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[...]

Chapter Four

Everyday life in prewar and wartime Britain

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‘I don’t know how I managed it, but I did’

Everyday life is a vast and somewhat vaguely defined area. In this chapter we will concentrate on nine specific subjects selected from it. The first three sections deal with basic needs: employment and jobs; accommodation and rents; earnings and standard of living. Sections four to eight probe some aspects which helped the refugees to constitute a new symbolic framework for their lives: education and language; food and cooking; marriage and children; politics and political experience; English peculiarities and leisure. Section nine, dealing with the question of social contacts, prepares the ground for the following chapters on problems of integration.

1. Employment and jobs

‘They didn’t pay me enough, and I went to somebody else’

When the first refugees arrived in 1933/34, Britain was struggling out of its economic depression. In 1935 industrial production was already 10% higher than in 1929. Although wages had deteriorated by 3%, the cost of living had fallen even more, by 13%. Long-term unemployment, especially in certain heavily depressed areas, was a devastating fate for many families. Nevertheless the labour market was expanding modestly.

Those refugees who could not rely on money or assets that they had brought with them were not at first able to profit from this economic recovery. Normally, refugees were not allowed to work, except in domestic or agricultural occupations. This was in line with British

immigration policies over the previous hundred years, which had tried to confine the mass of immigrants to low-paid jobs. There was scope for relaxing the rules in individual cases, but in general the situation changed only with the outbreak of war.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, many of the women refugees came to England on domestic visas; and jobs as domestic servants were often the only possibility of earning money. There existed a baffling misconception on the part of many potential employers, as Gertrud Wengraf recalls:

A lot of people rang up this Austrian Self Aid, they heard about it, and they wanted a housemaid or a butler or something else, but when they heard they had to pay those people, they were very surprised. They thought, 'they ought to be glad to get out of their country. And have a house and a roof over their heads. Pay them?' So lots of people put their phone down and said, no, I don't want them.

As the refugees had to accept the first employment they could find, negative experiences were not uncommon. Hilde Ainger travelled to Bristol to meet her employer and was nervously warned by her predecessor of the difficulties of the job. Rightly so, she thought afterwards:

There was a young mother with a baby, her husband was in the Navy, she was lonely, and her parents, who had come from Jamaica, lived there and expected me to wait on them the way their servants did in the Caribbean. Everything was left all over the place, I have never seen anything like that. I got up at six to pick up the jigsaws and the embroidery and so on, it was unbelievable ... my employer was absolutely appalling, she treated me abominably.

Similar stories are told by Gertrud Wengraf, Helga Reutter, Klary Friedl and Mimi Glover. It was not easy to come to terms with such setbacks. Eva Pollard's narrative is typical in its way of structuring this sobering experience. Her first job was clearly very demanding: she had to get up at seven o'clock, and she had to perform tasks to which she was not only quite unaccustomed, but which were also completely unknown to her from Germany, for instance 'to stoke a fire or light a boiler, or cook some bread-and-butter pudding'. There were psychologically disturbing moments, too, as when the small son of her employers called her 'you Hitler' and threatened her with a knife. At first, she felt that there was no real cause to complain, because nothing else mattered but that one had saved one's life and those of one's relatives. But when her employer moved to a summer residence, the situation deteriorated

further. The workload grew; most of all she was hurt by the thoughtless and uncaring attitude. She had to accompany the family to the beach with a hamper, but was not allowed to go for a swim herself and had to wait on the family for the whole day. Her second employer was more friendly, but the working conditions were even worse, since they lived in a big house in the country with no amenities whatsoever, and in complete social isolation.

Walter Wolff's mother encountered similar experiences. Although a good housekeeper, she was nevertheless not used to hard domestic work. She endured it in order to be able to stay near her children. Again, what stuck most in the memory were unfeeling, uncaring episodes, as Wolff recalls:

Her first Christmas in England with the family – the family decided that she was not to be invited to have Christmas dinner with them, and could have her turkey and sprouts in the kitchen. The gentleman of the house pushed a glass of champagne through the hatch and said, 'I wish you a Happy Christmas', and that was that.

Nelly Kuttner also suffered very bad treatment from her first employer. Once again, a seemingly minute detail is recalled most vividly: every morning she had to bring out cushions for her employer's garden swing from a shed and put them away again in the evening. After the Blitz, when the family was evacuated to the countryside, her employer made her stay in the empty house. When she left it for two days, fearful of bombs, he refused to write her the reference she desperately needed for a new job. On her return to collect her belongings, she experienced a severe humiliation:

The message was, I was allowed to pack my luggage, but if I did not scrub the floor in my room, I was not allowed to take my luggage away. The cook handed me the bucket, the brush and the soap, and Mrs Myers said I had to kneel down. At that moment, I was thinking, under the Nazis I escaped from kneeling down to wash the pavement, and here I have to wash the floor.

