

Voluntary Refugee Work in Britain, 1933–39. An Overview

by Susan Cohen

Zusammenfassung

Im Artikel wird die Arbeit von Flüchtlingskomitees untersucht, die sich in Großbritannien vor und während des Zweiten Weltkriegs gründeten und dort betätigten.

Abstract

The focus of this paper is of the work undertaken by refugee committees which were established and operating in Britain before and during the Second World War.

The refugee crisis in Britain

Following Hitler's accession to power as German Chancellor in January 1933, many Germans, especially Jews, began to leave their homeland for safe havens abroad. Britain was one country where they sought refuge, and British officials soon became concerned about the financial implications of an influx of destitute foreigners. In response, the Anglo-Jewish community, including the recently formed Central British Fund and the Jewish Refugees Committee (JRC), relieved the British government of all responsibility for refugees from Europe, by guaranteeing to take on the financial and social burden themselves. The situation was manageable until March 1938, when, following the *Anschluss* (annexation of Austria), there was a huge increase in the number of would-be refugees, putting an unsustainable burden on the community organisations. In order to conserve their dwindling resources, they were forced to exclude future applicants, and to impose a selections process.¹ There were already official restrictions in place to control the numbers allowed into the country, besides which a £50 guarantee was required for every person, to fund

¹ London, Louise: *Whitehall and the Jews 1933–48: British Immigration Policy and the Holocaust*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) pp. 58 ff.

their presumed eventual re-emigration. The categories of visas available were also restricted, and for many refugees, women in particular, the only way to gain entry was to take one of the domestic posts that were available. The refugee crisis continued to grow exponentially following the Munich Agreement in September 1938, specifically in Czechoslovakia, and the events of *Kristallnacht* on the nights of 9/10 November 1938 had a dramatic impact on the numbers attempting to escape Nazi persecution. It also caused outrage abroad, and a wave of sympathy, albeit short-lived, in Britain. In an unprecedented humanitarian move, the British government decided to allow up to 10,000 unaccompanied children from Eastern Europe to enter the country on what became known as the *Kindertransports*.² Sir Samuel Hoare, the Home Secretary, agreed to relax the formality of individual applications, and replaced these with group travel lists to speed up the emigration process. For their part, the refugee agencies in Britain promised to finance the operation, including the £50 guarantee per child, and to ensure that no burden was placed on the public purse. Aside from the monetary aspect, which extended far beyond the guarantee, the sheer volume of practical work required to support the *Kinder* and other refugees, who ranged in age from babies-in-arms to old people, from the unqualified to the highly professional, was onerous. This responsibility came to be shouldered by an array of voluntary refugee committees, most of which were hastily established across the country by all manner of people, in direct response to the humanitarian crisis.

The community response

Besides the major refugee committees set up by religious organisations, including the Jewish community, Christians and Quakers, innumerable others sprung up around the country, and it is these smaller groups that are the focus of this paper and ongoing research. Amongst them were local initiatives, such as those established by communities in York, Gloucester, Reading, Rotherham and District, Lincoln, and Cambridge. Others were founded within women's organisations, including the British Federation of University Women (BFUW),

² For example, Harris, Mark Jonathan & Oppenheimer, Deborah: *Into the Arms of Strangers. Stories of the Kindertransport* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000).

the National Council of Women (NCW) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). There were those, like the Cambridge Children's Refugee Committee, who concentrated on the assisting the influx of children on the *Kindertransports*. The Academic Assistance Council (AAC), established in 1933 and later known as the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL), focused their activities on academic refugees, most of whom were male, and whilst the AAC was co-founded by two men, William Beveridge and Lionel Robbins, it was Esther Simpson, the secretary of the SPSL, who was the linchpin, and was not only responsible for the day to day running of the committee but also provided the refugees with emotional and practical support.³ The Refugee Relief Fund of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), another male-dominated profession, was set up and run by librarian-editor, Edward Carter, with the help of a female secretary. Through his unflinching persistence, he set up an émigrés group to help architects, including Walter Gropius and Erno Goldfinger, flee repressive regimes, and found work for them, as well as a number of engineers, painters and musicians, not just in England, but all over the world.⁴ The RIBA committee was not permitted to deal with visa applications, and had to pass these on to the Architects Refugee Committee, whereas the BFUW, who were similarly restricted, gave their applications to Esther Simpson at the SPSL. Additionally, there were individual women who became pre-eminent within the running of committees, like Miss Joan Strange, of the Worthing Refugee Committee (WRC),⁵ Mrs Ditcham in York and Mrs Cissi Rosenfelder, who undertook the operation of a Jewish refugee committee from her home in North London.⁶ Others included the entrepreneur Jack Pritchard, who helped some twenty architects and designers escape from Nazi Europe and find accommodation and work in Britain and elsewhere,⁷ as well as the activist, Doreen Warriner, who worked abroad, in her case in Prague as the British representative for the British Committee for

