

MARTIN GILBERT

BRITISH POLICY TOWARDS JEWISH REFUGEES 1933 TO 1946

It is an honour for me to be asked to give this lecture. I did not know John Foster but my first boss, my boss for five years, Randolph Churchill, certainly did and often spoke about him and often when he needed advice on some tricky legal situation would say, "Get me Sir John Foster on the telephone," normally at about 2.00 or 3.00 AM. My topic tonight is one which certainly concerned him closely as a humanitarian, as a lawyer and as a man who knew exactly how harsh officialdom could be in a pursuit of its own closely defined goals. There are a few historical precedents of a government coming to power as Hitler's did in Germany in 1933 and a whole segment of the population, more than half a million people, being suddenly at risk. The Jewish exodus from Germany began at once and Britain was among the foremost countries of refuge. Indeed, between 1933, when my tale begins, and May 1940 when it ends, more than 65,000 German, Austrian and Czech Jews found asylum here. In all that I have to say this evening, of anti-refugee policies and prejudiced and hard-heartedness and of political imperatives which work against those seeking refuge, nothing can diminish the importance in human or humanitarian terms of the administration of 65,000 people. Their presence and their subsequent life in Britain, and I know there are many here tonight, is a tribute to British concerns and British decency. Not least to the pressures put by those outside government circles, such as Eleanor Rathbone who Bannis Parkes mentioned, but something more to be done than was being done.

What went wrong? What prevented more Jews from coming within the British and British Imperial circle? First and foremost the answer is Palestine. The very first British Cabinet committee which met to discuss the problem of Jewish refugees from Germany on 17 April 1933 was dominated by discussion of Palestine and concluded, I quote from its minutes: "The number of Jewish refugees who could be allowed to enter that country is strictly conditioned by what that country can absorb. Although the matter is strictly one for the High Commissioner, there is no reason to suppose that room could be found in Palestine for any appreciable number of German Jewish refugees."

The German refugees seeking to enter Palestine had another problem. They were in competition, as far as Palestine certificates were concerned, with a far larger number of Polish Jews who were seeking immigration. Indeed, in 1933 whereas 5,000 German Jews received Palestine certificates, 13,000 Polish Jews received certificates and went. The government of Palestine, the Colonial Office and the British Cabinet at its highest level all heard alarm bells ringing and these were Arab alarm bells. Because of the problems created by Palestine as a destination, the British government's committees dealing with this question constantly discussed other sources, other places of refuge. In August 1933, the Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hall, who was to play a significant part in this whole question approached his friend, the new Viceroy of India, Lord Willingdon, with a suggestion that German Jews might be found employment in India and he pointed that there were many German Jewish doctors, dentists, professional men who might make their contribution to

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD AND JOHN FOSTER HUMAN RIGHTS TRUST

Indian society. Willingdon replied, "I personally feel perfectly sure that it will be useless any of these gentlemen coming out to try to get useful employment in India." Three days later, Hall spoke to the President of the Law College of Physicians, Lord Dawson of Penn, about the possibility of allowing a larger number of German Jewish refugee doctors into Britain than were being allowed in at that time. Dawson told the Home Secretary the number that could be usefully absorbed, or teach us anything, could be counted on the fingers of one hand and as one who has had his life saved, and perhaps many of you here have had your lives, saved by refugee German Jewish doctors over the past years, that seems an unfortunate phrase. Sadly, Lord Dawson of Penn's view was not an isolated one. Winston Churchill, as Chancellor of the University of Bristol, wrote to the Vice Chancellor, Thomas Loveday, asking him to find a place for a German Jewish medical student who could only leave Germany if he had such a place. Loveday replied that he did not think any such enhancement of the Bristol student body was needed and a second letter from Churchill was equally of no avail. Incidentally, I became quite obsessed with the question of what happened to this young man and quite by chance discovered that he did indeed get to the United States and have a successful career as a doctor.

Throughout the debates on destinations, there were those who argues in favour of considerable liberalization. Indeed, the Peel Commission on Palestine, headed by Lord Peel, came down very strongly in favour of allowing considerable numbers of German Jewish refugees into Palestine. People are familiar with Lord Peel's recommendations with regard to the territorial future of the country but not his recommendations with regard to opening the doors to refugees. I would like to quote from a paragraph in his report which I believe was written by the Secretary, later Sir John Martin, a distinguished Colonial Office civil servant and Churchill's private secretary in the Second World War: "there is in the mind of the Commission an added emphasis upon this question of Jewish migration which comes at a time when the Jewish race in a great country is being subjected to most horrible, cold, scientific persecution, brutal persecution, a cold pogrom which has been called, people reduced from affluence to ruin and then, even in that position denied the opportunity of earning their daily bread and cut off even from relief by grants to tide the destitute through the winter. Their little children pilloried in the schools to which they have to go, their blood and race declared 'defiling' and 'accursed', every form of concentrated human wickedness cast upon these people by overwhelming power, by the vile tyranny. We believe that when this case is put before the House of Commons they will not allow the one door which is open, the one door which allows some relief, some escape from these conditions, to be summarily close, nor even allow it to be suggested that it may be closed."