Common exploitation of servants was intensified by the particularly vulnerable status of the refugees. Disturbingly, some of the most stinging remarks where employers are concerned are applied to members of the Anglo-Jewish community. Eva Pollard refers to this fact several times: 'My sister, she was in an English family, unfortunately a Jewish family, and they starved her.' Helga Reutter mentions the cold attitude of English Jews towards the new refugees from Central Europe and relates it to the former's different social and cultural

background. Nelly Kuttner's employers, mentioned above, were also Jewish.

For quite a few, domestic jobs were only the starting-point. Helga Reutter started as a cleaner, then moved into tailoring and worked in precarious circumstances in her father's small firm; she kept working to augment the family income until 1960, when her husband was promoted to the position of managing director in his firm and they at last felt comfortable. Hilde Auerbach, after some initial au pair jobs, managed to move into teaching. Dorothea Galewski recounts with some irony the job at the Girl Guide Headquarters which she was able to obtain in 1942 after persistent efforts:

I got a job as a filing-clerk, junior filing-clerk, at the princely salary of one pound a week ... I stayed there for about three years and I made vast progress in that time, because I became the junior secretary of the secretary of the general secretary, and by the time I left I was earning the even more princely sum of three pounds a week, and I was extremely proud of this.

Even refugees with a special skill did not find many better opportunities. Eva Sommerfreund began in a small firm, run by fellow refugees from Vienna, to whom she was recommended as a hand-weaver of considerable experience. But 'they didn't pay me enough and I went then to somebody else'. Refugees with professional qualifications or experience sometimes fared even worse. Stella Rotenberg, who had studied medicine, started work in England as a nurse, although the work was extremely hard. On the other hand, her later job as a pharmaceutical assistant was very boring. In this case, exploitation was experienced more psychologically than materially: the wife of her employer thought she should wear a cap and a uniform. Lotte Berk, in Germany a talented modern dancer, underwent some embarrassing experiences when looking for a job as a model:

The professor, or the director, or whoever it was, said, 'Yes, are you a professional model?' 'Oh yes, yes', I said. So he said, 'Do you do nude?' And I hate nude, but I said, 'Oh yes'. Because I had to feed a child. And he said, 'You can start tomorrow'. So I started, two shillings an hour, one could do four hours, that was eight shillings, you could feed a family a day with that. But I was so nervous to be in the nude, hating it, that cold sweat broke out, and the director came up again and said, 'You're not a professional model'. 'No, I'm not, I need the job, I'm a refugee'. And he said, 'Put your clothes on, you're interesting enough, and sit for the wealthy', and that's what I did.

One of the few career paths open to the refugees was in teaching. Ruth Herring, already established in England as a German teacher before her conscious decision to leave Germany for good, was able to obtain a secure position. At the outbreak of war, however, she lost her job and was interned (alone among the women we interviewed). Whilst in internment, she was given the opportunity to start classes and, after her release, she returned to teaching through a network of professional and personal acquaintances. Renée Hubert was able to continue working as a French teacher without interruption even during the war. Others followed her into the teaching profession, principally after the war, among them Ernst Flesch, Hanna Singer and Hans Seelig.

For most of the men who were already planning to build new careers, war and internment meant a sharp rupture. Peter Gellhorn was in the process of becoming integrated into English musical culture, and in 1939 was able to conduct his first opera. Shortly afterwards, he was interned and later did war work in a factory. It was only after the war that he was able to resume his musical career. Peter Singer was unable to begin his studies because of the war and was instead sent to a farm. Soon, however, he managed to take up an apprenticeship in a mechanical engineering firm. Alfred Dörfel, who worked for the Czech Refugee Trust Fund, was deported to Canada; and Peter Johnson's work as a furrier and fur trader was cut short by his deportation to Australia.