³ For the AAC/SPSL and Esther Simpson see Marks, Shula, Weindling, Paul & Wintour, Laura (eds.): *In Defence of Learning* (London: British Academy, 2011).

⁴ Papers of the RIBA Refugees Committee, RIBA/OA. RIBA London.

⁵ Records of Worthing Refugee Committee, Add MSS 27809. West Sussex Record Office.

⁶ Papers of Cissi Rosenfelder, MS 116/157 AJ/396/5. 15 Sept 1939. Parkes Library. Special Collections. University of Southampton. Also Koschland, Bernd: 'Tyler Green papers – The Unique Archives of a War-Time Hostel' in Andrea Hammel & Anthony Grenville (eds.) *Refugee Archives: Theory and Practice* *The Yearbook of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies*. (2007) Vol. 9, pp. 157–72.

⁷ The Pritchard Papers Series PP/11. University Library, University of East Anglia. Norwich.

Refugees from Czechoslovakia (BCRC).⁸ The committees mentioned are purely representational, as evidenced by partial information given by the Movement for the Care of Children from Germany (MCCG). By September 1939, they had a list of 182 provincial refugee committees in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Of these only 54 were Jewish. Researching the work of these committees is hindered by the lack of extant archive material, and in some instances, notably the BFUW, papers remain inaccessible.⁹

From 1933 onwards

The earliest established committees were set up in 1933, as a direct result of anti-Jewish policies introduced by Hitler in Nazi Germany. The AAC, the BFUW and RIBA were specifically concerned with alleviating the plight of fellow professionals and academics, and responded by providing practical and emotional support. All three operated continuously from 1933, with the volume of their work gaining momentum after the *Anschluss* in March 1938. The BFUW, for one, did not formalise their committee until May 1938, and by September 1938 had to engage a paid secretary to deal with the deluge of requests from abroad. The person appointed, Miss Erna Hollitscher, was an academic refugee herself, and, like Esther Simpson, with whom she often collaborated, became central to the running of the committee.¹⁰ The refugee committees associated with the NCW did not get off to such a flying start. When Lady Stewart put forward a proposal to 62 members of the NCW Peace and International Committee in April 1933, suggesting that they considered what action they could usefully take to ‘assist women suffering from political or racial persecution or from deprivation of employment, at the present time in Germany’, the motion was opposed by a certain member who considered

⁸ Susan Cohen, ‘A British Woman’s Mission Abroad’ in *United Academic’s Journal of Social Science*, April 2011, pp. 6–11. [<http://www.united-academics.org/journals> accessed 31 Dec 2011].

⁹ Cohen, Susan: “‘Now you see them, now you don’t.’ The archives of the Refugee Committee of the British Federation of University Women.” in Andrea Hammel & Anthony Grenville (eds.) *Refugee Archives: Theory and Practice. The Yearbook of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies*. Vol. 9 (2007) pp. 109–22.

