

Jewish refugees as domestic servants

Teachers' Notes

This lesson 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.

For more information about Jewish refugees working as domestic servants in the UK, see the Student Worksheet.

Students will hear an oral history testimony describing Fanny Höchstetter's experience as a domestic servant and hotel chambermaid.

Curriculum links

Key Stage 4

History, Literacy skills

Lesson Plan

LEARNING AIMS

- To understand why Jewish refugees worked as domestic servants in Britain.
- To gain an insight into the refugees' working conditions.

RESOURCES/EQUIPMENT REQUIRED

- Copies of student worksheet.
- Transcript of the audio extract.¹

STARTER

On the board, write 'domestic service' and 'domestic servants'.

Ask students what they think 'domestic service' means, who would work as a 'domestic servant', and what tasks would they carry out.

Then display the following definition from Encyclopaedia Britannica:

"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."²

Ask students if they can think of any cultural depictions of life in domestic service? How is this portrayed?

For example:

- *Downton Abbey*, ITV, 26 September 2010 - 25 December 2015.
- *Gosford Park*, dir. by Robert Altman (Entertainment Film Distributors, 2001).
- Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).
- Art UK, *Servants* (2016), <<https://artuk.org/discover/topics/servants>> [accessed 28 June 2022].

¹ We added the audio clip transcript, which you may choose to share with your students if you think it would be helpful. The transcript is in English and Welsh whilst the clip is in English only.

² The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Domestic service* (2017)
<<https://www.britannica.com/topic/domestic-service>> [accessed 24 June 2022].

DEVELOPMENT

Ask the students to first read information on Jewish refugees, who worked as domestic servants in the UK in 1939 (student worksheet).

Working in pairs, students should answer the following questions on their worksheet (**TASK 1**):

1. Why did so many refugees become domestic servants?
2. Why might life as a domestic servant have been difficult for a Jewish refugee?
3. Why were domestic servants often treated badly?

MAIN

Ask the students to first read a short biography of Fanny and Bertl Höchstetter, Jewish refugees, who fled to Britain on domestic service visas in 1938 and 1939 (**Student Worksheet**) and then listen to the clip of [Ernie Hunter \(Fanny's son\) speaking about his mother's experience as a domestic servant and hotel chambermaid](#).

Working in pairs or individually, students should answer the following questions on their worksheet (**TASK 2**):

1. How was Fanny Höchstetter treated?
2. How did she feel?
3. Why did she have to leave Liverpool?

PLENARY

Refugees seeking work as domestic servants often paid for advertisements in the local newspaper. These advertisements needed to be short, but still able to give enough information for a prospective employer.

Working in pairs, ask the students to read the examples of advertisements from 1939 and then write an advertisement for themselves or a member of their family (**TASK 3**). The advertisement should include what post they are seeking, what skills they have, and a return address. It should be under 30 words in length.

Transcript

[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.