With the outbreak of the riots in Palestine and the Arab demand not only of the Palestinian Arabs but more particularly of the Arab states around- Saudi Arabia, Egypt – that Jewish immigration should be halted, the government set aside the Lord peel's very powerful appeal and sought another solution and it was Anthony Eden who was asked to propose it and he, being extremely busy with other more important matters including Ethiopia, Italy and above all the vicious Japanese attacks on China which were taking place at the time, asked his civil servants to do it for him and they did it. In particular, Sir George Rendel, one of the great experts on Palestine who prepares memorandum

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD AND JOHN FOSTER HUMAN RIGHTS TRUST

which became Eden's submission to the Cabinet and which became government policy and which was, as Rendel explained in the covering note to Anthony Eden, "We must reassure the Arabs that they will no longer be in danger of becoming a minority in their own country or of finding practically its only fertile portions taken over from them and handed over in full sovereignty to alien immigrants." Eden was impressed by this memorandum and asked his assistant adviser for League of Nations affairs, Roger Makins', to elaborate on it and prepare into a policy document. Makins' wrote, "I would view with dismay the possibility that Egypt, Iraq, Turkey and Persia would work against us which they will do if we continue to allow Jewish immigration into Palestine on the present scale. The alienation of the Muslim countries might be total." And Eden's only contribution to this great mass of paper which then went forward to the Cabinet was the following note: "This is important. I have great confidence in My Makins' judgement and little doubt that he is right." And so the immigration restrictions were imposed.

First of all that no more than 2,000 immigrants with what were called 'independent means' or 'personal capital' of £1,000 should be allowed to enter Palestine in the next six months. And this decision was taken five days before, but retained after, Hitler entered Vienna and another 180,000 Jews found themselves in immediate danger.

The various British government departments did cast about for means to resolve this question other than through Palestine and an enormous correspondence exists in the Colonial Office archives between the government and every single colonial government. One of the most promising areas of German and Austrian Jewish settlement was regarded as Kenya and the Governor of Kenya, Air Chief Marshall Sir Henry Brookbotham, was asked if he would consider making some substantial immigration quota for Jews. And he replied in a curious letter (he was an airman of distinction but perhaps not equally versed in the ways of the world), "I would not object to the carefully regulated influx of Jews of the right type ie Norwick from Germany for agricultural settlement in reasonably small numbers. In small groups of a size not too large to become part of the general economic or social life of our community."

None of the problems which confronted all those dealing with this question was a public prejudice which sometimes could be severe. The *Daily* and *Sunday Express*, under the inspiration of Lord Beaverbrook, with their large circulation and popular readership were particularly active in this regard. Indeed, on the day of Brookbotham's cautious answer to London, the *Sunday Express* told its readers, "There is a big influx of foreign Jews into Britain. They are overrunning the country. They are trying to enter the medical profession in great numbers. Worst of all many of them are holding themselves out to the public as psychoanalysts." The newspaper then went on to explain that psychoanalysts, I quote, "... often obtain an ascendancy over the patient of which bad use can be made if the psychoanalyst is a base man."

Another hope of the British government was that other countries would open their gates and indeed one of the curious features of the Evian Conference, which opened on 6 July 1938, was how many countries shared Britain's view that other countries should shoulder the burden. The Australian delegate

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD AND JOHN FOSTER HUMAN RIGHTS TRUST

achieved notoriety in the history books by stating that, "Since my country has no racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one." But he was in fact far from alone and the British government, after long discussion before the delegates went, insisted that the question of Palestine could not be put on the agenda. The British government also was very strongly supportive of, and initiated in part, the final resolution of the Evian Conference which was, I quote, "The countries of asylum are not willing to undertake any obligation towards financing involuntary immigration." And this too was to have a serious and deleterious effect on subsequent immigration.

Eden had resigned in February 1938 over matters connected with Italy and the United States and he was succeeded by Lord Halifax who shortly earlier had visited Hitler and been generally impressed by aspects of the Fuhrer's protestations of peaceful intent. One result of Halifax becoming Foreign Secretary was that the intention of the Evian powers to issue some general criticism of German policy for creating the refugee problem was changed. As Lord Winderton informed the Cabinet (he was the Minister responsible for the refugee policy at that time), "The American representatives at Evian had pressed us to include some clause of a denunciatory character towards the German government but our delegation, under instructions from the Secretary of State, have resisted this successfully" and it is curious somehow how often the word 'success' is used in this context. There was incidentally at this same meeting at which went reported the success in resisting denouncing the German government, there was at this same meeting a long discussion about the possibility of opening the British colonies to widespread German and Austrian Jewish settlement. And again it was the Home Secretary, Samuel Hall, whose area of responsibility this was not, who said, "I would like to warn my colleagues that while I am anxious to do my best, there is a good deal of feeling growing up in this country, a feeling which I believe is reflected in Parliament, against the admission of Jews to British colonial territory." Now again the use of Parliament, as those of you who study our history know, is often not reflected in the actual Parliamentary situation and it is rather an astounding assertion of Samuel Hall - there were of course in Parliament half a dozen violently anti-immigrant members of Parliament but there were many more, and they were among the more distinguished Parliamentarians, who were repeatedly and persistently urging the Government to open its gates. Still, that was Hall's presentation to the Cabinet and it was effective.