¹⁰ Cohen, Susan: ‘The British Federation of University Women’ in Marks, Shula etc. (eds) *In Defence of Learning*, pp. 161–176.

it ‘dangerous to interfere in the national life of Germany...’ and it was agreed that no action be taken until ‘authentic information was received’. That they doubted the veracity of Nazi anti-Semitism was not altogether surprising, given the lack of press coverage at home, other than by the *Manchester Guardian*, and was a matter which the Miss Eleanor Rathbone, Member of Parliament for the Combined English Universities, addressed in May 1933 saying:

“The little that appears on the subject in most journals is quite insufficient to bring home to their reader the real significance of these events. The general public, jaded with horrors and pre-occupied with its own distress, only knows vaguely that the German government is persecuting Jews, feels sorry about it, and turns to its own affairs.”¹¹

The refugee question was raised again in November 1933 by Eva Hartree, a prominent Jewish NCW member and one-time President, who suggested that branches might help by organising hospitality for German Jews who had been driven out of the country, as she was doing in Cambridge, as Secretary of the local All Peoples Association.¹² Mrs Johnston added weight to this call by urging individual members – there were 82 present on this occasion – to assist the International Committee for Securing Employment for Refugee Women, who already had a list of 60 women in urgent need of help. Apart from responding to a call for help advertising a charity concert to raise funds for the Assistance of German Refugee Professional Women in February 1934, and an address on Nazism and Fascism to the Western Counties Conference in June 1937,¹³ the refugee issue does not appear in the Executive minutes again until February 1938. Then, in the light of reports of the ill-treatment of Jewish girl students in Romania, it was agreed to recommend that ‘a resolution covering the whole question be forwarded to the International Council for Women.’¹⁴ If the 89

¹¹ Letter of Eleanor Rathbone, 2 May 1933, *Manchester Guardian*.

¹² The APA was a voluntary organisation established in London in 1929 by Sir John Wrench, with the aim of promoting international amity in general and Anglo-German understanding in particular. The rise of Nazism made the work of the association increasingly difficult, and Wrench found himself (unfairly) branded as a pro-Nazi. In 1936 he reluctantly decided to close the association. May, Alex: ‘Wrench, Sir (John) Evelyn Leslie (1882–1966)’ in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2009. [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37031>, accessed 31 Dec 2011].

¹³ Committee Minutes, 10 June 1937, Acc 3613/1/34. NCW Papers, London Metropolitan Archives. The papers of the ICW are held at the Women’s Library, London, and like the papers of the BFUW, are not available to researchers.

¹⁴ Minutes of Executive meeting, 11 February 1938, NCW Papers, Acc/3613/1/11. LMA.

members of the committee who attended the Executive committee meeting on 13 May 1938 still had doubts about the truth of reports of Nazi persecution of the Jews and others, these would have been dispelled by a talk given by Walter Adams, first general secretary of the AAC/SPSL, who had first-hand knowledge of the situation from helping with academic refugees since 1933. Even then, the NCW left it up to individual members to get in touch with diplomatic representatives of Romania and express their concern over the treatment of the girl students.¹⁵

1938: A growing refugee crisis

It was the Czech refugee crisis, created by the Munich Settlement and the resulting dismemberment of the country, the events of *Kristallnacht*, and an address given by Mary Ormerod, a Quaker and the secretary of the Co-ordinating Committee for Refugees,¹⁶ that were the catalyst for a sea change within the organisation. The NCW, along with many other women's organisations, supported Rathbone's challenge to the government over proposals to limit the number of special limited-stay visas issued to Czech refugees to a single quota of 350.¹⁷ Mrs Johnson, the NCW President, agreed, and petitioned the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary, on behalf of thousands of her members in Britain.¹⁸ Local branches up and down the country, from Newcastle to Worthing, responded to the call to write to their MPs, but neither the members, nor Miss Rathbone, were much impressed by the response of Sir Samuel Hoare in the House of Commons on 3 November, when he would only agree to 'consider cases individually and sympathetically.' Miss Rathbone's concern for the thousands of Czech refugees led to the establishment of her all-party voluntary Parliamentary Committee on Refugees in

¹⁵ For Walter Adams see Marks, Shula etc. *In Defence of Learning*. Minutes of Executive meeting, 13 May 1938, NCW Papers, Acc/3613/1/12. LMA.

¹⁶ The Co-ordinating Committee was an umbrella group set up, with Home Office encouragement, by the main refugee organisations, and was intended to produce constructive policy proposals. *Hansard* HC, vol.336, cols 834–6, 23 May 1938.

¹⁷ Cohen, Susan: 'Eleanor Rathbone and the British response to the Czech Plight of 1939' in 'Exile in and from Czechoslovakia during the 1930 and 1940s'. *The Yearbook of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies*, 2009, 11, pp. 147–66.

