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Beyond politics? German Jewish refugees and racism in South Africa

SHIRLI GILBERT 

ABSTRACT Between 1933 and the outbreak of the Second World War, around 6,000 Jews fleeing Nazi Germany landed on South Africa's shores, becoming the largest group of Jewish refugees on the African continent. This article by Shirli Gilbert, which is part of a larger project, explores how German Jewish refugees' historical experiences of antisemitism informed their engagement with South African racism before and during the early years of apartheid. While a limited body of research has documented the refugees' contributions to South African social and cultural life, as well as the close-knit communities they established upon arrival, we know very little about how the Nazi past informed their engagement with the post-war world's quintessential racial state. Their responses to the racist policies of their country of settlement are not easily generalizable, but do reveal some distinctive patterns. Of the minority who concerned themselves with racism, few chose the route of radical political activism. Instead, they challenged the racist underpinnings of apartheid in the social and cultural spheres, as journalists, educators, social workers and intellectuals, or via legal political routes, through parliamentary opposition. Multiple factors shaped these responses, including most obviously the traumatic circumstances of the refugees' migration, as well as gender, class and generational belonging.

KEYWORDS apartheid, Holocaust, Jewish, Nazism, refugees, South Africa

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Between 1933 and the outbreak of the Second World War, around 6,000 Jews fleeing Nazi Germany landed on South Africa's shores. Most migrated there not because of any particular connection to, or familiarity with, the country, but simply because for a period it was one of the few places in the world that would let them in. Although South Africa did not receive numbers of refugees comparable to major destinations such as the United States and Argentina, it accepted the largest group of Jewish refugees

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on the African continent, and considerably more than many other places of refuge in the Global South. Moreover, unlike many other destinations in the Global South, it became a place of settlement rather than one of transit: while a handful of refugees left South Africa in the 1940s and 1950s, the vast majority chose to remain there.

The limited body of research that has documented the experiences of these refugees has focused on their arrival and successful integration. The first substantive study of these experiences was Frieda Sichel's *From Refugee to Citizen* (1966).¹ Emphasizing the newcomers' contributions to South African social and cultural life, Sichel's book established a narrative that has continued to dominate both the historiography and popular memory of this group.² The latter is reflected in, among others, the *Seeking Refuge* exhibitions held in Cape Town (2003) and Johannesburg (2005), which focused on the refugees' successful integration into the wider Jewish community and the South African economy.³ Several additional pieces of written work have been produced on this topic, including an important article by Edna Bradlow examining the immigration period,⁴ a doctoral dissertation by Lotta Stone exploring the refugees' adaptation to South Africa before 1948,⁵ and articles on German Jews' religious and cultural life.⁶ While the refugees are not absent from mainstream histories of South African Jewry, we still know very little about their journeys to South Africa; the connections they maintained with family members dispersed across the globe and the homeland they left

- 1 Frieda H. Sichel, *From Refugee to Citizen: A Sociological Study of the Immigrants from Hitler-Europe Who Settled in Southern Africa* (Cape Town and Amsterdam: A. A. Balkema 1966).
- 2 Sarah Schwab, "'No single loyalty': processes of identification among German-Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany in South Africa", in Swen Steinberg and Anthony Grenville (eds), *Refugees from Nazi-Occupied Europe in British Overseas Territories* (Leiden: Brill 2020), 68–85.
- 3 Linda Coetzee, Myra Osrin and Millie Pimstone (eds), *Seeking Refuge: German Jewish Immigration to the Cape in the 1930s, Including Aspects of Germany Confronting Its Past* (Cape Town: Cape Town Holocaust Centre 2003); Jocelyn Hellig, Myra Osrin and Millie Pimstone (eds), *Seeking Refuge: German Jewish Immigration to Johannesburg in the 1930s, Including Aspects of Germany Confronting Its Past* (Johannesburg: South African Jewish Board of Deputies 2005).
- 4 Edna Bradlow, 'The German Jewish experience in Cape Town from 1936 to the present day', *Kleio*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1994, 86–97.
- 5 Lotta M. Stone, 'Seeking asylum: German Jewish refugees in South Africa, 1933–1948', Ph.D. thesis, Clark University, MA, 2010.
- 6 See, among others, Anna Carolin Augustin, 'Jenseits von Deutschland – Diesseits von Afrika: "Deutsch-jüdisches Kulturerbe" in Südafrika', in Elke Kotowski (ed.), *Das Kulturerbe deutschsprachiger Juden: Eine Spurensuche in den Ursprungs-, Transit- und Emigrationsländern* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg 2015), 288–309; Jocelyn Hellig, 'German Jewish immigration to South Africa during the 1930s: revisiting the charter of the SS *Stuttgart*', in James Jordan, Tony Kushner and Sarah Pearce (eds), *Jewish Journeys: From Philo to Hip Hop* (London: Vallentine Mitchell 2010), 146–62; David Saks, 'The German Shul: the contribution of Adath Jeshurun to Orthodox Judaism in South Africa', *Africana Notes and News*, vol. 30, no. 4, 1992, 133–40.