During the second half of 1938 a new phenomenon entered the scene. This was the movement of Jews illegally, according to British regulations, from Europe to Palestine, sponsored in large part at the beginning by the revisionist, Zionist organisation headed by Jabba Klinsky. And this created in British official circles a hostility toward refugees generally which was extraordinary. Every British ambassador in Europe received instructions on 21 July 1938 that he was to press his respective government not to allow Jews to pass through their ports or towns on their way to Palestine. And it was Sir Sidney Waterlow, the British Minister in Athens, who was at the centre of the efforts by the Foreign Office to coordinate this pressure, who was able to inform the Foreign Office three days later, "The Greek government have, at my insistence, now instructed their missions abroad, including the Greek missions in Vienna and Warsaw, not to issue transit visas through Greece to Jews whatever the destination stated on their application." Sir Sidney Waterlow was nor a cold-hearted man and I made a certain study of his

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD AND JOHN FOSTER HUMAN RIGHTS TRUST

telegrams and suggestions because at the very end of July he informed the Foreign Office that he felt that this pressure should be abandoned on humanitarian grounds. He had met a number of German Jewish refugees in Athens, had spoken to them, and had been horrified by the stories they told him. His suggestion as passed on to the Colonial Office and the Head of the Middle Eastern Department for the Colonial Office, Downey, wrote to the Foreign office, " I would like to make a strong protest against Sir Sidney Waterlow's rather surprising suggestion that a number of Jewish illegal immigrants should be admitted to the Palestine on humanitarian grounds, This seems to me absolutely intolerable."

The next area was the Sudetenland in the summer of 1938. Again, as German pressure grew on the Sudetenland, the Jews left – most of them went to Czechoslovakia – and sought to leave altogether. And here again was an orchestrated press campaign against their admission into Britain. Once again the *Sunday* and *Daily Express* took the lead and were followed by most of the mass newspapers. *The Express*, in a leading article which reminded me rather perversely of the leading article I read in *The Sun* the other day, began as follows: "Every warm heart must sympathise deeply with the Jews and their plight. Certainly there is no room for them here in Britain where we have 1,800,000 of our own people out of work and biting their nails. But places must be found for the Jews. There are plenty of uninhabited parts of the world where, given a touch of the Christian spirit, they may yet find happy homes." On the other hand, *Everybody's* magazine was returning to this worrying matter, which appeared again and again in the papers, of the doctors and dentists, I suppose we all feel threatened most physically by an alien doctor or dentists, I suppose we all feel threatened most physically by an alien doctor or dentist, *Everybody's* wrote: "Most of the alien doctors and dentists are Jews who are fleeing from Germany and Austria and the methods these aliens are bringing into England are not always in accordance with the professional etiquette of this country." The Krystalnacht, the sixtieth anniversary of which was last night, might have swept away with all these doubts and hesitations. Even Neville Chamberlain, who had adopted a stern policy with regard to Jewish immigration, wrote to his sister after Krystalnacht, "Jews aren't a lovable people. I don't care for them myself but that's not enough to explain the pogrom." And it wasn't enough to explain the pogrom but the pogrom didn't affect the policy. Indeed, a new personality comes on the scene whom I knew and who has many very close Jewish friends and who in the pre-war period of which I am speaking was a frequent, honoured guest at Jewish and Zionist gatherings and was regarded by all the leading Jewish figures of that time, by **the Seeths**, the Marks, the Sackels, the Blonds, as one of their closest, if not their closest, friend in government. That was the new Colonial Secretary, colleagues, "The government has to choose between its commitments to the world of Jewry and the world of Islam." In spite of the adversities which it was now suffering the world of Jewry remained extremely influential. For example, McDonald continued, there were to be said to be three million Jews in the United States. On the other hand, the British Empire itself was to a very considerable extent a Muslim empire. Some sixty million of our fellow subjects in India were Muslims. From the defence point of view it was out of the question, literally out of the question, that we should antagonise either the Muslims within the Empire or the Arab Kingdom of the Middle East. And McDonald told his colleagues of his conclusion: "This must mean that we do not contemplate even a distant future in which there could

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD AND JOHN FOSTER HUMAN RIGHTS TRUST

be a Jewish majority in Palestine." This was the conclusion, unknown of course to the Jewish leaders, which they feared most of all. From then on, the pressure against not only illegal immigration but immigration to Palestine was continuous. And each Cabinet that discussed the matter insisted on further restrictions, while at the same time inviting other countries, particularly Brazil and Australia, to take in more Jewish refugees.

