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"We had the most marvellous time": Jewish refugee domestics' narratives of internment in Britain during the Second World War

JENNIFER CRAIG-NORTON

"We were interned in May of 1940 and to be quite honest, we had the best time of our lives because we went to the Isle of Man and the British government paid for everything. You had your food, you had your lodging. We were together with all our friends in one boarding house – German friends we met in Yorkshire – all highly educated people who were domestic[s] and we were all together interned and we had the most marvellous time."[1] This striking recollection is from the testimony of Ann Callmann, a German-Jewish businesswoman who was working as a live-in cook-housekeeper in Yorkshire when she was taken into custody in May 1940, one of about four thousand foreign women who were interned by the British as enemy aliens during the Second World War. Both Ann and her twin sister Lilo Callmann were among the twenty thousand Jewish women aged eighteen to forty-five who had come to Britain in the late 1930s on domestic service visas, agreeing to take jobs as residential servants in the UK as a condition of their escape from Nazi persecution. Although only a fraction of these Jewish refugee domestics was interned, it is likely that they made up the majority of the foreign women who were interned on the Isle of Man, most of whom were refugees.

Ann Callmann was one of many former Jewish refugee domestics who recalled internment positively in memoir and testimony – a collective memory that diverges sharply with other narratives of civilian internment in wartime. While these women's recollections were not uniformly upbeat about every aspect of their incarceration, their remembrances of life on the Isle of Man stand in stark contrast to those of other internees in Britain and elsewhere, who recalled internment in more oppressive terms. In total, Britain interned close to thirty thousand aliens including a large proportion of the German and Austrian men between the ages of sixteen

1 Ann and Lilo Callmann, interview RG-50.150*0002, Rosalyn Manowitz/Hebrew Tabernacle Congregation Collection, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC (hereafter, RMHT/USHMM), 1977–8.

and sixty in Britain after 3 September 1939, most of whom were likewise refugees from Nazism. Initially sent to the Isle of Man, approximately a third of these men were subsequently transported to Canada and Australia as prisoners of war.[2] Statistics suggest that up to three quarters of the male internees in Britain were married men who keenly felt the separation from their wives and children, some of whom had also been interned.[3] On the Isle of Man, men were housed in requisitioned local buildings that functioned as barracks and their camps were guarded and surrounded by barbed wire, giving them a martial feel. In contrast, the women, of whom about sixty per cent were single, were accommodated, as Ann Callmann noted, as hotel boarders at two holiday resorts located on a remote and naturally isolated peninsula, obviating the necessity for prison-like enclosures.[4]

The demographic and physical differences in the internment of men and women on the Isle of Man account for some of the disparities between Jewish refugee domestics' and other internees' recollections of confinement, but the circumstances of the refugee domestics' pre-internment lives also significantly impacted the way in which they experienced and remembered their detention. The entire subject of Britain's Second World War internment of civilians, including thousands of Jewish refugees from Fascism, has still not been fully explored, and within that scholarship the experiences of women internees have not been extensively documented, leaving numerous questions unanswered. Why, for example, were relatively few women interned, and what determined whether they were taken into custody or allowed to remain free? How did these refugees feel about being classified as enemy aliens, and what aspects of interment did they find the most difficult? Why do many former refugee domestics recall their time on the Isle of Man positively?

2 Rachel Pistol, *Internment during the Second World War: A Comparative Study of Great Britain and the USA* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 46–9. The British also interned Italian men, though almost all of them were long-time residents of Great Britain. One of the ships carrying internees, the *Arandora Star*, was sunk by a German submarine with the loss of more than a quarter of the men, and the internees on a later ship, the infamous *Dunera*, were abused, robbed, and mistreated on their months-long journey to Australia.

3 François Lafitte, *The Internment of Aliens* (London: Penguin, 1940, repr. 1988), 76–8, found this proportion in the demographic statistics of one "typical" internment camp with 1,500 inmates, of whom 82% were Jewish and most had actually been classed as "refugees from Nazi oppression".

4 The National Archives (TNA), HO 213/1764, "The Internment of German and Austrian Women", 25 May 1940.

This brief study aims to address these and other questions by exploring the narratives of former Jewish refugee domestics, and examining how their pre-internment experiences coloured their impressions of and later recollections of internment on the Isle of Man.

