

A refuge for the persecuted, release for the fettered mind

An organisation set up in 1933 to find work for refugee academics is still very much in business. *Georgina Ferry* reports.



Seventy years ago, on 5 February 1939, the great and the good of Oxford poured into the Sheldonian to hear distinguished speakers address 'The Problem of the refugee Scholar'. The aim was to persuade the University and its colleges to open their hearts and their pockets to academics from countries where fascism had deprived them of their livelihood and of the opportunity to teach and research. On the platform was Lord Samuel, former Home Secretary and head of the Council for German Jewry, and Sir John Hope Simpson, the former Indian civil servant whose subsequent career as a colonial administrator had frequently focused on migration, forced and otherwise, in countries as diverse as Kenya and Palestine. Both were Balliol men.

Distinguished Oxford figures including the Master of Balliol, A D Lindsay, the Provost of Oriel, Sir William David Ross, and the regius Professor of Medicine, Sir Edward Farquhar Buzzard - had worked indefatigably over the previous five years to create the conditions in which the University would be prepared to stage a high-profile event in such a cause. It all began in 1933, when Sir William Beveridge, then director of the London School of Economics (and subsequently Master of Univ), was on a study trip to Vienna. Reading in a newspaper that, since Adolf Hitler's recent rise to power, Jewish and other non-Nazi professors were losing their jobs in German universities, Beveridge returned to England and mobilised many of his influential friends to form the academic assistance Council (AAC). In May that year they sent a letter to *The Times*, appealing for funds to find posts in universities in the UK and elsewhere for scholars who would otherwise be 'condemned to want and idleness'. among the 41 signatories were Oxford luminaries including the Nobel prize-winning physiologist, Sir Charles Sherrington, the organic chemist, Robert Robinson (also later a Nobel prizewinner), the Regius Professor of Greek, Gilbert Murray, and the recently retired Principal of Somerville, Margery fry.

Winning over a handful of liberal minded people was only the start of the process. Raising funds and finding jobs for foreigners in a country recovering from a severe slump was another matter. The papers of the AAC, which became the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL) in 1936, are among the Special Collections in the Bodleian's department of Western Manuscripts, and they detail the complex and equivocal response by the University and colleges to those whose academic freedom was threatened.

Individual colleges varied enormously in how they responded to the two appeals they received, in 1934 and then again in 1939. Some sent no reply. Some explained that the request lay 'outside the proper apportionment of our funds'. One managed to scrape together £10, at the second time of asking, by having a whip-round among its fellows. One of the women's colleges - always among the poorest - sent £20 with a heartfelt apology: 'We all regret it cannot be a large sum but we have hardly any free funds ... we are heavily in debt and largely dependent on charity ourselves. ... We should hope to be able to offer hospitality until the end of this academic year for a woman refugee scholar if any such were needing it.'

At the other end of the scale, Balliol, Christ Church, all Souls and Magdalen volunteered sums in the region of £1,000 each, usually with a view to helping named refugees to live and work in Oxford. among those funded by Balliol was Ludwig Guttman, a neurosurgeon who had fled his native Breslau after treating dozens of patients who had been assaulted during Kristallnacht in 1938. Like other medically qualified refugees, he was initially not allowed to practice as a doctor in Britain, but after the outbreak of war (and a brief period of internment) he was asked to set up a spinal injuries unit at

Stoke Mandeville Hospital. He championed the therapeutic importance of work and sport for people with spinal injuries, went on to found the Paralympics, and was eventually knighted.

Not every refugee scholar needed the help of the AAC. The pharmacologist Edith Bülbri ng had been working as a research assistant in London for two years when she came to Oxford; she was immediately put on the payroll as a departmental demonstrator and later rose to be Professor of Pharmacology. Meanwhile, there were others alert to the opportunity offered to Oxford, as researchers were forced out of German institutions. Frederick Lindemann, Dr Lee's Professor of Experimental Philosophy, held decidedly right-wing views on most subjects, but had no qualms about touring Germany in his Rolls-Royce and retrieving some of the best minds in German physics to revitalise the somewhat moribund Clarendon Laboratory. He obtained funds to support them from ICI, and Franz Simon, Kurt Mendelssohn, Nicholas Kurti and Heinz London duly set about establishing the field of low-temperature superconductivity that eventually led to Oxford's first spin-out company: Martin and Audrey Wood's Oxford Instruments. Other refugees first found homes elsewhere before coming to Oxford: Hans Krebs went to Cambridge in 1933, but was appointed to the Whitley Professorship in Biochemistry in 1954.