¹⁸ Minutes of Executive meeting, 18 November 1938, NCW. Acc/3613/1/12. LMA.

November 1938, a very different kind of refugee committee that was to act as a pressure group to influence government and policy towards refugees.¹⁹

By the time 75 members of the NCW Executive committee met on 16 December 1938, fourteen local committees reported that they had already taken up the refugee question, with a further nine either about to inaugurate schemes or were already co-operating with local refugee committees.²⁰ Eva Hartree laid down a few initial ground rules, and was adamant that any refugee scheme that the NCW started should work in close co-operation with existing local committees. It was also decided that the NCW should organise small groups of interpreters who could meet refugees at various ports, and so help them and the refugee societies. Other women's organisations, including the National Vigilance Society and National Women's Citizens Association were subsequently invited to help with this work. The response of the NCW and their local branches did not go unnoticed in the Jewish community, for the *Jewish Chronicle* paid tribute to their refugee work, which included finding homes for some of the 602 unaccompanied children who had arrived at Harwich. On 5 May 1939 the NCW formed their Ad Hoc Committee on refugees, and became more active in petitioning the government on many aspects of their refugee policy.²¹ The NCW were represented on the newly established Refugee (Public Opinion) Committee, and as a way of raising awareness and understanding of the refugee problem, it was suggested that more NCW meetings were held, and that more committees set up in places where none existed. The plight of women refugees interned as 'friendly aliens' in May 1940, and of alien women in Holloway prison, gave the Ad Hoc committee a different set of problems to deal with.²²

So much for an insight into the work of the national committee. Of equal importance was the Regional and Branch Representative Sectional Committee (RBRSC) who were soon providing information about the refugee work being undertaken around the country. At the end of 1938 NCW members in North Wales had prepared houses to receive refugee children, and a similar

¹⁹ Cohen, Susan: *Rescue the Perishing. Eleanor Rathbone and the Refugees* (Edgware, Middlesex: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010) pp. 113 ff.

²⁰ Minutes of Executive meeting, 16 December 1938, NCW Papers, Acc/3613/1/12. LMA.

²¹ Executive Committee Minutes, 19 May 1939, NCW Papers, Acc/3613/1/ 12. LMA.

²² Minutes, Ad Hoc Committee, 9 August 1940, & 12 December 1940, NCW Papers, Acc 3613/1/35. LMA.

venture was underway in Wrexham. Following an emergency branch meeting held in Cheltenham on 19 December 1938, the 31 members present agreed unanimously to sponsor a refugee child and to supply part of her maintenance. Their refugee child was Ruth Levy, and from then until August 1948, when she sailed to South Africa to live with a long-lost aunt whom the committee had traced, the people of Cheltenham supported Ruth financially and practically.

By February 1939 fund raising was well underway across the country, and in Birmingham, for example, the money was being used to keep and provide agricultural training to a refugee boy, whilst Hornsey were collaborating with Middlesex County School. The latter undertook to give the necessary guarantee and accepted reduced fees, whilst the NCW branch paid board and fees for their adopted refugee.²³ These cases are just the tip of the iceberg, for minutes of the RBRSC, and regular reports in the *Women in Council* magazine, reveal the extent of the work undertaken by local committees, very often in conjunction with other local ventures.

An initiative in Gloucester

An exceptional case was that in Gloucester, where the NCW branch initiated the setting up of the Gloucester Association for Aiding Refugees (GAAR), in February 1939. NCW members provided the nucleus of the group, which was predominantly women, and invited other organisations to appoint members. One particular member, Miss Ethel Hartland, stands out in the GAAR, and she was certainly driven by a sense of public duty, inherited from her father, a past Mayor of the city, to involve herself with the refugees. She had been a regular visitor to Germany and spoke the language fluently, which would have been an advantage.²⁴ A decision was made early on that help would be limited to the care and reception of children, mainly, it seems, because of the restrictions imposed in dealing with adults, especially where employment was concerned. The question of housing – boarding-out or setting up a hostel – was hotly debated, with considerable effort made to cost out the alternatives. While this issue was still being discussed, and a suitable property sought, the

²³ Committee Minutes, 16 February 1939, NCW Papers, Acc/3613/1/34. LMA.