behind; their encounters with local populations; and their adaptation to South African life, society and politics over time.⁷

This article, which forms part of a larger project, addresses one significant aspect of the refugees' history, namely their engagement with local racism before and during the early years of apartheid. The larger historiography on South African Jews and apartheid focuses on two distinct areas: extensive attention has been paid to the involvement of Jewish individuals, disproportionate to their percentage in the population, in radical opposition to the regime; there has also been more tortuous discussion about the responses of the Jewish communal mainstream, which did not speak out against apartheid until the mid-1980s.⁸ While both subjects have received considerable scholarly and public attention, it is perhaps surprising that almost no consideration has been given to how this distinctive group of Jews—refugees from Nazism—perceived the racist attitudes and practices they encountered in their new homeland.

As we shall see, only a handful of these refugees became involved in open political opposition to the regime. For the majority, the job of building a new life was the unquestionable priority; if they perceived parallels between South Africa and Nazi Germany, most chose not to pay close attention to them. Responses of the refugees to the racist policies of their country of settlement were of course varied and are not easily generalizable, as one might expect with a group of this size. But if the larger pattern—activist minority, acquiescent majority—mirrors that of South African Jewish political engagement in general, the responses of German Jews also reveal distinctive patterns. Of the minority of refugees who concerned themselves with South African racism, few chose the route of radical activism, defined here as high-risk and sometimes violent activities aimed at sabotaging the political regime.⁹ Instead, they challenged the racist underpinnings of apartheid in the social and cultural spheres, as journalists, educators, social workers and intellectuals, or via legal political routes, such as parliamentary opposition.

Multiple factors shaped these responses, including most obviously the traumatic circumstances of the refugees' migration, as well as gender, class and generational belonging. For the first few years after their arrival, they confronted countless practical, emotional and psychological challenges, from surviving on meagre resources to finding a job and housing, learning a new language and establishing new lifelines of social support. The persistent

7 See, for example, Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz (eds), *The Jews in South Africa: A History* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press 1955); Gideon Shimoni, *Community and Conscience: The Jews in Apartheid South Africa* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England 2003); and Richard Mendelsohn and Milton Shain, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball 2008).

8 This debate is most fully explored in Shimoni, *Community and Conscience*.

9 On defining radical activism, see Remy Cross and David A. Snow, 'Radicalism within the context of social movements: processes and types', *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2011, 115–30.

anxiety and fear with which they lived—born of the existential flight from Nazism, the concern for family members left behind, and the renewed encounter with antisemitism in their place of refuge—also undoubtedly informed both the extent and nature of their political engagement for many years.

In exploring the responses of individual refugees, this article primarily relies on so-called 'ego-documents', including published and unpublished memoirs, personal accounts and interviews, alongside the contemporary press, correspondence and other miscellaneous sources. It is not always easy to extract attitudes towards racism from such sources; often, they are not explicitly addressed or articulated, and views expressed in retrospect are inevitably recrafted as social consensus changes. In addition to reading the sources carefully with such issues in mind, I have also examined the choices and actions of refugees in terms of what they reveal about underlying mindsets and approaches.

Arrival and early years

Almost half of all German Jewish refugees who fled to South Africa arrived in 1936; the announcement of new immigration restrictions precipitated a rush to arrive before 31 October. Around two-thirds of the refugees were male and one third female, with the majority under the age of forty. While most men (70 per cent) arrived alone, women tended to be married and arrive with their families.¹⁰ The refugees hailed from all parts of Germany, from big cities as well as small towns, and from a range of economic and educational backgrounds. Their levels of Jewish observance also varied, although many were relatively assimilated.¹¹

Many refugees initially struggled to find employment. Women were often the initial breadwinners, as it was easier for them to find jobs as nurses, baby-sitters and cooks. Their husbands, until they found work, were left to do the shopping and housekeeping. This shift in men's social status required careful balancing. Sichel noted that 'When the wife was the main wage earner, much tact and discretion was required if the unemployed husband were not to have his morale undermined.'¹² Some women supported their families for years while their husbands worked to re-establish professional careers. Those who were unable to do so were forced to adjust 'to the lives of the working class'.¹³ Other German Jews established their own enterprises in fields as diverse as clothing manufacturing and retail, medicine, the arts, catering and cattle-farming.¹⁴ Over time, the refugees became integrated

10 Stone, 'Seeking asylum', 45.

11 Ibid., 45, 130–4.

12 Sichel, *From Refugee to Citizen*, 39–40.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 54–66.

into the Jewish community. Within a generation their distinctiveness as German Jewish refugees had largely dissipated.