Somewhat ironically, the war actually improved the professional situation of others, not only because of the chance to do war work in factories and the general shortage of labour when so many men were in the forces, but also because it created new opportunities and demands. Towards the end of 1939 Eugen Brehm applied for a post at the newly created BBC Monitoring Service and was appointed as a German Monitor. There was a short break because of his internment; but the BBC succeeded in having him released from internment quite quickly, and gave him his job back and he remained in the Service for the next forty years, rising to become Assistant Head of the Reception Department. Hanne Norbert-Miller, who had scraped a living from some poorly paid acting parts within refugee theatre, was hired by the BBC as well:

All the actors did quite a lot of freelance work at the BBC from 1940 ... Politically aware people were interested in us. Richard Crossman, I think, told whatever part of the Foreign Office it was about us and we all went for an audition. There were all these dramatised features. They needed a lot of voices, a lot of actors. From 1940 onwards we were really quite busy at the BBC.

Ilse Wolff was able to argue successfully that, because of her previous work in Germany, she was uniquely qualified for the position she was being offered at the Wiener Library. The library soon became an important source of material for the BBC and for government propaganda output in general. These early successes contrast sharply with the experiences of other refugees. Whereas Hanne Norbert-Miller found work with the BBC as an announcer, this was not possible for Lotte Berk as a dancer. She lived very precariously for several years, due both to lack of opportunities and, as she concedes, out of choice.

An analysis of the professions in which the refugees worked for the greater part of their working lives or in which they worked last (in the case of women who stopped working for family reasons) shows that they were concentrated in a limited number of areas: eight were in teaching and education, seven in domestic and similar jobs, five in publishing, journalism and the media, six in clothing, textiles and leather goods, four in the medical, pharmaceutical and nursing professions, three in the arts and architecture, and one in the travel business. We have already referred to the high proportion of domestic and teaching jobs undertaken by our interviewees (the former exclusively by women). In the industrial sphere, textiles and clothing are strongly represented, to which can be added some jobs in the chemical and leather goods sectors. This reflects the origins of a number of the refugees. Further important areas are publishing, medical care and the arts. In the industrial sector we find manual workers as well as entrepreneurs who owned their own businesses, itself a more or less direct reflection of the different social and economic backgrounds of the refugees.

It is suggested from our sample of interviewees that men could, after some initial difficulties, find jobs for life. Eight had jobs in the same industry or profession for some thirty years: Alec Armstrong, Eugen Brehm, Alfred Dörfel, Peter Gellhorn, Peter Johnson, Eric Rose, Peter Singer and Walter Wolff. This also applies to most of the husbands of the female interviewees, a very important group where patterns of employment and economic activity are concerned. The only exceptions are Ernst Flesch, who left photography for teaching, and Hans Brill, who made the radical transition from naval officer to librarian and lecturer in art.

The situation for women was different; their path was frequently more chequered. There are some who had come to England well before the war or had previous connections, for instance Ruth Herring, who had been a teacher and could resume her career after internment, or Erika Young, who obtained her first job as a teacher through her school. There are some who worked part-time in their chosen occupation for many years, for instance Nelly

Kuttner. There are also those who secured a long-term job, for instance Ilse Wolff. There are others who started in a job to which they could return after their children had grown up, for instance Hanna Singer. There are some who qualified for new jobs, for instance Dorothea Galewski. And there are a considerable number who started work in odd jobs and ended by supporting the businesses and professional success of their husbands (Klary Friedl, Mimi Glover, Christel Marsh, Eva Pollard, Helga Reutter, Stella Rotenberg and Gertrud Wengraf).

On the whole, women appear to have been more ingenious than men in adapting to new situations and in changing their choice of professional career. Hilde Ainger discovered her abilities as a cook and a manager, administering the small budget of a school and developing cooking 'into a fine art'. Klary Friedl started making cheese when her husband lost his business at the outbreak of war. For a while this provided them with their main source of income, supplying customers as distinguished as Marks & Spencer and Fortnum & Mason; the business only collapsed with the introduction of food rationing. At one stage Josephine Bruegel earned some money by cooking for other refugees in a boarding house. There is nothing comparable in the life stories of the male interviewees. Hilde Ainger describes the feeling of inventing new careers and new identities: 'Occasionally, when I think back, I feel I've lived about ten different lives.'

However, several of our interviewees are ambivalent concerning the flexibility demanded of them. On the one hand, it was traditionally expected of women to cope better in such circumstances, and so they sometimes had to fall back on traditional women's work. The harsh fate of Erica Young's mother is the best example:

She was never good at languages, so her English was never terribly good, but she had gone to classes to learn to type and to do book-keeping; she was good at figures. But before she did that she got a job in one of the sweat factories in Soho making artificial flowers, making buttonholes, finishing. She knew nothing whatever about sewing because she was very, very short-sighted ... But she was also very practical, so she managed. She said she had to ask people to tell her how to hold scissors and then she held them up to her eyes, like that, [to see] what she had to sew.