²⁴ Hartland Collection, Local Studies Library, Gloucester.

Honorary Secretary applied to the Movement for the Care of Children from Germany (MCCG) for the GAAR to be allocated ten refugee boys from the Dovercourt Bay Camp, near Harwich.²⁵ A house was eventually found in Alexandra Road, a few doors away from where Miss Hartland lived. The property was purchased by the committee in April 1939, with regular funds being paid by Miss Hartland. All the conveyancing was done free of charge by a local solicitor, and members put themselves forward to run five sub-committees to deal with furnishing – all of which was donated –, welfare, house, appeals and establishing a clubroom. Dr and Mrs Arnstein, refugees from Carlsbad who had then escaped from Prague, were appointed wardens, but were unwilling to keep the one hundred pound annual wage plus board, lodging and laundry, that the Home Office insisted be paid to a married couple. This was far in excess of what the committee could afford pay, and the Arnstein's insisted that they would 'gladly give it back as a contribution towards the cost of running the hostel.'²⁶ The hostel opened its doors in June 1939 and in due course, the ten boys, aged between twelve and fourteen, were met at Liverpool Street station, London, and took up residence in their new home. The minutes show the great care and attention paid by the committee to the welfare and well-being of the boys, and how every effort was made to keep them in touch with their parents, and to maintain their religion. To this end, the headmaster of Archdeacon St Seniors Boys School, which the boys attended, organised English lessons for them as an alternative to religious instruction, and an arrangement was made for a rabbi from the Liberal community in Birmingham to visit them regularly. Three local scout troops invited the boys to a holiday at their camp in 1939, and the following year those boys who could attend, were guests at the Gloucester Rotary Club Holiday Home at Weston. The boys did their bit for the war effort, growing vegetables on an allotment that one of their two local doctors arranged, and they also undertook fire-watching duty. There is a great deal more to be written about this committee, which cared for the boys even after the hostel closed in 1942. They were all found lodgings in private homes, and were either at technical school or in agricultural training. The GAAR was disbanded in 1946, by which time the only two boys still in the city were self-supporting.

²⁵ For Dovercourt see London, Louise, *Whitehall*, pp. 118–20.

²⁶ Minutes of executive meeting, 3 April 1939. NCW papers, LMA.

Czech refugees

There were other refugee groups established in late 1938 whose immediate priority were the Czech refugees. In October 1938, the non-sectarian BCRC was formed to handle the allocation of funds raised at home, and help settle any refugees who might arrive in Britain. The story of the Czech refugees and Doreen Warriner, who was appointed to run the BCRC in Prague, has been told elsewhere²⁷ but one other women's organisation of note who were active in the field were the YWCA. This enterprising, proactive organisation was established in 1855 to help protect young Christian women, and following a visit made by Miss Curwen, the National General Secretary, to Czechoslovakia in November 1938, they set up a refugee committee. Research on this rich archive is ongoing, but it is evident that the committee worked closely with the Prague branch, concerning individual applications for visas from endangered Jews and non-Jews, and then undertook to find work and a home for the women. Money was always a problem for the refugee committees and the YWCA set up their own Czech fund, appealing for money in February 1939 from the Pilgrim Trust, a charitable foundation established in Britain in 1930,²⁸ and the Lord Mayor of London's Fund, inaugurated in September 1938. They worked with the Czech Refugee Trust Fund (CRTF), which took over from the BCRC in July 1939, and co-operated with a wide variety of agencies, including the Home Office and the Domestic Bureau of the Central Office for Refugees. The latter was significant for many of the Czech women entered the country with visas to work as maids and domestics. Some cases were complicated, and one that stands out was that of an unnamed woman whose Jewish husband had died in Dachau, and who entered Britain under her maiden name in March 1939. Problems arose after she gave birth to a child in July, as she found it difficult to gain work as a cook rather than a domestic servant. The committee went to great lengths to help her, placing adverts in newspapers on her behalf. There was a happy outcome when she married an Englishman in September 1940, and later gained employment as a teacher.

²⁷ Cohen, Susan: 'A British Woman's Mission Abroad' *United Academic's Journal of Social Science*, April 2011, pp. 6–11 [<http://www.united-academics.org/journals>, accessed 31 Dec 2011].