The refugees' arrival in South Africa coincided with, and exacerbated, a period of growing local antisemitism. While antisemitism was not absent from South Africa before the 1930s, this period saw an increase in explicitly political anti-Jewish behaviour that showed the distinct influence of Nazism. Although the earlier Quota Act (1930) had mainly targeted Jews from Eastern Europe, the Aliens Act introduced in February 1937 reduced Jewish immigration from Germany to a trickle.¹⁵ By the 1938 general election in South Africa, antisemitism had become a central aspect of several mainstream parties' platforms. Nazi-inspired political movements such as the South African Gentile National Socialist Movement (Greyshirts) began to find popular support. And when war broke out in September 1939, only a very narrow parliamentary majority supported the decision to join the fighting on the side of the Allies.¹⁶

The existing Jewish community, made up of 72,000 Jews of largely Eastern European origin who had migrated at the turn of the century, did not always make life easy for the newcomers. Gus Saron, Secretary of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD), wrote to a friend that 'the older South Africans in the Jewish population had shown very little desire to welcome the German Jews into their social life', and that the refugees were not always made to feel welcome at communal events.¹⁷ The SAJBD had in fact actively discouraged German Jewish organisations from sending refugees to South Africa because of political concerns over immigration and fear of exacerbating antisemitism. The SAJBD's perceived hostile stance towards the refugees was a point of fierce criticism from some Cape Jewish leaders in particular. A number of prominent figures actively worked to help the immigrants and took personal responsibility for providing the necessary financial guarantees.¹⁸

15 Edna Bradlow, 'South African policy and Jewish refugee immigration in the 1930s', in Paul R. Bartrop (ed.), *False Havens: The British Empire and the Holocaust* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 1995), 239–52 (240); Hellig, 'German Jewish immigration'; Mendelsohn and Shain, *The Jews in South Africa*. For a detailed account of Jewish immigration to South Africa, see Sally Peberdy, *Selecting Immigrants: National Identity and South Africa's Immigration Policies, 1910–2008* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press 2009), 57–83.

16 See Milton Shain, *A Perfect Storm: Antisemitism in South Africa, 1930–1948* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball 2015); Patrick J. Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika: The Impact of the Radical Right on the Afrikaner Nationalist Movement in the Fascist Era* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press 1991).

17 Stone, 'Seeking asylum', 114; Interview with Carl Fileman, February 1983: University of Cape Town Kaplan Centre Archive (hereafter Kaplan Archive), BC949.

18 Bradlow, 'The German Jewish experience in Cape Town from 1936 to the present day', 87–90; Stone, 'Seeking asylum', 73–5; Harry Schwarz, 'Refugees in a hostile environment', *Jewish Affairs*, 2005, 44–6; see also Hellig, 'German Jewish immigration'.

This hostility perhaps explains in part why the refugees initially kept to close-knit social circles, although they were also sometimes perceived as cliquy and giving off an air of superiority.¹⁹ They settled in the same neighbourhoods, held social gatherings in one another's homes, opened their own shops and restaurants, and established independent social, cultural and religious organizations.²⁰ At the same time, they made an effort to integrate themselves into their new homeland. If they themselves were 'more German than Jewish', they did not pass that identity on to their children.²¹ They learned English well, spoke it at home and contributed to Jewish communal life.

Even before the refugees' arrival, Jews' status in the South African racial hierarchy was ambiguous. In the early years of the twentieth century, confronting growing antisemitism fuelled in part by Jewish immigration from Lithuania, the emerging communal leadership engaged in a conscious effort to make Jews 'respectable' and remove the influence of so-called 'Peruvians', a derogatory epithet used to describe impoverished immigrant Jews. Afrikaner nationalist antisemitism in the 1930s posed a special challenge to longstanding communal efforts to establish Jews as middle class and, critically, white.²²

Although the advent of apartheid in 1948 brought a reprieve from public antisemitism, the fear of antisemitism did not disappear, particularly given recent traumatic experiences in Europe. Relatedly, the question of how South African Jews perceived the relationship between antisemitism and anti-black racism emerges. During the war and immediate post-war years, it was common to hear Jewish communal leaders connecting the battle against antisemitism with the larger 'struggle against narrow racialism'.²³ In the context of the time, however, 'racial tolerance' carried associations rather different from what contemporary audiences might assume. Even as Jews expressed concern for the welfare of the underprivileged black majority and launched social and educational uplift projects, they continued to understand equality and racial cooperation as distinct terms for 'Europeans' and 'non-Europeans'. Most Jews did not share the outlook of activists who compared South African racism explicitly to Nazism; in this respect, they did not diverge from other Whites. As apartheid took root in the 1950s and the notion of the 'separate development' of the races permeated all aspects of everyday

19 Bradlow, 'South African policy', 241.

20 Sichel, *From Refugee to Citizen*, ch. 8; Franz Auerbach, 'German Jews and their baggage', *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2005, 16–19; *Memorial Album: Hebrew Congregation Etz Chayim Johannesburg* (Johannesburg: Eagle Press 1966); Saks, 'The German shul'.

21 Author interview with Madeleine Fane, Johannesburg, 6 February 2012.

22 On establishing themselves as white, see Riva Michal Krut, 'Building a Home and Community: Jews in Johannesburg, 1886–1914', Ph.D. thesis, SOAS, University of London, 1985.