Jewish refugee domestics' pre-internment experiences

Great Britain's middle and upper classes, who relied on servants to run their households, found a dwindling supply of working-class women willing to take up such work after the First World War, a shortage that was commonly referred to as the "servant problem". By the 1930s, British housewives were increasingly turning to foreign women to meet the demand for servants, though virtually none of the thousands of continental women who came to work in British households in the 1920s and early 30s was Jewish. But that changed with the escalating persecution of Jews under the Nazis, which impelled Jewish women to take advantage of Britain's high demand for servants, to escape their increasingly dire conditions. In response to the German annexation of Austria in March 1938, the British government instituted a visa requirement for anyone leaving the Nazi Reich, but did not restrict the number of domestic service visas that could be issued, and as a result, over the next eighteen months more than twenty thousand Jewish refugee women (and a few men) were able to leave the Reich and enter the UK on such permits.[5]

Although Jewish refugee domestics came from a variety of religious, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds, and ranged in age from teenagers to middle-aged women, the majority were single women from urban middle-class families who were by their own assessments unprepared for the lives that awaited them as servants in British homes. Most had grown up with servants themselves, and many acknowledged in their testimonies that they had never done any domestic work in their natal homes. Others, like Ann and Lilo Callmann, who came from secretarial, teaching, or other professional careers found the taxing physical work and the subservience expected of British servants hard to bear. Almost everything about domestic service in British homes was foreign to these women, from the coal-burning fireplaces and lack of modern appliances

5 For more detailed discussion see Tony Kushner, "An Alien Occupation: Jewish Refugees and Domestic Service in Britain, 1933–1948", in *Second Chance: Two Centuries of German-Speaking Jews in the United Kingdom*, ed. Werner Mosse et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), 553–78.

to the rigid class hierarchies that relegated them to isolation in kitchens, attics, and basements.[6] While grateful for the opportunity that domestic service visas gave them to escape the Nazi regime, few former refugee domestics reflected positively about their work as servants in British homes, and most regarded their time in domestic service as a particularly painful period in their lives.

Even more distressing than the physical demands of their work was the way many refugee domestics felt treated by their employers. Most were unprepared for the class structures that governed the treatment of servants, and the social isolation and inferior status conferred on domestic workers in Britain contrasted with their recollections of the way the maids and nannies they had grown up with had been treated.[7] For the daughters of lawyers and doctors who had come of age aspiring to similar educational and career attainments, and for women like the Callman sisters who had enjoyed lives of independence and autonomy, working as servants was perceived as demeaning and humiliating, as Ann Callmann described:

> I had to clean the complete house, I was expected to do all the cooking, all the washing and that was rather difficult because I had never done anything like that, being used to an office job . . . when you come out of Germany and go as domestic to England . . . you had to swallow your pride quite a bit to do work which you at home had people who did it for you . . . it would take books to describe what pride I personally had to swallow . . . The thoughts which crept into my mind, the adjustment which I had to do can't even be described in words . . . most nights . . . but also during the day time, I was continuously in tears.[8]

Callman's unhappiness was compounded by the fact her employers were Jewish, from whom she had hoped to receive sympathy as a co-religionist, but instead they "show[ed] me off as a refugee" and "expected [me] to say 'Thank you for letting me come to England to be alive.'"

Some refugee domestics, including Ann's sister Lilo, found sympathetic employers with whom they resided more as equals and who offered them compassion and support, but even for many of these more fortunate women, Britain's declaration of war on Germany on 3 September 1939 brought upheaval and uncertainty. Two weeks after the war began, in

6 For discussion of the refugee domestics' difficulties in adjusting see Jennifer Craig-Norton, "Refugees at the Margins: Jewish Domestics in Britain 1938–1945", *Shofar* 37, no. 3 (2019): 295–330.

7 Ibid., 302–6.

8 Callmann, RMHT/USHMM.

a meeting between Home Office officials and representatives from the refugee organizations, it was revealed that more than eight thousand domestics had already been dismissed by their employers for various reasons, "not the least of which was probably the unwillingness of British employers to continue to employ Germans."[9] By the end of 1939, the Domestic Bureau of the Jewish Refugees Committee was supporting several thousand unemployed domestics who could not find employment in the unsettled wartime conditions.[10] In addition, all aliens resident in Britain were now required to report to tribunals, overseen by judges, magistrates, and other local officials, where they were asked questions about themselves and their activities since entering the UK, and assigned a classification based on the presiding officials' judgment of their threat to British national security. Most Jewish domestics were recognized as "refugees from Nazi oppression", and assigned the least restrictive classification, C. Few refugees and only a handful of Jewish domestics received A class, which was reserved for those deemed most suspicious and meant immediate internment. But thousands were lumped into Category B, which prohibited travel further than five miles from their employment without police permission, and subjected them to restrictions on the use of radios, cameras, and bicycles, among other things.

In their testimonies, former refugee internees emphasized the arbitrary nature of the tribunals' classification decisions – a situation that was recognized at the time, but that was never rectified before widespread internment began in the spring of 1940. Judges and magistrates in charge of the 120 nationwide tribunals were not provided with uniform guidance or standards on which to base assignments to class A, B, or C, leaving them to rely on their own opinions, and subjecting refugees to tribunal officials' biases and prejudices. François Lafitte, a social scientist who in 1940 wrote a scathingly critical report on internment, noted that there was no consistency about the placement of aliens in Category B, and "a few suspicious tribunals" put all aliens they did not immediately intern into this class, while several others assigned all domestic servants, all

9 TNA, HO 213/452, memorandum of a talk, Mr Peake, Sir Alexander Maxwell, Lord Reading, Sir Herbert Emerson, and Mr Otto Schiff, 18 Sept. 1939, 5.

