



The Holocaust and Wales

Jewish Refugees as Domestic Servants

Created by the Centre for the Movement of People (CMOP) at Aberystwyth University



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Jewish Refugees as Domestic Servants

This resource looks at refugees from Nazi Germany who became domestic servants in Wales. This was the most common occupation among refugees, with 20,000 women from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia entering Britain on domestic visas before September 1939.

The resource explores the life of Fanny Höchstetter, a German-Jewish refugee who became a domestic servant in Llangollen.

It contains:

- Useful definition: 'domestic service'
- Background information about refugees in domestic service and where to find out more
- Useful definition: 'protected areas'
- Short biography of Fanny and Bertl Höchstetter
- Link to audio clip of oral history recording of Ernie Hunter, Fanny's son
- Photographs of Fanny and her sister Bertl and the Hand Hotel, Llangollen
- Welsh newspaper advertisements for domestic servants in 1939
- Transcript of the audio clip

The resource assumes a basic understanding of the Holocaust. You may wish to cover the Holocaust Educational Trust's (HET) worksheet ['Defining the Holocaust'](#) before exploring these resources. See also the HET's ['General Principles for Teaching the Holocaust'](#).



What is 'domestic service'?

'Domestic service, the employment of hired workers by private households for the performance of tasks such as housecleaning, cooking, child care, gardening, and personal service. It also includes the performance of similar tasks for hire in public institutions and businesses, including hotels and boarding houses.'

Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica, '[Domestic service](#)' (2017)

Background information about refugees in domestic service

One avenue for refugees to enter the UK in the interwar period was to gain a visa as a domestic servant (or domestic). Although the British government was very reluctant to accept refugees in any number, the perceived shortage of domestic servants forced them to make an exception. Around 20,000 women from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia arrived in Britain on domestic visas before the outbreak of war in 1939.

Some were accepted to work in private homes as housekeepers, companions, nursemaids or governesses, but the vast majority were admitted for basic domestic work – cleaning and cooking. There was also a small number of Jewish men admitted as butlers or gardeners. These refugees were not allowed to change jobs without Home Office permission, although most left domestic service quickly if they found an alternative.

Many refugees were ill-prepared for life as domestic workers. Middle-class Jewish refugees were more likely to employ servants of their own than to have worked as domestics in their home countries. Employers often treated the refugees with contempt, and some women were even forced to work under mistresses with fascist and antisemitic views. When one refugee complained to a mistress about having to scrub floors and clean from 8am until 11pm with only half an hour's break, she replied 'If it's too much for you, I'll send you back to Hitler.' Unsurprisingly, many refugees loathed their time in domestic service.

When war broke out in September 1939, the condition on Home Office permission for changing jobs was lifted, but this was tempered by the threat of internment. Refugees often lost their jobs if their place of employment fell within a 'protected area', or because their employers simply refused to employ 'enemy aliens' within their own homes. Almost half were sacked on the outbreak of war.

For more information on refugees in domestic service, see:

- Jana Buresova, '[Refugees in Domestic Service in Britain](#)', *AJR Refugee Voices* (2020)
- Mario Cacciottolo, '[Nazi persecution saw Jews flee abroad as servants](#)', *BBC News* (2012)
- Jennifer Craig-Norton, '[The untold stories of the Jewish women who became domestic servants in Britain to escape the Nazis](#)', *British Academy Blog* (2019)



What were 'protected areas'?

'Protected areas' were coastal areas in Britain, where, in the event of Nazi invasion, a spy could cause most harm (e.g. ports where British ships were docked). 'Enemy aliens' (people from Germany, Austria or Italy) were prohibited from living in or entering these areas without permission. They were generally between 20 and 50 miles from the North Sea and English Channel coasts and at a varying distance from coasts in most other areas. From May 1940, the protected areas expanded from coastal counties to include important inland locations.

For more information on British policy towards 'enemy aliens' during the Second World War, see:

- Roger Kershaw, '[Collar the lot! Britain's policy of internment during the Second World War](#)', *The National Archives Blog* (2 July 2015)
- Simon Parkin, "[I remember the feeling of insult': when Britain imprisoned its wartime refugees](#)", *The Guardian* (1 February 2022)



Historical source 1: Short biography of Fanny and Bertl Höchstetter

Fanny and Bertl Höchstetter were sisters who worked as civil servants in Germany. In 1933, they were both sacked due to their Jewish heritage. They fled to Britain on domestic service visas (Bertl in 1938 and Fanny in 1939) and initially worked in the Wirral, near Liverpool. Fanny had no experience of domestic service, although her uncle had written her a glowing reference highlighting (falsely) her skills in cleaning and housework. Once the war began, they were ordered to move to Llangollen. Bertl worked as a seamstress while Fanny gained a job as a chambermaid at the Hand Hotel. She did not enjoy her time in domestic service. In Wales, she met fellow refugee Anton Hundsdorfer, and the pair quickly married. They left Wales for Manchester in 1945, and Fanny later set up a DIY business, while Anton founded his own joinery firm.

Historical source 2: [Audio Clip: Ernie Hunter – On his mother's time as a domestic servant](#)

Historical source 3: Fanny and Bertl Höchstetter
shortly after their dismissal from the German civil
service in 1933



Image: People's Collection Wales

Link: <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/1889361>

© Ernie Hunter

See also: [Northern Holocaust Education Group](#)



Historical source 4: The Hand Hotel, Llangollen, 1925



Image: People's Collection Wales

Link: <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/39877>

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Historical source 5: Welsh newspaper advertisements for domestic servants in 1939

'WANTED, situation as Mother's Help for refined English-speaking Refugee, aged 27; excellent references. – Box M 8197, Mail & Echo, Cardiff.'

➤ *Western Mail*, 7 November 1939, p. 2

'COMPANION-Help. – German Refugee, already in Cardiff. Requires Post; good with children. – H 4892, Mail & Echo, Cardiff.'

➤ *Western Mail*, 29 May 1939, p. 2

'MOTHER and Daughter, Austrian refugees. Require Post with good family, together or separate; experienced household duties, care of children, companion; excellent references. – Box 3910, Western Mail, Port Talbot.'

➤ *Western Mail*, 28 October 1939, p. 2

'ENGLISH-Speaking Refugee, 24, seeks situation as Housemaid; fond of children. – R. Wajcman, 87, Albany-road, Cardiff.'

➤ *Western Mail*, 13 November 1939, p. 1

Transcript

[Audio Clip 1: Ernie Hunter – On his mother’s time as a domestic servant](#)

[...] mother had the opposite thing of being miserable. Because she was treated, now I gather from Flora [Bertl’s daughter], as a skivvy, and she had to use, I now gather, the outside loo, even though there were inside – it’s a huge house – inside loos, which she cleaned; people didn’t speak to her; she had to eat in the kitchen on her own, apparently, etc. And no one conversed with her, if that’s the right phrase, and so in one sense, apparently, she was quite happy when the regulation came out, ‘You’re too close to Liverpool and this military target and sensitive area – go!’ So, both Bertl and Fanny, and my father – they still didn’t know each other – were all sent to Llangollen, where they then met up.

[...]

My mother got a job at the Hand Hotel as a chambermaid.

[...]

She buckled down to it. As...it’s as simple as that, and from what I gather, did, you know, whatever was needed, even though she was certainly, most certainly, not used to it. So, how efficient she was, I do not know, because she was certainly not used to that sort of work, doing it at all.