23 Gerald Lazarus, 'The road before us', *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1941, 1–2.

life, the Jewish community increasingly narrowed its focus to internal issues like religion, education and support for Israel.²⁴ The refugees' encounters with racism thus took place against a complex backdrop in which they occupied an uncomfortable and uncertain position.

Encounters and engagement with racism

Few of the refugees previously had contact with black people in Germany, and their initial encounters with black people in South Africa elicited impressions of unfamiliarity. 'We thought we would come directly into the jungle', said Paul Hofmann. '[W]e did not have the faintest idea about this country [...]. I thought we would come into a country that was completely black.'²⁵ Hans Susskind recalled that 'we had seen black people sometimes in the circus but never saw them to talk to them; it was really strange to us.'²⁶ If they expressed concern about racial issues, it was mainly regarding antisemitism. Bernhard Herzberg recalled his ship being greeted at the Cape Town docks by an antisemitic Greyshirt demonstration, at which he remarked ironically to his companions: 'You see—those men want to make us feel at home!'²⁷ Some refugees, as will be explored later, clearly linked the antisemitism that they encountered to broader anti-black racism, but for most—at least initially—such connections were not obvious.

An interview with Kurt Leyser from the early 1980s offers some insight into the nuances of German Jewish perceptions of South African racism. Asked how he felt about black people when he arrived in 1936, Leyser replied:

When I arrived in the docks in Cape Town, I saw a considerable number of black labourers trying to dock the boat [...] and already then unconsciously I remember still today I was thinking it is not possible to treat human beings the way these people at the docks looked, and it was against my grain to see them looking the way they looked.

Leyser's subsequent remarks, however, revealed his limited understanding of structural inequality, even at a remove of almost fifty years. Asked whether he treated black people 'the same way as any other gentiles', he replied:

Well I never treated anybody different, and I would not treat a Coloured or a black man any other way because it is just against my philosophy, that I would

24 Shirli Gilbert, 'Jews and the racial state: legacies of the Holocaust in apartheid South Africa, 1945–60', *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2010, 32–64 (56).

25 Cited in Hahle Badrnejad-Hahn, 'Jewish Refugees from Hitler Germany to Cape Town', B.A. Honours thesis, University of Cape Town, 2000.

26 Interview with Hans Susskind, May 1982: Kaplan Archive, BC949.

27 Bernhard Herzberg, *Otherness: The Story of a Very Long Life* (London: Bernhard Herzberg 1998), 60.

not want to be as badly treated as they have been treated, myself [...] I must say that when I had the idea of going to Africa [...] I was quite prepared to being a labourer and building roads and this sort of thing and was indeed pleasantly surprised that the country was developed at that stage already to such an extent that I was immediately raised to a higher standard than I had expected on account of the fact the black population is doing such labour that I thought I would have to do. Obviously I was pleased of such a status in one way, but sad to see the blacks, not at that time anyway making any progress and improving their lot.²⁸

Underlying Leyser's comments is the assumption that black people had allowed themselves to be treated this way, and that they themselves were responsible for failing to 'make progress' and 'improve their lot'. There are numerous similar accounts by refugees of black people failing to 'get somewhere' because they 'shikkured away' their earnings or lacked discipline in their working practices, even as the perspective of the 1980s—when anti-apartheid resistance was gathering momentum—perhaps led them to defend their colour-blind 'philosophy'.²⁹

Remarks such as these also suggest the need to consider class in understanding German Jewish attitudes. The nature of the South African labour market meant that, in the early years after their arrival, refugees often found it difficult to obtain unskilled work. As one put it in 1942: 'People who gave up their businesses and professions in Europe because they preferred to hew stones rather than live under the Nazi regime, found that there were no possibilities of such labour for them in South Africa.'³⁰ While some, like Leyser, were 'pleasantly surprised' to have been 'raised to a higher standard', many were concerned about whether they would find any employment at all.³¹ Either way, their perceptions of the people who performed these menial jobs were shaped, in their accounts, by notions of class as much as race. Asked how German Jews related to Blacks, Bella Stein replied: 'I don't think it made any difference, not to us in any case, we treated them, how shall I say, as the working class people.'³² Responding to a similar question, Erwin Spiro asserted: 'I for one have no bias, if a person of any colour is a gentleman I respect him and if he isn't then I don't want to have anything to do with him.'³³ Class and race are of course deeply entangled, especially in the South African context. In addition, as already noted, the political context of the early 1980s in which these former

28 Interview with Kurt Lesyer, n.d.: Kaplan Archive, BC949.

29 Interview with Walter Stern, November 1984: Kaplan Archive, BC949.

30 Anonymous, 'The local German-Jewish community: how the immigrants have adapted themselves to South African life', *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 2, March 1942, 5.