How serious were these alternatives? Roger Makins warned the Cabinet in a note that to ask these other countries to take in Jews was unrealistic. "We should note," he said, "the pitiful condition to which German Jews will be reduced. This will not make them desirable immigrants." And that same day, at a very distressing meeting with the Council for German Jewry at Downing Street, Neville Chamberlain told them (they asked for a British loan to help refugees), "I must tell you the idea of a British government loan is premature and hardly worth discussing at this stage." There was a debate in the House of Commons on November 21st, the first debate after Krystalnacht, and government ministers were surprised at the extent of feeling among Members of Parliament that immigration restrictions generally should be abandoned. Indeed, one Labour Member of Parliament, Ottomon Logan, a Catholic, made the most moving appeal for an end to restrictions, so much so that Malcolm McDonald later told me he himself felt his palms sweating with anticipation and nervousness and a realisation that what Logan had said was true. But it fell to Samuel Hall, not McDonald, to answer. And Hall was able to, whether his palms were sweating or not, present the British Government policy clearly. I would like to read his presentation - it appears in the Hansard and was heard by all Members of Parliament:

"In this country we are a thickly populated industrial community with, at the present moment, a very large number of unemployed. Competition is very keen with foreign countries and it is difficult for many of our fellow countrymen to make a livelihood at all and keep their industries and businesses going. It is quite obvious that there is an underlying current of suspicion and anxiety about alien immigration on any large scale. It is a fact, and Members had better face the fact quite frankly, that below the surface, and I know this from my own daily experience at the Home Office, there is the making of a definite anti-Jewish movement. I did my best as Home Secretary to stamp upon that evil that is the reason why I prohibited demonstrations in certain parts of London. Faced with a fact of that kind, while I think very few Members look upon this problem with greater sympathy than I do, I have to be careful to avoid anything in the nature of mass immigration, which in my view would inevitably lead to the growth of a movement which we all wish to see suppressed."

Ironically, within ten days of Hall's devastating statement, on 2 December, the first of almost 10,000 youngsters, Kindertransport, left Berlin by train for Britain, the second group leaving Vienna some ten days later. At Hall's insistence, all 10,000 were what were then called 'transmigrates'. They were allowed into Britain to escape what was recognised as the present danger in Germany and were supposed to return to their homes after that danger had passed. In the event, of course, the danger was followed by war and by destruction, not only of their homes but, in most cases, of their families. Like the adult refugees, the Kindertransport youngsters made a subsequent contribution to British life as British citizens of an exceptionally high standard

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD AND JOHN FOSTER HUMAN RIGHTS TRUST

and I know several of you are here tonight, including my friend Ruth Legett who arrived from Berlin in the summer of 1939. And surely the admission of these 10,000 youngsters reflects the finest of British instincts of granting asylum.

To be in government circles, the beginning of 1939 saw an intensification of the pressures of the movement of Jews towards Palestine. The first pressure being put in Sophia against the Bulgarian government, which was even then trying to negotiate a trade treaty with Britain, warning that this treaty could be endangered if the Bulgarian government did not, I quote, "Take immediate steps to put an end to the movement of illegal immigrants through Bulgaria."

Malcolm McDonald, who was going to have to defend this policy in the House of Commons, asked the Foreign Office expert, who was drafting the telegrams to Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Yugoslavia, to explain the basis of them so he could then pass on this explanation verbatim to the conference. And this was the expert's explanation: "It seems to me that it is morally wrong for us to insist on sending more and more Jews into Palestine against the wishes of the Arab inhabitants of that country. After all, the moral satisfaction we may derive from sending more Jews to Palestine without Arab consent must be weighed against the moral right of the Arabs to have some say in the question of the admission of these aliens into their country." At this period, the Jewish population of Palestine was some 27%. Dr Weissman, the Zionist leader, took up this issue with Lord Halifax in January 1939 and pleaded for some limitation which would mean there would not be a Jewish majority at any foreseeable future but which would enable some 40,000, 50,000 or 60,000 more Jews to immigrate at once without in any way endangering the Arab majority. Halifax told Weissman that he could not do this and that he did not accept Weissman's premise that the Jews were in Palestine of right and not on sufferance. Now Weissman's premise was not his own but that of Winston Churchill who, as Colonial Secretary in 1922 in his Palestine White Paper, had set that down as the basic meaning of British policy - that the Jews were in Palestine of right and not on sufferance. The reason why this phrase was used by Lord Halifax, I suspect, is that it was on the agenda for the next Cabinet meeting two days after his meeting with Weissman and presumably he read the minutes. And at this Cabinet meeting on 27 January 1939, Malcolm McDonald announced that the Churchill White Paper no longer held good with regard to the phrase, 'as of right and not on sufferance'. 'As of right', McDonald told his colleagues, in complete contradiction to anything that could be found in the Churchill White Paper, 'as of right' referred only to those Jews who were already living in Palestine in 1922. Curiously, a view reflected in the Palestinian Charter. It did not apply, said McDonald, to those Jews who reach Palestine after 1922 or might do so in the future. McDonald was supported in his arguments by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, who also began to play an increasingly important part in these deliberations. John Simon, of course, had to deal with economic well-being of British and he said with regard to a proposal McDonald had to put up, to settle Jews in British Guyana, far away from Palestine, far away from Britain, Simon said, "I believe it will be a very serious business if the British taxpayer, in addition to paying everything else he is asked to pay for just now, has to pay for the settlement in various parts of the world of enormous numbers of refugees." Ironically, I can find nothing in the archives to suggest that the