²⁸ See <http://www.thepilgrimtrust.org.uk/documents/ThePilgrimTrust-DetailedHistory.pdf>, accessed 31 Dec 2011.

Joan Strange and the Worthing Refugee Committee

Amongst the local initiatives set up, again initially to help Czech refugees, was the WRC. The people of Worthing quickly responded to the Lord Mayor's Appeal and within two weeks of being asked to contribute, had raised £297 10s 6d.²⁹ Their refugee committee – the only one in West Sussex – was officially constituted on 29 January 1939, and like so many others, worked in conjunction with other agencies, having contact with the German Jewish Aid Committee, the Movement for the Care of Children from Germany, the West London Synagogue Association, the BCRC and the CRTF. The number of members at the WRC meetings varied between an initial 21, made up of thirteen men and eight women, to just eight, five of them women, at the 21st meeting on 17 July 1939. Five stalwarts who never missed a meeting were all women, and included Mrs Thorneycroft, the Honorary Secretary, a formidable protagonist who often simply refused to leave the Home Office until her refugee business was dealt with. The other outstanding member was Joan Strange, a physiotherapist by profession, who not only devoted herself to the refugees from the outset, but also recorded her wartime activities in a series of diaries.³⁰ Joan already had contact with refugees abroad, for on 11 January 1939 she wrote of her excitement awaiting the arrival of the German-Jewish Moses family from Stuttgart, and of how her brother, Ken, had travelled to Germany and smuggled some of their jewellery into Britain prior to their safe arrival here before the outbreak of war. Then there were the five German and Austrian people she entertained to tea on 25 January 1939, describing them as 'a sorry tale but all of them courageous'. Four days later Joan signed up for the new committee at the opening meeting, having listened to a talk locally about the refugee problem given by a Mr Davidson from Woburn House, London.

There were a number of Czechs in the town well before the war, and every effort was made to help them, but by April 1939, and in common with other groups, decisions about further applications were being made on the basis of danger, not religion. Sending out a rallying call to local residents, the WRC published its own leaflet, 'The problem of the refugees. How Worthing can help',

²⁹ Payne, Michael: *Storm Tide: Worthing: Prelude to War 1933–1939* (Worthing: Verité CM, 2008) p. 137.

³⁰ Strange, Joan: *Despatches from the Home Front. The War Diaries of Joan Strange, 1939–1945*, Chris McCooey (ed.) (Eastbourne, Sussex: Monarch, 1989).

and, distributed 12,000 leaflets locally, as they were trying urgently to raise the guarantee money for a Mr Fritz Rabb in Prague. By 24 April the committee had succeeded in this task and, with the help of the BCRC, he arrived in Britain in May, with his wife and child following in August.³¹ People were initially accommodated in private houses, either free or for a low rent, but it was not long before houses were made available as hostels. Joan Strange was personally responsible for one of these, for not long after the committee was set up she bought a house, which was then run as a refugee hostel for twelve refugees who paid a very low rent. The money for this came from a £200 bank overdraft, a loan of £200 from her mother and £426 from the sale of her 500 National Savings Bonds. Of the 300 refugees whose lives were saved by the committee during 1939, 40 of the families were known personally to Joan. In her diary entry for 14 July 1939 she wrote of her joy that 'Two Czech refugees moved into 37 Shakespeare Road (her house) – they were married yesterday!' She was as delighted to be able to persuade Mr King, a local shoe mender, to do repairs cheaply for her refugees. There are notes about outings with her refugee friends, of cinema visits and of skating on Patching pond, but there are also many entries which express concern over anti-Semitism in the town, of internment and the consequences, and the problems the refugees faced, especially concerning visas. By the end of 1939 there were around 1000 aliens in West Sussex, approximately 500 of whom were in Worthing, with 250 of these registered at the WRC office on 5 January 1940. A further two hostels were opened in April 1940, bringing the total to six, but by 14 June 1940 all enemy aliens had to leave coastal area. About forty Austrian and German refugees attended a farewell tea put on by Mrs Thornycroft, an event that Joan described as 'very pathetic.'³² Equally sad was a visit she made to see four of her refugees in Huyton Internment camp in Liverpool in August 1940. 'It was a beautiful sunny day so the camp did not look so awful, but the barbed wire is horrid. The men looked better than I'd anticipated but all so sad at lack of freedom.'³³ Joan remained in contact with her refugees friends after the

³¹ Case File, Friedrich (Fritz) and Regina Rabl, Worthing Refugee Committee, Add MSS 27810. West Sussex Record Office.