31 Stone, 'Seeking asylum', 121–2.

32 Interview with Bella Stein, August 1983: Kaplan Archive, BC949.

33 Interview with Dr Erwin Spiro, n.d.: Kaplan Archive, BC949.

refugees gave their interviews inevitably informed how they framed their recollections of earlier interactions.

Whatever their initial perceptions, many refugees gradually accepted the racial status quo, and sometimes explicitly appropriated its values and vocabulary. In a 1983 interview, Fritz Kronheim acknowledged that:

We took the status of the underdog for granted, and they [black South Africans] took it for granted [...] they were quite happy in their way of life. [...] We took up the attitude of the other white people considering them as born to do the hard labour. We did not think about it or have discussions about it like today.³⁴

Like most other white South Africans, refugees found it ‘unthinkable’ to socialize with non-Whites, and referred to their domestic workers and gardeners as ‘girls’ and ‘boys’.³⁵ In a pamphlet produced by the Association for Jewish Refugees in Great Britain in 1955, Johannesburg correspondent W. Heidenfeld candidly observed that while the refugees were unpopular wherever they went, in South Africa they

at least had a white skin—and therefore automatically became worthy of all the privileges that white South Africa reserves for itself. [...] This is not to say that German refugees have joined the extreme Nationalists or are openly advocating apartheid. But I know a good few who, in their attitude toward the Native population, vie with the most rabid Afrikaner on the platteland; and hardly anybody who would stick out his neck on behalf of the non-European population. The majority are no doubt slightly uneasy about it all and to ease their conscience are doing all they can in the way of charity. They maintain that it cannot be their job to change the South African way of life even if they wanted to, and that, by accepting South African hospitality, they accepted South African (white South African) standards.³⁶

That German Jews gradually became white South Africans is not unexpected. The notion that past experiences of racism makes a person more likely to oppose racism is not generally supported by historical evidence. There are, nonetheless, significant nuances in Heidenfeld’s comments that are worth noting. These include the idea that most refugees were ‘uneasy’ about apartheid, seeking ways to ‘ease their conscience’; and that they, at the same time, considered ‘white standards’ to be the inescapable cost of accepting life-saving refuge in South Africa.

34 Interview with Fritz Kronheim, June 1983: Kaplan Archive, BC949.

35 See, for example, Interview with Wilma Zaduck, n.d.: Kaplan Archive, BC949; Interview with Carl Fileman, February 1983: Kaplan Archive, BC949.

36 W. Heidenfeld, ‘Country without “refugees”’, in Werner Rosenstock (ed.), *Dispersion and Resettlement: The Story of the Jews from Central Europe* (London: Association of Jewish Refugees in Great Britain 1955), 31–3 (32).

Against this background, it is perhaps unsurprising to find the desire to avoid politics altogether as a recurring theme in ego-documents. Charles Wallach, the son of refugees, recalled: ‘Politics didn’t play a part in their minds. They were pleased to be able to get out and get their parents out.’³⁷ Martin Uli Mauthner surmised that ‘many who stayed turned to a form of “innere Emigration”. My impression is that they would not be nearly as active in the struggle against Apartheid as were those with roots in Eastern Europe.’³⁸ On the latter front, Mauthner’s impression is certainly correct: German Jews were not represented among the many Jewish individuals accused in the Treason Trial (1956–1961) and the Rivonia Trial (1963–1964), and hardly a German Jewish name is to be found among the ranks of radical anti-apartheid activists.

This is not to suggest, however, that all German Jews were uninterested in, or indifferent to, contemporary politics. A small number chose to leave in protest at the apartheid regime,³⁹ though for most the prospect of re-emigrating was likely unappealing. Several campaigned actively for the United Party (UP) in the late 1930s and 1940s, and a handful became involved with the Liberal Party during its relatively brief existence in the 1950s and early 1960s.⁴⁰ Compared with the National Party, an exclusivist antisemitic party that had supported the Nazi war effort, the UP was a more comfortable political home for South Africa’s Jews. Despite more reform-minded policies, it was firmly predicated on white dominance, though liberal elements later broke with the party to pursue more progressive reforms. Prominent among those liberal elements was the German Jewish refugee lawyer and politician Harry Schwarz, who in the late 1960s emerged as the leader of the UP’s anti-apartheid faction; he also continued his legal work throughout his political career, and served on the defence team at the Rivonia Trial.⁴¹

Another refugee, Bernhard Herzberg, participated less directly in political activity. Soon after his arrival in South Africa in 1934, he was drawn into the lively leftist discussions that took place at the home of Cissie Gool in Cape Town. He also went on to join the Lenin Club. Later, he used his position of leadership in the Jewellers’ and Goldsmiths’ Union to secure fair representation for non-white workers, and marshalled his expertise in the chemical industry to improve living conditions in squatter camps. He remained a

37 Author interview with Rabbi Charles Wallach, February 2012.

38 Martin Uli Mauthner, ‘“Schubert Park” – memories of “continental” Jo’burg’, *AJR Journal*, August 2016, 5.

39 Mauthner, ‘Schubert Park’; D. L. M., ‘Profile: our mutual “Freund Hans”’, *AJR Information*, vol. 45, no. 4, 1990, 7; ‘Arnold Pomerans’, *AJR Journal*, vol. 5, no. 8, 2005, 15; Eva Mayer Schay, *Of Exile and Music: A Twentieth Century Life* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press 2014).