10 Lafitte, *Internment of Aliens*, 49, notes that refugee domestics lost their jobs as households laid off their staff and evacuated from cities, "and not due to anti-German or anti-refugee feeling". Minutes of the Executive Council of the Domestic Bureau, 15 Dec. 1939, indicate that in London alone the voluntary refugee agencies were fully supporting more than 2000 unemployed domestics; Archives of the Central British Fund for Jewish Refugees, London, 1933–1960, Part 1, File 38, Reel 6 (CBF 1/38/6), item 49.

unemployed aliens, and all those living in refugee hostels to B.[11] Most former refugee domestics mentioned their tribunals in their testimonies, and these accounts highlight reports of the tribunals' lack of consistency in assigning classifications. Refugees were routinely asked about contact with their families in the German Reich, and Ruth Webster, who was put into B, was among those who believed that "because they found out I had corresponded with my family via Hungary", and "they knew the letters I had written – they held it against me."[12] Conversely, Helga Lemer believed that her honesty was rewarded. "When I came before the tribunal, you know you were not allowed to send the letters via America and Belgium, and people told me before, 'tell them the truth because they have got the letters in any case', which was so because if I wouldn't have told the truth I probably wouldn't have got a C . . ."[13] Margaret Cohen-Tuteur replied "rotten" when asked about the treatment of Jews in Germany, but when the tribunal judge pressed her to tell them how she knew this, she feared admitting that she was still in contact with her mother in Germany, and said she had read it in the British papers.[14] Betty Goldschmidt and Herta Groves both believed they were put into B because they answered truthfully when asked about their fathers' military service and awards in the First World War.[15]

Faced with the unpredictability of the tribunals, refugee domestics often enlisted the help of sympathetic masters and mistresses to achieve a favourable outcome, but the interventions of employers did not always work to the refugees' advantage. Alice Heisig, whose "boss was nice enough to take me to the tribunal", believed that her employer's intercession led to her being "declared a friendly alien" by the tribunal in Margate,[16] but Ernestine Baginsky was not as fortunate. Facing a panel of three judges who looked to her "as if they had 300 years between them", Baginsky related that she had "a very nice letter from Mr Joseph . . . and Mrs Joseph spoke for me and said I was all right . . . but in Leicester everyone

11 Lafitte, *Internment of Aliens*, 63.

12 Ruth Webster, interview 31729, USC Shoah Foundation, Visual History Archive (hereafter, VHA), 1997.

13 Helga Lemer, interview 27010, VHA, 1997.

14 Margaret Cohen-Tuteur, interview 12235, VHA, 1996.

15 Betty Goldschmidt, interview 29530, VHA, 1997; Herta Groves, testimony 32918, VHA, 1997.

16 Alice Heisig, interview 3477, Leo Baeck Institute, Center for Jewish History, New York, Austrian Heritage Collection (LBI/AHC), 1998.

who was an alien was interned."[17] Not all employers armed their refugee maids with positive character references, however, as both Alice Fraser and Alice Blum Mavrogordato discovered. Fraser remains convinced that her wealthy and influential employer maligned her to the tribunal judges "because she certainly didn't like me",[18] and Mavrogordato claimed to have proof that her employer had done so. In a remarkable "Curriculum Vitae", written on the Isle of Man in 1941, Mavrogodato detailed every question asked her in her original tribunal, where "Having a clear conscience I thought I would naturally be classified 'C'." Mavrogordato, who had been a dress designer in Vienna, wrote that her employer "was apparently shocked from the very first minute she saw me, noticing that I did not look like a 'real maid'", and frequently accused her of being a spy because of her beautiful clothing.[19] Although she was probably too cautious to include it in her wartime account, Mavrogordato confessed in her 1997 testimony that she had allowed a Jewish friend to secretly steam open the letter her mistress had given her to take to the tribunal, and found that her employer had written: "Miss Blum claims to be a refugee from Nazi oppression. But since I am not in her confidence . . . I cannot verify her statements." It was Mavrogordato's firm belief that "this would have meant immediate internment", but added, "in York, they interned all Austrian and German aliens . . . all of them."[20]

These testimonies demonstrate refugee domestics' awareness of the importance of their tribunal's location in their alien classification and subsequent internment, a circumstance that was confirmed by the authorities at the time. For example, refugee organizations' claims that ninety per cent of aliens in Leeds had been put in either A or B category were corroborated by internal government correspondence that noted that both Worcestershire and Leeds had " a high percentage of non-exemptions" because "in the Midlands where there are important armament and other government works, the tribunals may have felt it inadvisable to free enemy aliens of the special restrictions."[21] The Home Office "admitted that . . . so many Tribunals had resulted . . . in a divergence of