On the other hand, there were opportunities and challenging changes as well. Adelheid Schweitzer managed to adapt from a sheltered youth to freelance journalistic work in a news agency in Red Lion Square, not far from Fleet street. Her account provides a glimpse into a world of journalism which is long gone:

My job was to go and interview people, all sorts of people, write it up, get them to sign it, and it was then sold as an original article by that person. It makes you laugh, really. I don't know how I managed this, but I did.

A fairly typical experience is that of Josephine Bruegel. She had studied medicine in Prague, but had been prevented from finishing her studies. After arriving in London in 1939, she worked as an au pair, and later in a hospital in a poor area in the docklands. After this demanding job, she spent a short period earning pocket money by cooking meals in a boarding house and selling them for sixpence. When she married, she started studying again and was awarded her medical degree in 1942. She worked for six months until her son was born. Returning to Prague after the war, she and her husband encountered difficulties with the newly-installed Communist regime; but in 1948 she began a successful new medical career back in Britain. This interrupted, delayed career, with its twists and turns, was caused by a combination of her situation as a refugee and as a woman.

Some of our interviewees remember discrimination because of anti-semitism. Hilde Ainger's employer declined to engage a cook through Bloomsbury House (where the refugee aid organisations were located), and told her: 'I couldn't really employ more than one Jew.' Adelheid Schweitzer asked the father of her friend, who had acted as guarantor for her and was head of the famous tea firm Brooke Bond, for a job: 'And he said: "Why don't you go to your own people?" ... I think he meant his competitors, the Lyons'. Anti-semitism recurred when she worked in an engineering firm in Leeds and had a fearful row with her superior. But she was able to keep her job and even to get her father-in-law a job in the same firm because the owner prided himself on being an eccentric. A similar account from the period after the war is given by Eric Rose, who insists that his early career in the textile industry in Lancashire was affected by anti-semitism. Other incidents of discrimination had social causes: Mimi Glover, for instance, once quit a domestic job when her employer made advances to her; Alec Armstrong was not allowed to join the Royal Institute of British Architects because his German qualification was not accepted; and Hans Seelig encountered difficulties in getting into Oxford because he did not come from a public school – a handicap obviously not unique to refugees. In most cases, however, these setbacks were short-lived. After the war, the refugees began to build up successful careers, as will be seen below in Chapter Eight.

[...]

9. Social contacts

‘It was many years before we really met English people’

At first, the refugees appeared to have more social contacts amongst themselves than with English families. Obviously, this depended on their professional situation. Women refugees sometimes emphasise their connections with other refugees or their isolation. Margarete Hinrichsen states: ‘I don’t think I mixed much with English people at that time.’ Eva Sommerfreund describes how she established a circle of friends, most of whom were refugees, ‘not because I didn’t want to move in other circles, but it happened like that’. Dorothea Galewski states in similar vein: ‘The only friends they [her parents] had, for a very, very long time, were other refugees. It was many years before we really met any English people.’

Domestic jobs could sometimes lead to isolation. Eva Pollard recalls her first years, when her employer tried to spoil her one free afternoon with new demands, so that she was not even able to visit her fiancé. Hanna Singer came to hold conflicting feelings about the woman who had guaranteed her entry into Britain:

I felt, gosh, yes, you know, without her, we wouldn’t have got out, but we hadn’t been that sort of close. As I said, there were, sort of, odd difficulties, I think. The relationship between her and my mother later on, when my mother, I think, was always made to feel, always felt she was socially inferior and that sort of thing. There was still that slightly odd sort of feeling, but she was a wonderful woman.

The tension between gratitude and a feeling of unwelcome obligation is openly discussed and, in a nice twist of cultural perceptions, it is indicated by the very English word ‘odd’. For Elizabeth Rosenthal, the relationship with the family that had taken her in turned sour when her newly arrived mother wanted her to live with her, and consequently they fell out with the hosts.

On the other hand, men such as Eric Rose and Eugen Brehm emphasise the factor of social integration through their jobs. Hans Seelig even states clearly his family’s aim of keeping a certain distance from other refugees:

My parents considered themselves, significantly I think, as immigrants, with no intention of ever going anywhere else; adapting, without necessarily forgetting the past, but adapting themselves to their surroundings. We never lived, for example, in the areas where refugees lived. My parents never wanted to. We had contact, of course, with refugees, the Refugee Club in Oxford – they were cultural matters rather than

social matters. Our best friends in this country were on the whole not refugees, except one or two that remained from Germany.

