

## Worksheet: Jewish refugees as domestic servants

### TASK 1

a) Read the information below about Jewish refugees who worked as domestic servants in the UK in the 1930s.

One avenue for refugees to enter the UK in the interwar period was to gain a visa as a domestic servant (or domestic). Although the British government was very reluctant to accept refugees in any number, the perceived shortage of domestic workers forced them to make an exception. Around 20,000 women from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia arrived in Britain on domestic visas before the outbreak of war in 1939.

Some were accepted to work in private homes as housekeepers, companions, nursemaids or governesses, but the vast majority were admitted for basic domestic work – cleaning and cooking. There was also a small number of Jewish men admitted as butlers or gardeners. These refugees were not allowed to change jobs without Home Office permission, although most left domestic service quickly if they found an alternative.

Many refugees were ill-prepared for life as domestic workers. Middle-class Jewish refugees were more likely to employ servants of their own than to have worked as domestics in their home countries. Employers often treated the refugees with contempt, and some women were even forced to work under mistresses with fascist and antisemitic views. Unsurprisingly, many refugees loathed their time in domestic service.

*“If it’s too much for you, I’ll send you back to Hitler”* – one mistress when a refugee complained to her about having to scrub floors and clean from 8am until 11pm with only half an hour’s break.<sup>1</sup>

When war broke out in September 1939, the condition on Home Office permission for changing jobs was lifted, but this was tempered by the threat of internment. Refugees often lost their jobs if their place of employment fell within a ‘protected area’, or because their employers simply refused to employ ‘enemy aliens’ within their own homes. Almost half were sacked on the outbreak of war.

*What was a protected area?*

‘Protected areas’ were coastal counties in Britain, where, in the event of Nazi invasion, a spy could cause most harm. ‘Enemy aliens’ were prohibited from living in or entering these areas without

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<sup>1</sup> Mario Cacciottolo, *Nazi persecution saw Jews flee abroad as servants* (2012)  
<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-16942741>> [accessed 23 June 2022].

permission. From May 1940, the protected areas expanded from coastal counties to include inland locations.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

#### Sources:

Buresova, Jana, *Refugees in Domestic Service in Britain* (2020)

<<https://www.ajrrefugeevoices.org.uk/post/refugees-in-domestic-service-in-britain>> [accessed 23 June 2022]

Cacciottolo, Mario, *Nazi persecution saw Jews flee abroad as servants* (2012)

<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-16942741>> [accessed 23 June 2022]

Craig-Norton, Jennifer, *The untold stories of the Jewish women who became domestic servants in Britain to escape the Nazis* (2019) <<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/untold-stories-jewish-women-domestic-servants-britain-escape-nazis/>> [accessed 23 June 2022]

b) Working in pairs, answer the following questions:

1. Why did so many refugees become domestic servants?
2. Why might life as a domestic servant have been difficult for a Jewish refugee?
3. Why were domestic servants often treated badly?

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<sup>2</sup> Hansard, *Aliens (Protected Areas)*, HC Deb 02 May 1940 vol 360 cc927-8W

<<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/written-answers/1940/may/02/aliens-protected-areas>> [accessed 27 June 2022].

<sup>3</sup> Hansard, *Protected Areas (Aliens)*, HC Deb 19 September 1940 vol 365 c208W

<<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/written-answers/1940/sep/19/protected-areas-aliens>> [accessed 27 June 2022].

<sup>4</sup> Simon Parkin, "I remember the feeling of insult": when Britain imprisoned its wartime refugees', *Guardian*, 1 February 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/01/when-britain-imprisoned-refugees-second-world-war-internment-camps>> [accessed 27 June 2022].

## TASK 2



*Fanny and Bertl Höchstetter shortly after their dismissal from the German civil service in 1933. Their gestures show what they thought of Hitler.*

Image: People's Collection Wales:  
<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/1889361>

© Ernie Hunter.



*The Hand Hotel, Llangollen, 1925.*

Image: People's Collection Wales:  
<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/39877>.

© Llangollen Museum.

- a) Read Fanny and Bertl Höchstetter's biography and then listen to the clip of [Ernie Hunter speaking about his mother's time as a domestic servant](#).

**Fanny and Bertl Höchstetter** were sisters who worked as civil servants in Germany. In 1933, they were both sacked due to their Jewish heritage.

They fled to Britain on domestic service visas (Bertl in 1938 and Fanny in 1939) and initially worked in the Wirral, near Liverpool. Fanny had no experience of domestic service, although her uncle had written her a glowing reference highlighting (falsely) her skills in cleaning and housework.

Once the war began, they were ordered to move to Llangollen. Bertl worked as a seamstress while Fanny gained a job as a chambermaid at the Hand Hotel. She did not enjoy her time in domestic service. In Wales, she met fellow refugee Anton Hundsdorfer, and the pair quickly married. They left Wales for Manchester in 1945, and Fanny later set up a DIY business, while Anton founded his own joinery firm.

- b) Working in pairs, answer the following questions:

1. How was Fanny Höchstetter treated? List three examples.
2. How do you think she felt?
3. Why did she have to leave Liverpool?

### TASK 3

Refugees seeking work as domestic workers often paid for advertisements in the local newspaper. These advertisements needed to be short, but still able to give enough information for a prospective employer.

a) Read the examples of advertisements from 1939:

- WANTED, situation as Mother's Help for refined English-speaking Refugee, aged 27; excellent references. – Box M 8197, Mail & Echo, Cardiff.<sup>5</sup>
- COMPANION-Help. – German Refugee, already in Cardiff. Requires Post; good with children. – H 4892, Mail & Echo, Cardiff.<sup>6</sup>
- MOTHER and Daughter, Austrian refugees. Require Post with good family, together or separate; experienced household duties, care of children, companion; excellent references. – Box 3910, Western Mail, Port Talbot.<sup>7</sup>
- ENGLISH-Speaking Refugee, 24, seeks situation as Housemaid; fond of children. – R. Wajcman, 87, Albany-road, Cardiff.<sup>8</sup>

b) Write an advertisement for you or a member of your family. The advertisement should include what post they are seeking, what skills they have, and a return address. It should be under 30 words in length.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Mothers' Helps and Nurses: Wanted [...]', in *Western Mail*, 7 November 1939, p. 2, col. 1  
<<https://search.findmypast.co.uk/bna/viewarticle?id=bl%2f0000104%2f19391107%2f042&stringtohighlight=efined%20refugee>> [accessed 28 June 2022].

<sup>6</sup> 'Housekeepers, Companions and Lady Helps: Companion-Help. – German Refugee [...]', in *Western Mail*, 29 May 1939, p. 2, col. 2  
<<https://search.findmypast.co.uk/bna/viewarticle?id=bl%2f0000104%2f19390529%2f058&stringtohighlight=erman%20refugee>> [accessed 28 June 2022].

<sup>7</sup> 'Housekeepers, Companions and Lady Helps: Mother and Daughter, Austrian refugees [...]', in *Western Mail*, 28 October 1939, p. 2, col. 5  
<<https://search.findmypast.co.uk/bna/viewarticle?id=bl%2f0000104%2f19391028%2f053&stringtohighlight=austrian%20refugees>> [accessed 28 June 2022].

<sup>8</sup> 'House & Parlourmaids: English-Speaking Refugee [...]', in *Western Mail*, 13 November 1939, p. 1, col. 1  
<<https://search.findmypast.co.uk/bna/viewarticle?id=bl%2f0000104%2f19391113%2f007&stringtohighlight=wajcman>> [accessed 28 June 2022].

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