17 Ernestine Baginsky, interview 37569, VHA, 1998.

18 Alice Fraser, interview with author, London, 17 February 2017.

19 Alice Blum Mavrogordato, "Curriculum Vitae", 8, 10–11, ME1474, Leo Baeck Institute, 1941.

20 Alice Mavrogordato, interview 46112, VHA, 1998.

21 TNA, HO 213/1732, R. Claire Martin to Cooper, 30 Nov. 1939; Matthews to Cooper, 5 Dec. 1939.

practice from which some anomalies had risen . . . [and] where the alien lived had a good deal to do with it, although . . . that explanation did not cover . . . [the situation] where two tribunals sitting in the same town obtained results which differed widely from each other."[22] Helga Lemer's experience substantiated this latter point when she and a friend attended two different tribunals in greater London. Her friend "got a B because she went to Manor House and it was known the judge in Manor House was antisemitic . . . but I lived in Golders Green . . . so we came before King's Cross tribunal . . . and they gave me a C." These inconsistencies caused Ernestine Baginsky to feel "injustice . . . because in each town or city it was different . . . because there were different people who sat at that tribunal."[23] Margot Pottlitzer, who was given what she claimed was a "special C" by "a real judge . . . who knew what it was all about", was nevertheless later interned because, she claimed, "all the people in Cheltenham were interned" regardless of classification.[24] Faced with increasing pressure from refugee organizations and the Parliamentary Committee on Refugees led by Eleanor Rathbone, the government agreed that B cases ought to be reviewed, ideally by tribunals overseen by a different set of judges.[25] Undoubtedly, many refugee women would have had their B classifications re-evaluated under this plan, but the reviews had barely got under way when Germany attacked France and the Low Countries in the spring of 1940, sparking fears of invasion that unleashed a wave of anti-alien sentiment, and culminated in the mass internment of thousands of Jewish refugees.

Arrest and imprisonment

Fears of a German invasion prompted the British government to make several moves that directly impacted refugees' lives. Most immediately, coastal areas were declared protected, and all aliens ordered to leave, causing a new round of job losses for refugee maids who worked in

22 TNA, HO 213/1732, "Category B", 5 Dec. 1939, 4.

23 Lemer, VHA; Baginsky, interview 37569, VHA, 1998.

24 Margot Pottlitzer, interview 3816, Imperial War Museum, London, 1998.

25 TNA, HO 213/1732, "Category B", 4; Eleanor Rathbone to Sir John Anderson, 29 Nov. 1939, 3. Rathbone declared that "notoriously there has been no uniformity in the practice of the Tribunals", noting that the Home Office had sent a circular on 21 Oct. 1939 to all tribunals reminding them of the disadvantages of travel restrictions to aliens' employment, and empowering them to revise their B classifications.

these areas, and swelling the ranks of unemployed domestics.[26] For Betty Goldschmidt, one of many who struggled to find work after being classified as an enemy alien, internment provided a solution to chronic unemployment. "I personally couldn't get work . . . the minute I showed my papers, they were sorry but they couldn't keep me. . . . I worked when I could for a day, two days . . . and in a way it was a blessing when I was interned."[27] And in a similar vein, Henny Sauer, who had been working as a maid on the south coast when the area was declared protected, testified that "quite a few girls in domestic service in Torquay – we asked the police to intern us because we had nowhere to go."[28] As the German threat intensified, widespread suspicion of German-speaking aliens increased, and the internment of Category B men began early in May 1940. On the 24th, police authorities were advised of the imminent arrest of all women in Class B, and the arrests began a few days later.[29] According to the instructions circulated to the police, women were to be arrested early in the morning, allowed to take as many belongings as they could carry, and then be taken to "Collecting Centres" until transport could be arranged to Liverpool and thence to the Isle of Man.[30]

In their testimonies, former refugee domestics describe the initial stages of the internment process as the most difficult and upsetting ones. Although most women reported that the constables who took them into custody were generally kind, even apologetic, they were stunned when they were taken to the "Collecting Centres", which in most instances were women's prisons. Herta Groves recalled being taken into custody in a Black Mariah. "You can imagine how I felt, where will I be taken? . . . I was totally flabbergasted . . . It was emotionally a terrible shock for me, not so much for myself – for me, it was some sort of strange adventure – but I thought 'what would my parents think that I am a prisoner?'" Still a teenager at the time of her arrest, Groves naturally thought about how distressing it would be for her parents to know her fate after they had worked so hard to get her

26 TNA, HO 213/1993, Sir Alexander Maxwell, memo, 31 Oct. 1939 shows that on 17 Oct. 1939 the government agreed to lift the employment prohibitions under which most refugees had been admitted to the UK, but were extraordinarily reluctant to release refugee domestics to take any other type of work. Thus most refugee domestics were still employed as servants at the time they were interned.