³² Strange, Joan, *War Diaries*, p. 40.

³³ Strange, Joan, *War Diaries*, p. 46.

war, regularly sending out calendars at Christmas time, a gesture which one lady, Gisela Durst, then in Chicago, was very touched by.³⁴

York Refugee Committee

There was a determined response to the plight of child and adult refugees from the local community in York in late 1938, again following the Lord Mayor's Appeal, and by the time their committee was officially formed in November 1938, they had already found homes for thirteen children.³⁵ There were about an equal number of men as women in this group, although the Honorary Secretary was a lady, and most of the executive work was undertaken by Mrs Ditcham, assisted by Mrs Hughes. They, in turn, were both on the Executive panel with another two women. The challenges that the York committee faced mirrored those across the country, with the minutes recording the desperate plight of refugees seeking help, of the great need of offers of hospitality and of the difficulty in securing financial guarantees. The generosity of local people, from tradesmen to professionals makes inspiring reading: Mr Ditcham, a dental surgeon, and two medical doctors gave their services free of charge, numerous free passes were given for the theatre and two cinemas and English classes were arranged. The committee set up a social club for their male Czech and Sudeten refugees – there were 99 in York by 10 May 1939 – and billeted them in the town and a 20 bed hostel set up by the committee. Room was left in the hostel for the wives who were due to arrive, even though there were many refugees in need of a bed. The men formed platoons of gardeners and worked on three allotments, which kept them well stocked with vegetables for the hostel, and helped prepare the hostel by laying floor covering and painting. The committee were delighted that not only were the men anxious to leave a good impression, but the residents of the city were very welcoming. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the number of schools who opened their doors to refugee children. Amongst them were Great Ayton, Ackworth and Bootham, with their strong Quaker heritage, St Peter's and York College for Girls who all gave refugee children free places, often providing for

³⁴ Letter of Gisela Durst to Joan Strange, 7 December 1947. Papers of Joan Strange, Add MSS 51, 940–43. West Sussex Record Office.

³⁵ Notes of meeting of York Refugee Committee, p.1: York Refugee Committee Papers, Acc 404. York City Archives.

maintenance and uniform as well. Enabling the children to maintain their religion was as important to the York committee as elsewhere, and as there were no very Orthodox Jewish families in the city, hostel places were given to two very religious girls by the Leeds Jewish Aid Committee. The girls were soon appealing to Mrs Ditcham to go back to York as they were so unhappy, and they were quickly returned to foster parent in York. Ilse Suss, a seven year old Catholic girl settled in very happily at the Bar Convent, and holidays were arranged for her at a convent in Easingwold, whilst her two brothers were soon very comfortable in Harrogate. A summary of refugees up to 10 May 1939 lists the names of nearly 200 individuals, children and adults, whose cases were being dealt with in a variety of ways by the committee, and it is evident that the work was endless, and very demanding.³⁶ In fact, Mrs Ditcham was so concerned that some matters were being shelved due to lack of time, that at the meeting on 13 June 1939, she asked member to give up a whole evening every month to the proceedings, rather than the customary one and half to two hours, so that everything could be discussed.³⁷

The York Refugee Committee, which ceased its work in 1941, is yet another instance where much more detailed examination and evaluation of the archive material is required. Even without this, it is clear that the residents, many of whom had a link to the Quakers, responded in the very best of humanitarian traditions, and like all the other committees mentioned in this overview, was comprised of men and women who cared about the plight of others, who were not afraid to welcome them into their homes and community, and were willing to make whatever sacrifices were needed to give the refugees hope for the future.

³⁶ Minutes of Executive Committee, 10 May 1939, York Refugee Committee Papers, Acc 404. York City Archives.

³⁷ Minutes of Executive Committee, 13 June 1939, York Refugee Committee Papers, Acc 404. York City Archives.