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD AND JOHN FOSTER HUMAN RIGHTS TRUST

taxpayer was to have paid for this. The burden would have gone on Jewish organisations.

It was not only Chancellors of the Exchequer and Prime Ministers who involved themselves in this debate. On 28 February 1939, Lord Halifax received a somewhat surprising communication of Buckingham Place notepaper. It was from the King's private secretary, Sir Alexander Harding, and it read as follows. "His Majesty has heard from Lord Gord [Lord Gord was the then High Commissioner in Palestine] that a number of Jewish refugees from different countries are surreptitiously getting into Palestine and his Majesty is glad to think that steps are being taken to prevent these people leaving their country of origin." Lord Halifax acted with considerable speed, telegraphing two days later to the British ambassador in Berlin, Sir Neville Henderson: "There is a large, irregular movement from Germany of Jewish refugees who as a rule set out without visas or any arrangements for their reception and they attempt to land in any territory that seems to present to them the slightest possibility of receiving them. This is the cause of great embarrassment to his majesty's government and also it appears [this is a fascinating note in Halifax's telegram] to the American government and the latter have expressed a wish to me that you should join the American Charge d'affaires in Berlin in bringing the situation to the attention of the appropriate German authorities and requesting them to discourage such travel at least on German ships." 28 February 1939 and 2 March 1939.

Henderson did as instructed on the following day, on the 3rd March. Going to see the German Foreign Office and sending them a memorandum with him on the British intention and desire to check unauthorised immigration of Jews from the German Reich. And these pressures were taken and there was great anguish in the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office when, on March 8th, the Romanian government let 850 Jews on board an immigrant ship through the Danube Channel into the Black Sea. As one senior Foreign Office official dealing with Southeast Europe noted, "It has been decided that we should reprove the Romanian government at once."

After the early months of 1939 new decisions were made by the Cabinet with regard to Palestine each of which further restricted the ability of Jews to reach it. The principle behind these decisions was summed up by Malcolm McDonald on 27 January. He was satisfied, he told Cabinet, "...that we could not afford to forfeit the confidence and friendship of such a large part of the Muslim world. If we lost that now, we would lose it for a long time. If we reach a settlement in Palestine alone the lines proposed, Jewish criticism in America would not have any permanent effect on Anglo-American relations." And there then began a curious minuet in which British diplomats in the United States were asked to confirm that although there were a vast number of Jews in the United States, they did not in fact have, so the British government wished to be assured, any real influence on policy.

The search for an alternative had continued throughout 1939 and I do not think it was for want of trying from the London end that this search failed. But one by one the colonial governors found reasons for turning down the application. Normally it was that the climate of their colony was not suitable for immigration or that the immigrants proposed would not have the agricultural skills, though I have often thought ironically that perhaps then

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD AND JOHN FOSTER HUMAN RIGHTS TRUST

the Jews planning in their Hushsharad camps to go to Palestine would have been ideal settlers in these agricultural colonies since they were being trained for agricultural work. As this debate continued, Germany and ex - Bohemia and Moravia and again some 100,000 or 120,000 Czech citizens, designated Jews according to the Nuremberg Laws, became captives and sought refuge. One of the most shocking things is not in any secret archive but it's at the Colindale Newspaper Library, are the pictures in British newspapers in the week following the German annexation of Prague of Jews reaching Britain by Prague from air and because they did not have the necessary documents to enter Britain, being sent back by air to Prague. Some of those sent back could not be found a plane until the following day. A special Home Office dispensation allowed them to spend the night in London under assurances from the Central British Fund that they would be returned the next day to the airport which they then in every case did.

The search for assurance that the United States would not be offended by the Palestine aspect of the policy was finally received on 20 April 1939 from none other than the American ambassador in London, Joseph Kennedy. Kennedy told Lord Halifax, as Halifax reported to the Cabinet, "We ought not to over-estimate Jewish influence in the United States." And Chamberlain made one of his fairly rare interventions at that Cabinet when a number of Ministers again expressed their unease at such a draconian policy, Chamberlain with all the authority of his Premiership told his colleagues, "It is of immense importance from the point of view of strategy to have the Muslim world with us. If we must offend one side, let us offend the Jews rather than the Arabs." One realises in a way why these archives were kept closed originally for fifty years and why there was such opposition to Harold Wilson reducing the years to twenty- five. Indeed, the opposition was so strong that Wilson could only reduce it to thirty.

