enemy attacks, others continued to sail for the US, Canada, Latin America, and Australia throughout 1940.

But, as Clare Ungerson, author of “Four Thousand Lives: The Rescue of German Jewish Men to Britain,” has [argued](#), many of the refugees were keen to assist the Allied war effort. Nearly 900 of the Kitchener men joined the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps, a labor and logistics section of the British Army, and were sent to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force in early 1940.

“They were brought back in unarmed boats from St Malo, about three weeks after the main Dunkirk retreat,” Ungerson writes. “Many report having to relinquish their guns before being allowed to board the ‘little boats’ back to Britain.”

Harsh reality



Kitchener Camp resident Erich Silbermann would go on to join the US Army, land at Normandy on D-Day, and continue the fight eastward through the war's end 11 months later. (Courtesy/ family of Erich Silbermann)

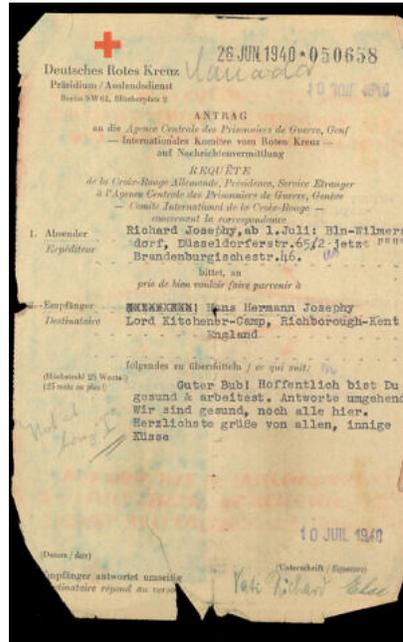
Dunkirk and the fear of an imminent German invasion brought a hardening of public attitudes, a fear of spies and saboteurs, and a press-inspired campaign for mass internment. A “protected area” on England’s eastern coast was established in which nationals of enemy countries were barred from living; on their return from France even members of the auxiliary corps were sent to Devon in the far south-west of the country.

The Kitchener camp was shuttered and those still living there escorted away under armed guard. Others who hadn’t yet joined the army were caught in the dragnet of mass internment ordered by the government, and soon found themselves in the holding and permanent camps established around the country, most notoriously on the Isle of Man in the North Sea.

In July 1940, nearly 250 of the Kitchener men boarded the HMS Dunera on its infamous journey to Australia as the government began to deport refugees to Allied nations overseas. Conditions onboard the overcrowded boat were appalling, while abuse and theft by the guards was rife. Moreover, alongside the large numbers of Jewish refugees, the Dunera was also carrying German and Italian prisoners of war and fascists.

Within weeks, public sentiment shifted again, this time in favor of the refugees; the slow, bureaucratic process of releasing them commenced in August 1940.

Many of the Kitchener refugees endured these new traumas while desperately concerned about the fate of family left behind in Germany. The message service provided by the International Red Cross allowed communication to be maintained, at least for a time. The content of these short messages, some of which are now in the Wiener Library archives, are heartbreaking



The letter sent to Harold Jackson via the Red Cross, July 1940. (Wiener Holocaust Library Collections)

In July 1940, for instance, Kitchener Camp refugee Harold Jackson (formerly Hans Hermann Josephy) received a letter from his parents, Richard and Else, who unlike their son, had been unable to escape Berlin the previous year. “Good Boy!” they wrote to him. “Hope you are healthy & working. Respond immediately. We are healthy, all still here. Warmest greetings by all, dearly kisses. Daddy Richard and Else.” Jackson never saw his parents, who were later murdered in Riga, again.

Likewise, Hugo Heilbrunn, who was arrested in November 1938 and imprisoned in Buchenwald until April 1939, was saved by the Kitchener scheme. His plan was to sail to New York via Britain and his wife, Selma, was to follow him. Instead, trapped inside Germany when war was declared, she was deported to the Łódź ghetto in 1941 and murdered in Chełmno in 1942, along with her mother and brother.



A photo of Walter and Evelyn Finkler taken in the early 1930s. (Wiener Holocaust Library Collections)

Some were more fortunate. Walter Finkler and his wife, Hansi, were Austrian Jews. After the Anschluss, their eight-year-old daughter, Evelyn, was sponsored by an English family to travel to Britain. Walter left Austria as a Kitchener refugee in March 1939, the same month that Hansi was granted a domestic service visa (the scheme would eventually allow 15,000 Jewish refugee women into Britain).

The Jewish men who were rescued from Germany and Austria more than repaid the debt to the countries which had saved them.

Erich Silbermann arrived in Britain as a Kitchener refugee on June 6, 1939. He emigrated to America in 1940 and served in the US Army working with an amphibious engineering unit.

Six years to the day after he set foot in Dover, his unit landed at Utah Beach in Normandy on D-Day. He continued to fight through France and Germany until the Nazis' defeat 11 months later.