The outbreak of war in September 1939 led to unwarranted but perhaps understandable anxiety throughout the country about the presence of so many 'enemy aliens' - there were around 500 in Oxford alone, and the fact that some of them were scientists did not help. 'In some of the science departments it would be the easiest thing in the world to blow the whole place up', fretted the Vice-Chancellor, George Gordon, and he joined with the local chief constable in recommending wholesale internment. But the national mood shifted almost as soon as this had been achieved, in July 1940. The injustice of internment galvanised the registrar, Douglas Veale, who seven years earlier had seemed relieved that he could pass the problem of job-seeking professors on to the AAC. He drew up lists of interned scholars in Oxford he could recommend to the Home Office for release. Most were freed after three or four months, when, according to historian of science Paul Weindling, Veale invited them to tea and helped them and their dependants to find work and homes. In all, the SPSL had helped more than 2,500 refugee scholars by the end of the war. In the years that followed, 16 won Nobel prizes, 74 became fellows of the Royal Society and 34 fellows of the British Academy. The Society had raised £100,000 for the support of the refugees (several million pounds in today's money), but of even greater value was the indefatigable letter-writing of its secretary, Esther Simpson, whose integrity and interest in those she championed were legendary. The organisation still exists today: since 1997 it has been known as the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA), and has just celebrated its 75th anniversary with the publication of a book, *The Refuge and the Fortress*, by Jeremy Seabrook. In 2008 it was supporting around 140 academics from 30 countries.

'It's a mark of the spread of intolerance and the desire to eliminate thinking people that there is still a need', says Professor Michael Yudkin, biochemist and Emeritus fellow of University College and Kellogg College, who has been on the council since 1970. 'We have applicants from a large number of countries, mostly but not exclusively in the Middle East, certain African countries and the former Soviet Union. Iraq has been a particular problem, but there are many other countries in that region that are not friendly to academics and regard them as subversive.'

Yudkin recognises that the situation is very different for many of these scholars compared with those who were coming out of some of the best universities in the world in the 1930s. 'Those that come from under-resourced countries, however able, may not have achieved that level of standing', he says. As a former member of CARA's allocations committee, he has seen the value of providing small sums for bench fees or computers to help refugee scholars find their feet. Professor Roger Zetter, who directs Oxford's Refugee Studies Centre (RSC), argues that universities and other organisations need to be more proactive in providing subsidised access to resources such as libraries and conferences. 'Many feel disempowered when they come to Britain', he says, 'because they feel their knowledge and experience is undervalued.'

Oxford is a member institution of CARA's 'Scholars at Risk Network', a national system designed to find work or training for refugee academics in British universities. The RSC recently received one of CARA's 'Pathfinder' grants, and has worked with the organisation on the cases of individual scholars. One who came to Oxford is featured in Jeremy Seabrook's book. 'Victor' (not his real name) studied and taught at a university that had been displaced to Khartoum from the non-Muslim south of Sudan.

After winning a Ford Foundation scholarship to take a Master's degree in Cairo, he returned to Khartoum, but found the restrictions of the Islamic regime there intolerable: as a student, he had received 30 lashes with a horsewhip for being out at night, and to continue as a teacher he was obliged to learn Arabic and study the Koran. With the help of CARA, he has now completed an Oxford DPhil.

That academics should support others who have been deprived of a basic freedom - the freedom to think - is extremely important, says Dr Dawn Chatty, deputy director of the RSC. 'In many countries the intellectual elite is a very small minority. Often the future development of those countries rests on their shoulders. If they are supported as academics, that makes it possible for them to help in the future.' On 26 May this year the Oxford Union hosted a refugee forum, chaired by the Principal of Jesus, Lord Krebs, with support from CARA, Oxford asylum Welcome and OUSU. Seventy years after the Sheldonian meeting, the issue is as pertinent as ever.

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