27 Goldschmidt, VHA.

28 Henny Sauer, testimony 9877, VHA, 1996.

29 TNA, HO 213/1764, Home Office, Memorandum to Police Authorities, 24 May 1940.

30 TNA HO 213/1764, Memorandum Outlining the Arrangements for the Internment of German and Austrian Women Placed in Category B.

to Britain where they believed she would be safe.[31] Being taken into custody and treated like criminals was especially unnerving to refugees who had witnessed and experienced arbitrary terrorization while living under Nazi rule. Equally unsettling was the abrupt loss of whatever tenuous sense of security they had developed since arriving in the UK. Alice Mavrogordato described "the disappointment I felt at being considered an enemy by the country to which I had come with so much confidence and where I had hoped to become a free human being again."[32] And Betty Goldschmidt, who was only a teenager when taken into custody, recalled of her arrest, "It was terrible to be interned as a German. There I was young and emotional being thrown out of Germany as a Jew coming to England to be taken to prison as a German – I didn't know where I was."[33] These former refugees articulate one of their fundamental traumas – the failure of the British authorities and much of the British public to recognize the suffering they had endured as victims of the Nazi regime or to have sympathy for their ordeal of exile and displacement. For these and many other Jewish refugees, the experience of being classified as enemy aliens and treated in an undifferentiated way as Germans was extremely disorientating.

Along with the hundreds of others, Groves and Goldschmidt were taken to Holloway prison, an imposing nineteenth-century castle-like fortress situated in north London, where the shock they experienced at being imprisoned was compounded by being thrown in with the general prison population and housed in regular prison cells. As Groves remarked, "We felt extraordinary that we would be together with real criminals." The internees' prison stays varied widely, from the two nights Goldschmidt spent there to the six months Marianne Rosson, one of the rare refugees given an A classification, endured after being sent to Holloway in November 1939. Only seventeen when her mother sent her to England as an au pair in 1938, Rosson had been so homesick that she had gone back to Germany to visit her parents in the summer of 1939, and she believed that that visit, her weekly telephone calls to her mother in Berlin, and having once been caught travelling more than five miles to attend a dance had aroused the suspicions of her tribunal judge. Like Groves, she worried about what her parents would think of her predicament, so she never told them she was in prison. Most of those who spent more than a few days in Holloway complained as Rosson did about having to spend most of her

31 Herta Groves, testimony 32918, VHA, 1997.
32 Mavrogordato, "Curriculum Vitae", 10.
33 Goldschmidt, VHA.

time in her cell, about the unfriendly prison warders, and about having to mix with committed Nazis. Rosson and others also reported that they volunteered for anything that would allow them to spend time out of their cells, even if it meant mixing with ordinary prisoners.[34] Margot Pottlitzer, who was in Holloway for several weeks, volunteered to fetch food from the kitchens, and sweep corridors to avoid being locked up. Herta Groves, who spent six weeks in Holloway, volunteered to sew uniforms, and was able to spend all day in a sewing room, chatting with other refugees, but still dreaded being locked into her cell at 7 pm each night. In recalling this period in their narratives of internment, former refugees most objected to living in and being subject to a prison regime, but they also spoke of the uncertainties surrounding their stay and uneasiness about what awaited them next. Happily for most, their lives improved when they eventually arrived on the Isle of Man, but for some there was further unpleasantness in store on the final leg of their journey.

All refugee domestic internees, whether they suffered a period of imprisonment of not, were sent to the Isle of Man from Liverpool, and many painfully recalled the night before their departure and the harrowing journey to their ship. On her arrest, Alice Mavrogordato was taken directly to Liverpool, where she and others from York were forced to spend the night on the floor of a police station, sleeping on blankets that she insisted were full of lice.[35] Ernestine Baginsky, who was briefly imprisoned in Derby, where she remembered sleeping on newspapers covering the floor of a dirty cell, was next taken to Liverpool where she and others were housed in an old sailors' home "that was like a prison, but at least had mattresses on the floor." On the way to the port the following day, the "Liverpudlians thought we were all Nazis . . . and they threw stones at us."[36] Likewise, Alice Fraser and Gisela Hirschberger both recalled spending one night in Liverpool and people throwing stones at them as they boarded the ship.[37] Ruth Webster perhaps best articulated the effect this harassment by the British populace had on the beleaguered refugees: "On the way to the ship in Liverpool we were stoned – the bus was stoned . . . it made no difference – Jewish, not Jewish. We were Germans . . . We were rejected

34 Marianne Rosson, interview 47967, VHA, 1998.
35 Mavrogordato, VHA.
36 Baginsky, VHA.
37 Alice Fraser, interview 46112, VHA, 1998; Gisela Hirschberger, interview 21975, VHA, 1996.

by one country and not accepted by another."[38] That multiple internees' narratives include nearly identical accounts of encountering abuse as they boarded ships into a second exile demonstrates how indelibly this episode was etched into their memories. Alice Mavrogordato said that many of her compatriots were in tears during the sailing, a journey that Alice Fraser described as "appalling" and Elsie Gumprich remembered as "horrible" and "cruel", packed together "like sardines" with many becoming ill.[39] Thus, the disparity between their experiences prior to their arrival on the Isle of Man and the conditions they encountered on the island could not have been greater.