There was a chink of light in May and that was a proposal by the Cabinet Committee on Refugees to settle 500 German or Austrian or now Czech Jewish families in British Guyana. The Treasury, Sir John Simon, the Chancellor of the Exchequer had finally agreed that as long as no burden was placed on the British Treasury, they could go and after an enormous effort, British Jewry, the leaders of British Jewry, the leading families in British Jewry, some of whom ate here this evening, agreed to finance in total the settlement of the 500 Jewish refugees in British Guyana. There came a hitch and it was explained by Malcolm McDonald to the Cabinet committee. As McDonald told the committee, despite this economic guarantee, Lord Moyne and his colleagues on the Royal Commission on the West India were sceptical as to the possibility of any extensive white settlement in British Guyana. "I myself have another reason for opposing this proposal. I am afraid," explained Malcolm McDonald, the friend of so many leading Jewish families, "that when the refugee settlers become British subjects i.e. after five years, they would acquire the right to migrate into the United Kingdom." And so the 500 did not go to British Guyana.

At the end of that month, April 1930, the Palestine White Paper was finalised, imposing severe restrictions upon Palestine – an upper limit of 100, 000 immigrants of whom 25, 000 would be emergency cases. And McDonald, in a moment of honesty – he was not a dishonest man – told the Cabinet, "I frankly admit that certain points have been inserted in this White Paper to

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD AND JOHN FOSTER HUMAN RIGHTS TRUST

meet Arab pressure, points which perhaps would have been omitted if the matter were looked at strictly on its merits." There was one success which was sufficiently impressive to be circulated to Ministers in a Foreign Office telegram which went the rounds. That was a report from Sir Sidney Waterlow in Athens with regard to the immediate impact on the Arab world of the Palestine White paper and the restrictions on immigration. As Waterlow informed London, "The Egyptian Minister in Athens has informed me that the Palestine government's action last week in arresting and ordering away vessels having on board illegal Jewish immigrants and the new restrictions announced from London have had profound effect on Egypt as well as proof of good faith and intentions." And Waterlow added as a sort of gloss, a sociological gloss: "Such concrete action has far more value in the eyes of an oriental than any number of promises from the Greeks."

Four or five months earlier, at the beginning of the year, Northern Rhodesia had been asked to make its contribution to Jewish settlement. And in July the long-awaited answer from the Governor of Northern Rhodesia, Sir John Mavin, arrived at the Colonial Office. One of the problems which he has was that Sir Herbert Young, himself a former governor (and incidentally one of Churchill's closest advisers in the drafting of the 1922 Palestine White paper), had strongly recommended large scale Jewish Immigration into Northern Rhodesia. Sir John Mavin replied to this proposal (and to the proposal genuinely: "I am frankly alarmed at the thought of European children being born and brought up in such a regime where an insufficient and unbalanced diet would be inevitable and no amenities of life really possible. The result, as I foresee it, would be the physical degeneration of these people. To these physical dangers would be added even more serious danger of mental and moral retardation. The educational facilities here, even for our present European population, are far from satisfactory. I am sure that you will agree with me that it would be unfair to allow European children to grow up in this territory, ill-nourished and ill-educated and very grave problems for the future would be created thereby. It would strain our resources to provide education for the existing population. To increase that strain by introducing a large number of settlers who could contribute little directly or indirectly to the revenue might create a problem beyond our financial means." So Northern Rhodesia seemed to be ruled out.

There is no doubt that the pressure of illegal immigration created a great agitation in British official circles, so much that McDonald extended the Palestine quota for six months arguing, correctly, that illegals had filled it up. There was a countermeasure and that was a series of articles in *The New York Times* by a journalist called Joseph Levy describing the plight of the illegals and these articles made an impact and somehow seemed more impressive than the Jewish pressure which was known not to really be serious. So strong were these articles by Levy that the Colonial office prepared a special answer to them and this answer was sent out to all British Consuls in the United States for them to work out into articles and discussions and presentations of their own, The crux of the Colonial Office answer was: "The idea is fostered by Jewish circles is that they are justified in trying to break the law by virtue of some super-legal, higher morality. And in extenuation they cite the persecutions in greater Germany and the desperate plight in which many European Jews now find themselves. But in this view they, like so many other law breakers, are thinking only of themselves and fail to

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD AND JOHN FOSTER HUMAN RIGHTS TRUST

realise that what they are doing is fundamentally anti-social, as anti-social as the German persecution of which they complain”.