Peter Johnson founded an organization called The Hyphen in 1948, specifically to allow refugees to widen their social contacts (see below in Chapter Nine).

However, there is a wide range of different attitudes towards social relationships, which can best be illustrated by some detailed examples. Ernst Flesch came to Britain in 1939 with a Kindertransport, at the age of eleven. At first, he stayed in an orphanage. This communal experience seems to have set a pattern for him. He moved to London in 1942, where he was constantly involved in collective activities. He was involved at the Austrian Centre in different groups until its dissolution after the war. He describes subsequent developments:

There were many disagreements then, of course, among the refugees, because many of them would have liked the Austrian Centre to have continued, obviously ... It left a gap in my life. I then went gradually, through other friends ... to a Jewish Youth Club in Belsize Square, two minutes from here. Oddly enough, it was rather interesting. It was a club in one of the private houses in Belsize Square for quite a long time, and then later on they had another house in Finchley Road.

Until 1947 he had mainly refugee friends, although, through his involvement in Young Austria, he was called on to deliver a number of public talks to British groups about the situation in Austria. When he travelled to Austria in 1948, it came naturally to him to attend meetings of the Free Austrian Youth. Later he got involved with Club 1943 and other cultural organizations.

The path taken by Peter Gellhorn was quite different. His first years revolved around existing personal connections or those he could establish in the fields of culture and the arts. The difference in experience is apparent in the contrasting style of the two narratives: Ernst Flesch is mostly concerned with groups and their activities, Peter Gellhorn is preoccupied with personal acquaintances and their successes. Although their early exile experiences were equally pressured – both had to look desperately for jobs and seek to earn money – their approaches and attitudes were different. Peter Gellhorn expresses a certain distance when he describes a circle of contemporary British artists he came to know at Toynbee Hall: ‘It was perhaps better to be a little outside that circle. But it was always there and it led to occasional

engagements and other things.’ Nevertheless, such acquaintances were useful. On the other hand, Ernst Flesch concludes that most of his friends are still other refugees. Thus, these different experiences of exile have to be compared not as more or less difficult, but rather in the way the differences between them influenced the two men’s perspectives on exile in Britain and their potential for assimilation.

It is instructive to compare the recollections of some of the women. Christel Marsh was born in 1917 and became engaged in 1938 to an Englishman who visited Germany. A member of the ‘Bekennende Kirche’, she was shortly afterwards arrested by the Gestapo. In June 1938 she left Germany and settled in Britain, though with some difficulty as she married only after her arrival. Precisely because she was married to an Englishman, she felt completely isolated: her parents-in-law rejected her and she was unable to get to know her husband’s friends:

There was no time to really sort of get settled. Everybody was on the move at that time ... Apart from this fellow, you know, who didn’t live in London but in Bath miles away, I knew nobody. Absolutely nobody. That was one of the worst aspects.

One of her few acquaintances was the German wife of a colleague of her husband, but ‘she and I had nothing in common except our German extraction, you know, and it became a sort of “Notgemeinschaft” [companionship born of necessity]’.

Stella Rotenberg found herself in a similar situation. During the war, although she felt accepted as the wife of an Army officer, she had to move around with her husband and was unable ever to settle down properly. After the war, she supported her husband in his medical career, but did not feel very happy in her role as housewife and mother, and she especially missed social and cultural contacts.

Hilde Ainger’s experiences were very different. She came to London as an au pair in 1934, at the age of seventeen. She was completely on her own and her first experiences were thoroughly unpleasant. Later she moved to a job in a students’ hostel:

I cooked this three-course meal for eighteen people every night, including carving the meat, waiting at table, doing the dishes, everything, and I finally would sit down, but then I would start having intelligent conversations. I found it very exciting and people took me out – I had no money, you see – but I was taken out and everything was within walking distance. I was working unbelievably hard, but it was worth it.

Subsequently, she married an Englishman and her interest in Germany subsided. In fact, she is the only one of our interviewees who has never revisited her former home country.

These wide differences between the experiences of men and those of women, as suggested by our interviewees, demonstrate the importance of gender, and furthermore the varying impact of gender as a determining factor. The traditional role of housewife sometimes proved to be even more of a handicap in life than the precarious status of exile. But we must now turn to a closer examination of the group's lives in the Second World War, which altered their position in Britain radically.

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