Interment on the Isle of Man

The women arrived on the Isle of Man at the start of an especially warm British summer, and were immediately transported to the picturesque holiday resorts of Port Erin and Port St Mary (jointly known as Rushen Camp), where the weather, the natural beauty, and the relative freedom all combined to produce a jarring contrast to their recent experiences. Betty Goldschmidt remembered arriving in Port Erin on 29 May 1940, "a lovely day, and I was happy to get there. From being in prison in a cell, this island seemed good to me."[40] Marianne Rosson, who arrived in June after six months in Holloway prison, said simply "the Isle of Man after prison was heaven."[41] The women were assigned to the hotels and boarding houses of the two resorts, which were separated by a narrow isthmus. The landladies who ran the boarding houses and the overseers of the larger hotels had been retained by the British government to host the internees, and were paid to provide board and lodging for them. In contrast, the treatment of men on the other side of the island was markedly different, as Herta Groves recounted: "The men were interned like real internees – POWs I would say. . . . they had to march and soldiers were right and left of them and they were very limited in the life they were allowed to live – lived in barracks – whereas we in Port Erin we were totally free within the village."[42]

38 Webster, VHA.

39 Fraser, VHA; Elsie Gumprich, interview 40444, VHA, 1998.

40 Goldschmidt, VHA

41 Rosson, VHA.

42 Groves, VHA. The difference in the treatment of men and women on the Isle of Man derived from the fact that the War Office administered the men while the Home Office administered the women; see Miriam Kochan, "Women's Experience of Internment", in *The Internment of Aliens in Twentieth Century Britain*, ed. David Cesarani and Tony Kushner

The large hotels in Rushen Camp housed between one hundred and two hundred women each while the smaller boarding houses accommodated a few dozen, but every available lodging was utilized, as Herta Groves attested: "I was quite fortunate. I was put in a small house which belonged to a fisherman who had an upstairs with a kitchen and a sitting room. And we were three refugee girls . . . from Vienna and one girl who was from Austria, who was a maid formerly here – she was not Jewish." Most of the lodgings were so crowded that many women had to share a double bed, often with strangers, which caused many complaints, but as Groves noted, women from the same homeland often managed to remain together, and some arrived with friends or siblings, as Alice and Hanna Fraser and the Callmann twins had.[43]

The women were required to keep their lodgings clean and to help with the cooking, but much of their time was unstructured, leading many to characterize their internment in unapologetically positive terms. They were allowed to wander between the two resorts and as far as five miles inland where barbed wire separated the Rushen peninsula from the rest of the island. There was even a golf course and as Herta Groves recalled, "We were able to go swimming on the beach. It was a wonderful summer and we were free and we could even go to the patisserie shop and the cinema." In their small house Groves and her roommates "only had to keep house for ourselves and had actually a very free life."[44] Ann Callmann had changed jobs before internment, and her second, much kinder mistress had pressed a bathing costume in her hands as she was taken into custody, a gift that was eminently suitable since "we went to the beach all the time, we swam for hours, went home for lunch. A few of us . . . had . . . to help the landlady who was preparing . . . the meals. We were responsible for our own rooms but otherwise no [work]."[45] Elsie Gumprich recalled, "I was very happy there . . . it was like a holiday."[46]

These internment narratives implicitly affirm that life on the Isle of

(London: Frank Cass, 1993), 152–3.

43 Groves, VHA.

44 Ibid. Kochan, "Women's Experience", 158, quotes an internee saying that her parents sent her golf clubs and she played golf every day.

45 Callmann, RMHT/USHMM. Refugees who had not been so fortunate swam in their underwear, and even in the nude, scandalizing the local inhabitants; see Kochan, "Women's Experience", 158; Doreen Moule et al., *Friend or Foe? The Fascinating Story of Women's Internment during WWII in Port Erin and Port St Mary, Isle of Man* (Isle of Man: Rushen Heritage Trust, 2018), 28.

46 Gumprich, VHA; Webster, VHA.

Man offered a reprieve from the drudgery and isolation of residential domestic service and the insecurities of refugee existence. As the previously quoted testimony of Ann Callmann succinctly articulated, "The British government paid for everything. You had your food, you had your lodging. We were together with all our friends." The word "free", which is invoked frequently in these testimonies, seems incompatible with narratives of internment, but Ruth Webster explicitly addressed this seeming contradiction in terms: "We [Jews] were the majority . . . we were free. We were surrounded by barbed wire – we had a limit – but within the camp itself we had concerts, we had discussions – we had everything there. We made our life there."[47] Here Webster acknowledged the refugees' physical confinement but, like Callmann, lauded their ability to socialize with those who shared similar backgrounds and hardships, and who were freed from onerous domestic labour, demanding employers, and the need to make their own living. Herta Groves implicitly addressed these former adversities when musing about the refugees' lives before internment and after: "And as our lives for all of us were rather hard . . . we had no money and whatever occupation we had was a hard life for us – it was like a holiday for us."[48] While women internees who had come to Britain through other means often had harsher assessments of life in Rushen, domestic service provided a reference point that powerfully influenced the way that refugee maids, cooks, and housekeepers viewed their internment experience.[49]

Even though the hardships of their previous domestic service helped to frame their internment in mostly positive terms, the refugee domestics' memories of interment on the Isle of Man were not wholly positive. As for all internees, there remained a nagging unhappiness with captivity and being branded enemy aliens, as well as the constant irritant of confinement with non-Jewish German women, many of whom they were convinced were committed Nazis. As Betty Goldschmidt explained, "you can't say they were bad to you, the British, you can't even if you try, it was more a mental thing, I think . . . that you weren't free."[50] Ernestine Baginsky's account expanded on this qualified narrative:

47 Webster, VHA.

48 Groves, VHA.

49 Kochan, "Women's Experience", 154–63, details the concerns of a wide range of female internees, with special emphasis on the hardships of married women, many with young children, who were housed in Port St Mary.