40 See, among others, Interview with Ursula Bruce, February 1996: USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, #10447; and Shirli Gilbert, *From Things Lost: Forgotten Letters and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press 2017).

41 ‘Harry Heinz Schwarz’, in *South African History Online*, 11 September 2019, available at www.sahistory.org.za/people/harry-heinz-schwarz (viewed 9 April 2024).

committed anti-racist until his death.⁴² The examples of Schwarz and Herzberg, and the absence of radical German Jewish activists, suggest that refugees who participated in political work felt more comfortable doing so within legal parameters.

Many refugees also looked beyond formal politics to engage with contemporary social problems. Noting that '[t]he lot of the underprivileged African not unnaturally drew the sympathy of some refugees', educator Franz Auerbach (whose own efforts are detailed below) documented some notable examples of refugees' work with deprived communities. One was Mrs B, a trained social worker from Berlin, who initiated a scheme to provide black school children in Johannesburg with better meals. Building on the scheme's success, she ultimately established the African Self-Help Association, which fed over 20,000 children daily and ran several dozen creches, nursery schools and youth training projects. Another woman, Mrs G, spearheaded the development of low-priced protein foods for mass consumption in order to tackle malnutrition among black people, insisting the food be made available to its consumers at the lowest possible price. The foods produced by her factory, run together with her husband, were quickly adopted by feeding schemes and their innovations emulated by other industrialists.⁴³ That such social welfare projects were led by women is not coincidental. Sally Frankental notes that 'welfare organisations and welfare professionals had more dealings with, and more knowledge of [...] disadvantaged communities than any other sector of the organised Jewish community'.⁴⁴ While it is widely acknowledged that South African Jewish women in general undertook extensive work in outreach and social welfare among underprivileged populations,⁴⁵ the focus in the scholarship on the (almost exclusively male) communal leadership means that crucial areas of Jewish encounters with non-Whites—including those in the domestic sphere—have been largely overlooked. This is an area ripe for further research.⁴⁶

42 Herzberg, *Otherness*.

43 F. E. Auerbach, 'Contributions to national life', in Sichel, *From Refugee to Citizen*, 59–60, 62–4.

44 Sally Frankental, 'South African Jewish women', in Helen Epstein (ed.), *Jewish Women 2000: Conference Papers from the HRIJW International Scholarly Exchanges, 1997–1998*, Working Paper 6 (Waltham, MA: Hadassah Research Institute on Jewish Women 1999), 71–8 (76).

45 Azila T. Reisenberger, 'Status of Jewish women in South Africa: with special reference to apartheid and post-apartheid eras', *Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1998, 52–61 (55).

46 The question of how Jewish women (refugees as well as others) negotiated the politics of race within their own households is particularly in need of investigation. The Ph.D. research of Louise Leibowitz at University College London, which focuses on Jewish women's relationships with their domestic workers in the 1950s and 1960s, is a very welcome attempt to address some of these issues.

A key institution for refugees' engagement with South African social problems was the Unabhängige Kultur-Vereinigung (UKV, Independent Cultural Association), established in July 1936 by a group 'who felt deeply conscious of the need to assert and to cultivate intellectual freedom and in particular to take "the genuine products of the German spirit into our protection and care" while these were being suppressed in Germany'.⁴⁷ The UKV's primary aim was to defend the significance and value of German culture in the face of its appropriation and contamination by the Nazis; its secondary aim was 'to help make immigrants aware of the affairs of their new homeland',⁴⁸ advancing their understanding of South African culture and facilitating their integration. The Independent Cultural Association's members were intellectuals, academics, artists, writers and musicians, and they held regular concerts, literary evenings and lectures. Not all refugees supported the UKV's work; indeed, it sparked some controversy, and many believed its programme 'was likely to make refugees even more unpopular among those who argued that Hitler refugees were undesirable and unassimilable immigrants'.⁴⁹

The UKV was not a political organization but, in the UKV, culture and politics were intimately connected. At the core of its mission was the commitment to intellectual freedom. Franz Auerbach recalled that the organization's founder, Dr H. O. Simon,

believed passionately in tolerance and the liberal spirit. He never lacked the courage to speak out in favour of what he felt needed saying. In defending the Independent Cultural Association against someone who accused it of political involvement, he once replied in a letter: 'The only principle we have consistently followed which might be called political is freedom of speech.'⁵⁰

The commitment to intellectual freedom connected the UKV's two parallel aims. In asserting ownership of German culture, the UKV defied the Nazis' attempts at censorship and control of German life. Similarly, in acquainting refugees with the culture and character of their new home, the UKV insisted on examining South African society openly and without constraints. While the substance of its work was cultural, it aimed to be far more than a forum for leisure activity.

