



The refugee scholars who found safety among the spires

Oxford played an important role in offering a haven to the refugee academics forced to flee Nazi Germany after 1933. **Anthony Grenville** uncovers the story of this distinguished group

Oxford University took in more refugee scholars than any other academic institution in Britain, according to a report in November 1938. Though its record in its reception of these refugees was, like that of British society as a whole, distinctly mixed, the impact on its academic standards was great and lasting.

As early as 7 April 1933, Jews employed at German universities were among those removed from their posts under the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service. This threatened them with penury and stripped them of their livelihoods. But by forcing them to emigrate early, the law arguably saved their lives.

Britain was unique in its response to this emergency. The Academic Assistance Council, later renamed Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL), was set up in 1933 to assist academics dismissed by the Nazis to find posts in Britain or countries such as the USA. It was the initiative of William Beveridge (Director of the London School of Economics, later Master of University College, Oxford, and author of the Beveridge

Report). Oxford colleges worked with SPSL and its devoted secretary, Esther Simpson, to find posts for many refugees.

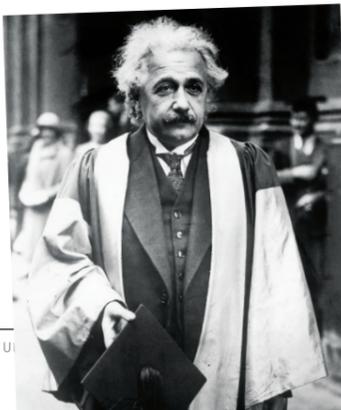
Oxford was not entirely welcoming; some colleges took no refugees at all. This was due in part to residual antisemitism, but more to a generalised antipathy to foreigners. This was demonstrated in 1931 in the case of Albert Einstein, when he was offered a fellowship at Christ Church. Despite Einstein's distinction, his election provoked a furious response from one classics professor JGC Anderson, who sent a four-page note of protest to the Dean of Christ Church. The protest failed, but its argument that jobs at British universities should go to British academics retained its force. This was hardly surprising, given that 80 percent of Oxford's 500 dons were Oxford graduates themselves and the colleges tended to give posts to the pick of their graduating students who devoted themselves to tutorial teaching.

This system signalled another barrier: whereas German academics remained remote from undergraduates and focused on research, at Oxford the tutorial formed the basis of a don's work, at least in the humanities. This difference proved hard for the newcomers to overcome. They also found the culture of the Senior Common Room alien to their conception of a professional university community. Beatrix Walsh, then the wife of a young philosophy don at Merton College, described the relations between the two groups of scholars: 'That was the trouble with these new chaps: they didn't seem to care about British gentlemanly conventions; they were outside some Common Rooms' pales... Nor did some of the incomers fail to make this plain to those who befriended them.'

She also recalled the refugees' descent into genteel penury, as they lived on handouts in unfamiliar surroundings: 'Most of them had to continue on their subsistence grants until the end of the war. Professors and their wives, who had lived in solid German comfort, with two staff at least, just as dons did in north Oxford, had no choice but to set up home in petit bourgeois Summertown.'

Among the colleges that did welcome

'One classics professor protested furiously when Einstein was offered a fellowship'



Albert Einstein visiting Oxford University in 1931.

refugee academics was Christ Church, despite its alleged propensity for admitting old Etonians as undergraduates. The classicists Paul Jacobsthal and Felix Jacoby came to Christ Church. Jacobsthal's expertise lay in the obscure field of early Celtic art. His appointment indicated a considerable degree of flexibility by the college, given that this subject could hardly form part of its undergraduate teaching.

Christ Church also admitted Jewish refugees as undergraduates. Some of these, like the celebrated translator Michael Hamburger, made substantial contributions to British culture.

Oxford gained much from refugee expertise in the arts and social sciences, in subjects such as medieval and Renaissance history, classics, art history (before the arrival of Otto Pächt and Edgar Wind the subject hardly existed as an academic discipline in Britain), philosophy, law and economics. Oxford's science also benefited greatly under an initiative of Professor Frederick Lindemann, head of the Clarendon Laboratory. Aware that Oxford lagged behind Cambridge in the field, Lindemann travelled to Germany in 1933 and targeted a team of Jewish scientists working on low-temperature physics at Breslau. Kurt Mendelssohn led the team along with his assistants, Franz (Francis) Simon and Nicholas Kurti, and their doctoral students, Heinz and Fritz London.

Sir Francis Simon was one of the first refugee scientists to be awarded the Nobel Prize. Two others who held Oxford positions also went on to win the Nobel: Ernst Chain, who was responsible for the development of penicillin with Howard Florey, and the biochemist Hans Krebs. But when Krebs first arrived in Britain in 1933, neither the Professor of Biochemistry at Oxford nor the Master of Balliol College showed much interest in him, and Krebs took up a research position at Cambridge.