50 Goldschmidt, VHA.

> We weren't treated badly there of course but there were various things that I was upset about. I was still young and I thought that it was quite unfair to get away from your country because you are persecuted there and then you . . . think you have found a new home and you are considered like an enemy . . . But we . . . were treated very well and it was a beautiful island and . . . I used to go for long walks on my own . . . and it was so beautiful there and when I saw this barbed wire I felt – I felt really bad. I really felt like a prisoner.[51]

For Baginsky, who shared a bed and a room with friends, and was one of the few to speak about the cold and windy winter weather, the charms of Port Erin eventually wore off. "We had a very nice room and it was looking out at the sea and I thought it was wonderful. But after one year I was sick of looking at the sea."[52] The inescapable sea view was a constant reminder of their exclusion and "otherness", and the unhappiness this engendered was exacerbated by the presence of non-Jewish Germans in their midst who, Ruth Webster explained, had lived in Britain for years and had no real idea what was going on in their homeland. "We were with . . . many Germans because there were many Germans prior to the war who were domestic servants . . . very pro-Nazi because they'd never lived in Germany."[53] Erica Betts described the tensions that existed between these women and the Jewish refugee internees: "The only thing that wasn't all right is that they mixed Nazis with Jews. And women fighting is not a nice sight. But they did . . . they tore their hair and scratched . . . that wasn't nice but otherwise the IOM was nice."[54] Like other internees, the refugee domestics also reported the petty jealousies that arose when many women were confined in a relatively small area, and bemoaned the lack of male companionship. Of the latter, Marianne Rosson opined "unfortunately I think some other romances developed – you know, lesbian ones."[55] However, even the unhappiness arising from these complaints was transcended by other aspects of internment, which they deemed personally advantageous.

One of the most frequently cited benefits of interment on a remote island in the Irish Sea was the safety it conferred on the refugees at a time when Britain was experiencing the full force of German air raids. Although

51 Baginsky, VHA.

52 Ibid.

53 Webster, VHA. Lafitte, *Interment of Aliens*, 117, notes that "the proportion of Nazis and sympathizers was higher than in the men's camps."

54 Erica Betts, interview 20825, VHA, 1996.

55 Rosson, VHA.

they received limited news of the outside world, it is clear from testimonies that the refugee domestics knew about the bombing of cities (the Blitz), and counted themselves fortunate to have escaped the worst of it. Ruth Webster, who offered a tempered assessment of interment, noted that in Port Erin she had "the day in front of you – nice accommodation, enough food . . . It was a camp . . . limited, no radios, no newspapers but we were free. London was bombed at that time. My belongings were bombed where I worked there in London."[56] Elsie Gumprich, who said that internment "was not bad", went even further than Webster, declaring "when I found out what had happened, I was glad" to be interned, believing it had saved her life. Her former employers, whom she described as "lovely people" and who were keeping her luggage while she was interned, suffered a direct hit on their home in Richmond one night, which did not harm them but destroyed the room she had occupied, along with all her belongings.[57] Ernestine Baginsky, who grew weary of interment and felt like a prisoner, admitted, "on the other hand, perhaps it was a good thing in one way because it was terrible in London . . . so at least we were safe there."[58] In fact, one refugee domestic, whose employer – a tribunal judge who threatened her with internment when she asked for a rise – testified that "I didn't realise I would have been better off had I been interned because people who were interned . . . they had a much better life. They were put . . . in hotels, the only thing was . . . they couldn't get away but they never heard an air raid or any bombs."[59] The realization that they had been spared the terrors of the Blitz was perhaps more acutely appreciated in refugee domestics' later reflections on internment, but one other benefit of incarceration was universally appreciated during their confinement.