The final debate in July and August 1939 concerned the very question of what was a bona fide refugee and indeed in this Colonial Office note, which is quite long, the question was also raised that consuls should bear in mind that many, if not all, of these refugees were not bona fide. The argument has reached London first of all from the British Charge d'affaires in Warsaw, Sir Clifford Norton, who had gone to see the Jews reaching Poland from Prague who were of course, on reaching Poland, seeking some form of certificate to Palestine or entry to Britain or elsewhere. And Norton informed the Foreign Office: "It is true that many of those now more or less earmarked by the refugee organisations are non-political refugees, but I would call them mostly Jews who left the protectorate, perhaps prematurely, in panic." Sir Norton, who was actually a very decent man, then went on to describe some of the horrendous treatment of the Jews in Prague and asked his Foreign Office colleagues, those that would read his dispatch, to bear in mind that that was the other side of the coin. But when Patrick Riley, who was responsible for distilling a policy out of this problem, read Norton's report and distilled the policy, he made no reference to this very powerful material sent by Norton with regard to the actual vicious persecution. Riley's minute, which is dated 24 July 1939, was as follows: "The problem of the Czech refugees is an extremely difficult one, particularly with regards to those who have reached Poland. A great many of these [and here he somehow reflects Norton] are not in any sense political refugees but Jews who panicked unnecessarily and need not have left. Many of them are quite unsuitable as immigrants and would be a very difficult problem if brought here." Now that, of course, is not a part of Norton's telegraph - he doesn't say these would be unsuitable immigrants or very difficult if brought here.

The money question continued to dog the refugees, the refugee organisations and the policy makers. At the beginning of August an all-party deputation of Members of Parliament went to see the Chancellor of the Exchequer, John Simon, to urge him to make available to Jewish refugees the sum of £2,000,000 - some £2,000,000 above the £4,000,000 that was already originally proposed but had not been distributed for Czech refugees in general. The House of Commons were told two days later, the deputation were told, that such funds were not available for these unfortunate refugees.

Money was the root of much of these discussions and Malcolm McDonald, in particular, seems to have had a view that the Jewish organisations has the resources to look after themselves and did not require good offices. Here is an example of this when he is informing his Cabinet colleagues of the continued pressure being taken, as he points out, on the Romanian, Polish and Greek governments not to allow illegal immigrants through their countries: "I must warn my colleagues that while the good effect of our representation could be seen from day to day, it might not last since the power of Jewish money is great." McDonald's reference to the power of Jewish money was ill-chosen, There is no doubt that by that time, by the Autumn of 1939, all the Jewish refugee organisations and all the Jewish philanthropic organisations were fighting desperately to find the funds to do something. And then in the early hours of 1 September 1939, the war began and Europe was effectively sealed.

My last little section deals briefly with this period from September 1939 to May 1940. First of all the British government had to work out a policy with regard to refugees coming from Germany, now that Germany was at war with Britain. And it was in fact the State Department in the United States which asked the British government to formulate its policy, simply because the American ambassador in Berlin, the American Embassy in Berlin were in charge of British interests and were being, as they reported, besieged by Jews seeking to come to Britain, including those who already possessed, and received in the last week of August, their papers. And so the State Department asked London, "Please ascertain from British government whether German nationals of the Jewish race who hold valid immigration permits issued by the British authorities in Germany will be allowed to enter Great Britain and, if so, please advise procedures to be followed in stamping or visa-ing their passports." It took the British 10 days to reply and the archives show that this reply was very carefully considered and the British answer was to Washington: "On the outbreak of war, all visas previously authorised or granted became void and it is left to the individual to make an entirely fresh application which will be dealt with in accordance with wartime regulations which do not contemplate the grant of visas to refugees of this nature." This 'nature' referred to the fact, which was undoubtedly true, that those German Jews still in Germany were then Reich nationals and Britain was at war with the Reich. A curious phrase in this document of the Americans stated that large scale immigration was no longer to be considered. This too was the reply given with regard to Colonial Office requests as to whether they should continue to seek refuge places in the colonies. Large scale immigration was no longer contemplated. It so happens that in the Colonial Office records, which are voluminous, there is a note dated 30 September, of the number of refugees admitted to the different colonies as a result of this three or four year intensive search for places of refuge from London out to the colonial governments. And I will just read it as a statistic. This is a figure for the six months up to 30 September 1939. At the top of the list Cyprus, with 291, Kenya with 216, Northern Rhodesia (despite Sir John Mavin's caveat) 186, Malaysia 88, Hong Kong 43, British Honduras 23, British Guyana (where the 500 scheme had been abandoned) 19, Swaziland 13, **Solon** and the Bahamas 10 each, the Gold Coast and Malta 7, **Igwallaland** and Nyasaland 6, Jamaica 5, Fiji, Uganda and **Sorali** 3 Jews each, the islands in Gibraltar believe it or not 1, and 14 colonies returned a note to say they had not taken any Jews at all. This included Barbados, the Gambia and Mauritius (which was of course later to be the scene of the taking of illegal Jews by the British government in their hundreds), Nigeria, the Seychelles, Somalia, the Protectorate, and **Tanganika**.