The programme of lectures offered by the UKV from its earliest days makes clear the nature of the South African issues with which refugees engaged. One of the first lectures, 'An Introduction to the Social Problems

47 F. E. Auerbach, 'Independent Cultural Association', in Sichel, *From Refugee to Citizen*, 91.

48 Franz Auerbach, 'Dr H. O. Simon (an appreciation)', *Union*, vol. 33, no. 3, September 1971.

49 Auerbach, 'Independent Cultural Association', 92.

50 Auerbach, 'Dr H. O. Simon'.

of South Africa', was presented by the social activist and welfare worker Hansi Pauline Pollak, later vice-president of the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR).⁵¹ Other lecture subjects included 'Native Education', 'The Non-European Inhabitants of the Union', 'Native Policy To-day and To-morrow' and African literature.⁵² Those who were invited to lecture at the UKV included university professors and a range of prominent figures associated with the SAIRR, including R. F. A. Hoernlé, a leader of the liberal movement in South Africa and trenchant critic of segregation, and Quintin Whyte, Director of the SAIRR from 1947 to 1970.⁵³ On the UKV's 40th anniversary in 1976—an especially fraught moment in the history of apartheid—the writer and academic Dr Richard Rive delivered a lecture on 'black Consciousness'.⁵⁴

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the circle of refugees that the UKV attracted tended to be left-leaning and younger than those in other refugee organizations. One notable figure was Franz Auerbach, who arrived in Johannesburg from Germany in 1937 at the age of fourteen. Auerbach went on to have a distinguished career in education, including twenty years of association with African night schools and influential publications on the impact of prejudice on black education. His involvement with the UKV began in 1947 and continued until the institution closed in 1976. Alongside of this work, he served in numerous political and social organizations, including the SAIRR, Jews for Social Justice and the South African Yad Vashem Foundation. Another key figure was Ruth Weiss, who fled to South Africa from Germany at age twelve in 1936, and had a distinguished career as an anti-racist activist and journalist.⁵⁵ While few women apart from Weiss feature in the public

51 Auerbach, 'Dr H. O. Simon'. Founded in 1929, the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) was the first national multiracial organization in South Africa, aiming 'to encourage, work for, and foster peace, goodwill, and practical co-operation between the various sections and races of the population of South Africa'. Its supporters included prominent liberals such as Alan Paton and Alfred and Winifred Hoernlé. For more on the SAIRR's history and work, see Quintin Whyte, 'South African Institute of Race Relations: Suid-Afrikaanse Instituut Vir Rasseverhoudings', *Race & Class*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1968, 103–5 (103).

52 'Vortraege', *Union: Blätter der Emigration*, vol. 2, no. 1, January 1940, 2; 'Vortraege', *Union: Blätter der Emigration*, vol. 2, no. 5, June 1940, 8; 'U.K.V. diary of events', *Union: Blätter der Emigration*, vol. 4, no. 10, October 1942, 7; Immanuel Suttner (ed.), *Cutting through the Mountain: Interviews with South African Jewish Activists* (Johannesburg: Viking Penguin 1997), 553.

53 Correspondence between UKV and SAIRR, February–May 1951: Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Collection AD1715, South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), 1892–1974, Section 35.3.1. For more on Hoernlé, see William Sweet, 'R. F. A. Hoernlé and idealist liberalism in South Africa', *South African Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2010, 178–94.

54 Suttner (ed.), *Cutting through the Mountain*, 553.

55 Both Auerbach and Weiss wrote memoirs: Franz Auerbach, *No Single Loyalty: Many Strands One Design: A South African Teacher's Life* (Münster: Waxmann 2002); Ruth

records of the UKV, the question of refugee women's involvement with its work is an area that warrants deeper archival investigation.

Whereas radical activist Jews tended to disavow any links between their activism and their Jewishness, German Jews such as Schwarz, Weiss and Auerbach consistently highlighted the connections between their anti-racist efforts and their refugee pasts. From the perspective of his family, as well as by his own account, Schwarz's commitment to social justice in South Africa was shaped by his childhood experiences in Nazi Germany. In a 1991 interview, he explained his lifelong devotion to anti-racist activism by saying, 'I know what the word discrimination means, not because I've read it in a book, but because I've been the subject of it.'⁵⁶ Auerbach often spoke about how his own experiences had informed his opposition to institutionalized racism, and in his many talks and writings, including his memoir, he drew frequent parallels between Nazism and apartheid.⁵⁷ He also often deliberately invoked the comparison in order to urge fellow Jews to protest local injustices.⁵⁸ Weiss, too, made frequent connections between her refugee past and her lifelong commitment to social justice. Describing an event in Germany where she was interviewed in 1979, Weiss wrote:

I speak of those years, explaining what it meant to be a small unwanted girl in Hitler's Germany. I also tell them what it means to be a black child in apartheid South Africa. [...] 'blacks under apartheid—Jews under the swastika. Was it all that different?' It was a question I had to ask myself a long time ago. Racism is unacceptable. Social injustice is unacceptable. Anywhere. Everywhere.⁵⁹

Such analogies are woven throughout Weiss's own accounts of her activist work, as well as accounts of her work by others.⁶⁰

For a minority group among the refugees—in Weiss's words, 'the assimilated lot, academics, artists and "politicals"'—the UKV was a forum that provided cultural familiarity as well as intellectual stimulation and engagement with contemporary South African life. Within their broad social orbit

Weiss, *A Path through Hard Grass: A Journalist's Memories of Exile and Apartheid* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien 2014).