One of the most valued aspects of internment was the opportunity it afforded the refugee domestics to correspond with their families abroad – which Ernestine Baginsky unequivocally described as "one thing which was a good thing" about being interned. Non-interned civilians could only write to their families in enemy territory through the Red Cross on forms that limited them to twenty-five words, but as Betty Goldschmidt explained, "I wrote home . . . to my parents because I was . . . classed as a prisoner of war and therefore I could write as a German POW." The

56 Webster, VHA.
57 Gumprich, VHA.
58 Baginsky, VHA.
59 Lisa Hoffman, interview 44709, VHA, 1998.

internees were provided with special folding letter forms (similar to old-style aerogrammes) embossed with the words "Prisoner of War Mail", which, though censored, enabled them to compose full single-page letters. Goldschmidt made no comment on her parents' reaction to her being a POW, but she revealed that they were able to circumvent the censors when her father wrote that she ought to go "to your Aunt Matilda". Since that aunt lived in America, Goldschmidt understood that her parents "were frightened that Hitler would come to England", and were imploring her to get herself somewhere safer.[60] That real news and content could be shared in this POW correspondence is attested by Gisela Hirschberger's testimony:

> The most ironic thing of my whole internment was that I could correspond with my parents through the prisoner of war postal service and I even received two prisoner of war packages from the German Red Cross that my parents had paid for and several books they had ordered for me. So all this time we could exchange news – of course it was all censored but at least I knew what was going on . . . They were so worried about me, they were worried that I didn't have enough winter clothes . . . they always said don't worry about us, we're working, we're working.[61]

The idea that a young refugee living in relatively safety in Britain was getting "care packages" from her Jewish parents in wartime Germany is remarkable, and shows the importance the internees attached to this privilege. In fact, several women remarked on their regret that release stripped them of the right to correspond fulsomely with their loved ones. For Marianne Rosson, it was a blow that she found almost impossible to bear: "The minute I left the camp I was not able to communicate with my parents any more . . . no more prison[er] of war mail . . . and I was very, very depressed I remember that. . . . I went completely out of my mind . . . I was in hospital for three months and I imagined things. I had a nervous breakdown that's what it was."[62] Although some women were able to stay in touch with families through the Red Cross, the loss of contact was a deeply felt consequence of release from internment, and for some made the transition back to "normal life" bittersweet.

60 Goldschmdt, VHA.
61 Hirschberger, VHA.
62 Rosson, VHA.

Release from and reflections on internment

For the refugee domestics, most of whom spent a year or so on the Isle of Man, release was both longed for and approached with some trepidation. In order to be released, they had to undergo another tribunal and to prove that they had arranged a way to support themselves once back in the general population. For some, this meant going back into domestic service until they could find different employment. A few joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), though as aliens they were generally confined to roles as cooks or orderlies, which differed little from the domestic work most of them disliked. Freed from employment restrictions, many took on war work in factories making uniforms or weaponry, while others began training as nurses or found office jobs. Most agreed with Betty Goldschmidt who described release as "heaven", though a few, like Marianne Rosson, who had been interned since November 1939, were none too eager to leave their island home. Rosson, who had become involved with a Rushen Camp theatre club, and loved attending concerts and providing entertainment, "didn't mind it at all . . . It was a lovely island . . . the food was reasonable. It wasn't bad I must say – except the freedom part." Nevertheless, when informed in late 1941 that she was due to be released, she asked the camp authorities "if I could please stay until 1942 . . . I wanted to stay until my 21st birthday – can you imagine?" The authorities complied with her request, and by the time she left Port Erin in February 1942, she had been in custody for more than two years.[63] Rosson's surprising request to remain interned is but one further example of the way in which refugee domestics' reactions to and reflections on their incarceration challenge notions of civilian alien wartime internment as oppressive, nativist, and unjust.

On the whole, refugee domestics expressed little or no long-lasting bitterness in their internment narratives, despite being deemed too untrustworthy to remain living within the British populace, being detained in prison, and held for months or years in internment. It is certainly understandable that the resentment they did express revolved around being unjustly classed as enemy aliens by tribunals that lacked standardization and applied classifications arbitrarily. The refugee domestics who were put in Category B were no more a threat than their compatriots who were given C classifications, and it has been argued that the government's decision to leave C women at liberty, when they took most C male aliens into custody,

63 Ibid.

was a tacit admission that women in general posed little threat as fifth columnists.[64] Looked at in this way, the three thousand or so Jewish refugee women who were interned were simply extremely unlucky to have drawn the tribunals they did, and were left to bear the consequences of an ill-conceived and poorly executed aliens policy.

In spite of all this, when former Jewish refugee domestics reflected on their internment in later life, they almost all qualified their narratives by discussing the ways in which their lives had been eased and augmented rather than diminished by their incarceration. Compared to their lives immediately prior to their arrival at Rushen Camp, internment provided a welcome end to the domestic jobs they hated, freed them from the burden of having to support themselves as refugees, ended the isolation their domestic jobs had imposed, kept them safe from wartime bombings, and provided them the opportunity to correspond freely with their families and loved ones behind enemy lines. All extolled the beauty and comfort of their surroundings, few had complaints about their lodgings or meals, and none felt overburdened by the work they had to do in their boarding houses. Many remarked on the cultural and social activities they were able to enjoy – all organized and carried out by their fellow internees. As single women, they were unburdened by separation from husbands, and though they did not like mingling with committed Nazis, their complaints about daily life on the island were relatively few. However, it is clear that most would have preferred to have been given a C classification and remained at liberty during the early war years, for, as Gisela Hirschberger noted, "nobody wants to be imprisoned however pleasant it can be."[65]

64 Kochan, "Women's Experience", 165–6.
65 Hirschberger, VHA.