I would like to end with an episode which took place on 18 September 1939. It is one which I studied very carefully and I know that if Wasserstein is here has also studied it. On 18 September, while the German armies were advancing through Poland and a considerable mass of refugees and immigrants, including the Polish government itself, were fleeing southward and eastward into Romania, Dr Weissman went to see Malcolm McDonald as a matter of urgency to ask McDonald for permission to allow 20,000 Polish Jewish children, who could be brought out by this route to enter Palestine. Weissman pointed out, which of course McDonald knew, that these 20,000

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD AND JOHN FOSTER HUMAN RIGHTS TRUST

would not complete the 25,000 emergency Palestine certificates which were an integral part of McDonald's own White Paper of few months earlier. Clearly 20,000 does not use up 25,000 emergency certificates. His discussion with McDonald, whom Weissman to that moment regarded as his closest friend in government circles, Weissman asked for immediate permission to move these children from Poland, through Romania, to Palestine. I'd like to just read the minutes, I can't paraphrase them and I can't really do justice to them except verbatim. Mr McDonald said that his own view has at first been that we should make some effort on humanitarian grounds to meet his request. On reflection, however (and he had four hours to reflect), he felt that it must be turned down. Technically, it might be possible for us to admit 20,000 Polish Jewish children to Palestine straightaway without going back on our pledge to the Arabs not to exceed the immigration figures laid down in the White Paper. "The position about the 25,000 emergency refugees is that it has always been intended that they should be introduced gradually over the five year period and not all at once." It might be possible to get around this technically difficulty of our promise with regard to illegal immigration (though this was not technically, he says, a part of that promise), by keeping the children in Cyprus or some such British territory until the new quota period began and then introducing them to Palestine gradually. But he thought that even though this might not actually be breaking our promise, it would certainly be so regarded by the Arabs. There was another consideration that it had not been the intention of the emergency certificates to relate only to one country, that is Poland. Furthermore, there were technical difficulties about getting the children there and making arrangements for the reception of so large a body at one time. Whatever Dr Weissman might say about accepting responsibility for their maintenance, the position in all the Middle Eastern countries was delicate and he thought that to accept Dr Weissman's proposal might have serious consequences. There was, furthermore, the consideration that His Majesty's Government were at war and everything must be subordinated to the winning of the war. Now the next sentence, I promise you, is a written down by the distinguished note taker in the Colonial Office: "However brutal it might sound, to remove 220,000 children from Poland at this moment would **propanto** simplify the German economic problem." They would not have to feed 20,000 children. "As against this [McDonald now is arguing against himself], must be set the possibility of hostile comment in America should this chance of relieving distress in Poland be missed." But here again the distress weighed equally on Christians and Jews alike and the Christians were far the more numerous in Poland. On the whole, therefore, he felt that without saying anything about Arab sentiments, he should reply to Dr Weissman that the acceptance of his request might prejudice the successful prosecution of the war and for that reason must be turned down but as to how it would prejudice the prosecution of the war, Dr Weissman should not be told.

Well that of course, was the end of the saga for the 20,000 children. On the evening of 15 May 1940, five days after the German invasion of Belgium, France, Holland and Luxembourg, the last of the 10,000 Jewish children to be extracted from Europe under the Home Office British Jewish refugee organisations' plan of December 1938, sailed from the Dutch port of Vimoeden. These were not Dutch children but German Jewish children in the main who had been caught in Holland on the outbreak of the war. One of them recalled, in a letter to me, "At 7.00 we sailed. Far away from the shore

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD AND JOHN FOSTER HUMAN RIGHTS TRUST

we looked back and saw a huge column of black smoke from the oil storage tanks that had been set on fire by the Dutch to prevent the Germans having them. At 9.00 news was picked up on the ship's radio – the Dutch had capitulated.” And the children found safely in Britain.

The widening war effectively sealed off Europe. British policy had, in my view, been distorted as a result of the Palestine dimension. At the same time, Britain's own record was 65,000 who received refuge, one that stands very well with the all other countries involved and far better than most.

I would like to end, perhaps rather as I began, by quoting from a letter which I found some years ago in the archives of the Wiener Library. On 1 July 1939, among the youngsters brought across, among the 10,000 youngsters, was a Czech Jew Rudolf Wesserley. His parents, his father was a judge in Prague, had been unable to come, had been unable to get guarantees, they offered of course to be domestic servants and so on, they were unable to come. In February 1946, Wesserley wrote a letter, and I'll end with this letter, to the people who had given him a new home in Britain: “All efforts to trace my parents on the Continent having failed, I must assume that they are amongst the victims of Nazis. I feel it to be my duty to do what they would undoubtedly have done had they been alive. I should like to thank you and express my deepest gratitude for having saved me, their son, in 1939. For having enabled me to live a full life and for the opportunity I gained to fight actively on the side of Britain”. Thank you.

© The Author