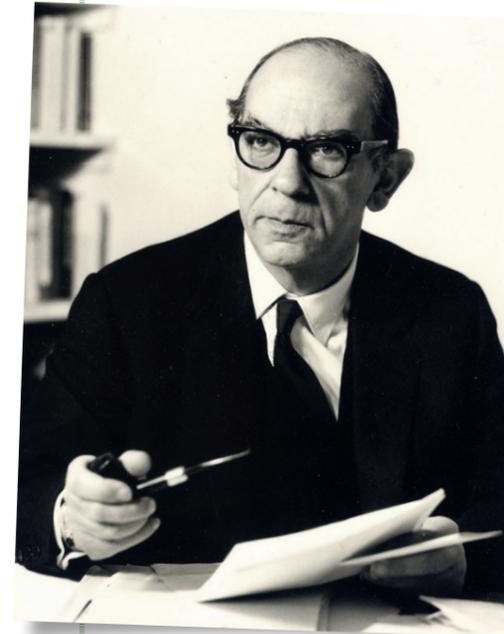
The sociologist Theodor Adorno spent four years at Merton College before departing for the USA. During his years in Oxford, Adorno and his colleague Max Horkheimer developed the ideas that became the inspiration for the revitalised Marxism of the New Left in the late 1960s. Other young refugees who completed their studies at the university included the philosopher Ernest Gellner.

Claus Moser, a teenage refugee from Berlin who was later director of the Central Statistical Office and then chairman of the Royal Opera House, became Warden of Wadham College. John Krebs, the British-born son of Hans Krebs and an Oxford graduate, became principal of Jesus College. This feels a fitting legacy to the impact these scholars continue to have. ■

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Isaiah Berlin and Oxford

Isaiah Berlin was one of the most famous Jewish intellectuals in post-war Britain, yet his attitude towards Jewish life at Oxford was ambivalent, says **David Herman**



'the N[ew] West End Synagogue', 'Women Zionists'). Letters to English friends, however, have few if any Jewish references, and are full of the genteel world of college gossip. This division continues throughout his time at Oxford in the 1930s, until he left for America during the war.

We get an interesting picture of these issues in the third, enlarged edition of Berlin's book, *Personal Impressions*, just published by Penguin. In a piece called 'Jewish Oxford', he writes about the Jewish world of late 1920s and 1930s Oxford, the people he met and the societies he joined. There were hardly any Jews in Oxford when he arrived; he writes, 'I doubt if there were more than seventy or eighty'. They were an interesting mix: Maranos, Sephardim, children of the 'mostly German-Jewish middle class' and of Yiddish-speaking Jews.

In 1928 Isaiah Berlin (pictured above) arrived at Oxford as a first-year undergraduate. He went on to spend almost 70 years in Oxford as a student, academic and founding president of Wolfson College.

Berlin was enormously happy to be there. As he told his biographer, Michael Ignatieff, 'I was an Oxford don, absolutely ... and fitted into the Oxford texture, absolutely - felt perfectly cosy and comfortable in Oxford academic life.'

In 1932 Berlin was elected a fellow at All Souls - its first Jewish fellow. The *Jewish Chronicle* published an article, 'A Jewish Fellow at Oxford', and the chief rabbi congratulated him in a letter addressed to 'Irving Berlin, Esq., New College'.

But this wasn't the whole picture. In his memoir, written just after the war, Berlin's father, Mendel, wrote, 'I was sure in my mind that a College known for their great selectivity, full of bishops and statesmen, will not plump for a foreign-born Jew... And I believe the first reaction of Lord Chelmsford, the Warden, after your examination, was "I hope he will not join our College."' This gives a sense of the obstacles facing even the brightest Jewish students at interwar Oxford.

Berlin's letters published in *Flourishing: Letters 1928-1946* confirm how complicated his situation was. A letter to his parents in 1928 is full of Jewish references ('the Schlemihl which I am usually made out to be',

In his letters there are just a handful of references to refugee academics who arrived in Oxford from 1933 - the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, the classicist Eduard Fraenkel, the economist Jacob Marschak. There seems little interest in them or their predicament.

Berlin knew many of the leading Jewish thinkers of his time. *Personal Impressions* includes tributes to almost a dozen Jewish figures including Einstein, Weizmann and Ben-Gurion. Elsewhere, he wrote famous essays about Marx, Disraeli and Moses Hess. He was a passionate, lifelong Zionist.

And yet in 'Jewish Oxford' and in his letters there are few references to the rise of Nazism. Curiously, the more famous Jews in 1930s Oxford barely appear, even though Lewis Namier and Felix Frankfurter (visiting from America) are the subjects of essays elsewhere in *Personal Impressions*. Thanks to Henry Hardy, who edited the letters and all three editions of *Personal Impressions*, we have a richer and more nuanced sense of Berlin and his Jewish connection to Oxford. ■

David Herman produced three programmes on Isaiah Berlin for BBC2. *Personal Impressions* by Isaiah Berlin, Pimlico (Penguin), 2018.