56 'Schwarz', *South African History Online*.

57 See, for example, Jonathan Ancer, *Mensches in the Trenches: Jewish Foot Soldiers in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle* (Johannesburg: Batya Bricker 2021), 161. Auerbach's writings are housed in the Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Historical Papers, Collection number A3267, Dr Franz Auerbach Collection, 1950–2006.

58 Franz Auerbach, 'Our responsibility', *Etz Chayim News*, vol. 2, no. 6, September 1960, 33–7 (34).

59 Weiss, *A Path through Hard Grass*, 12.

60 See, for example, Nadine Gordimer's foreword to Weiss, *A Path through Hard Grass*, 7–9.

were the socialist journalist (and Ruth's later husband) Hans Weiss;⁶¹ his friend Reinhold Cassirer, an art dealer from an illustrious Berlin family who nurtured promising black artists; Cassirer's wife, the novelist Nadine Gordimer;⁶² Ilse Dadoo, married for a time to Communist activist Yusuf Dadoo;⁶³ and Liberal Party activist Fred Prager,⁶⁴ among others. In her 2014 memoir, Weiss recalled that, while her refugee parents broadly shared her views about apartheid, they discouraged her involvement with the UKV because they 'equated "political" with "communist" and felt this to be dangerous in the country in which we found ourselves, just as it had been dangerous in Germany.'⁶⁵ Only a handful of UKV members joined the South African Communist Party, however, perhaps unsurprisingly given the apartheid government's extreme anti-Communist stance.⁶⁶ Those who chose to participate in anti-racist work confined themselves primarily to the social and cultural arenas. Our understanding of refugees' responses would thus benefit from deeper investigation into literary and artistic production alongside overtly political work.⁶⁷

Explaining refugees' responses

How do we account for the particular responses of German Jewish refugees to South African racism? Before tackling this question, it is worth re-emphasizing the countless challenges that these individuals confronted. The experience of fleeing Nazism, compounded by the antisemitism they encountered upon arrival in South Africa, left them vulnerable and insecure. Like refugees everywhere, they suffered from diminished social and economic status, loneliness and the trauma of losing homes and families. The historian Steven Aschheim notes that, within this context, 'it was, quite simply, *gratitude*

61 Weiss, *A Path through Hard Grass*, 63.

62 'Author's private relationships come under the spotlight', *Sunday Times* (South Africa), 8 August 2004, available at www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/lifestyle/2004-08-08-authors-private-relationships-come-under-the-spotlight/ (viewed 9 April 2024).

63 Mauthner, 'Schubert Park'.

64 'South Africa seizes liberal', *New York Times*, 28 July 1964, 2.

65 Weiss, *A Path through Hard Grass*, 67.

66 The Suppression of Communism Act (1950) was used to justify draconian action against any political opposition. See Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger, *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, 2nd edn (Harlow: Pearson Longman 2011), 58.

67 Chris Barron, 'Esmé Berman: a pioneering historian of SA art and artists', *Sunday Times* (South Africa), 11 June 2017; Ansel Hermann in *Echoes and Memories: The Refugees Speak*, dir. Jürgen Böhner (Johannesburg: SA Jewish Board of Deputies and Goethe-Institut 2005); Weiss, *A Path through Hard Grass*, 67; Auerbach, 'Independent Cultural Association', 63.

which was the most characteristic and understandable response of these German Jewish immigrants to their adopted country'.⁶⁸ In the months and years following their arrival, they focused on re-forging their lives and keeping a low profile. Having finally found a safe haven, their primary aim was integration; most were too preoccupied with the basic concerns of existence to be concerned about institutionalized racism.⁶⁹

In her 1943 article 'We Refugees', Hannah Arendt criticized the withdrawal from public life that she saw among many of her fellow refugees in the United States, and suggested that a healthier response was to confront injustice and remind the world that what happens to Jews first, happens to others next.⁷⁰ With the passage of time, some of the refugees' children in South Africa turned to tackling the injustices of apartheid along the lines of Arendt's advice, citing their parents' experiences as a key motivating factor.⁷¹ For the first generation, however, such a response was impossibly unrealistic. The anthropologist Steven Robins recalls that his refugee father 'could not channel his private experiences of loss and exile into a politically engaged response. [...] [H]e turned away from the world and became a private man, committed to raising a family and remaking his life at the tip of Africa.'⁷² The life stories of many German Jews across the world follow a similar pattern. In his book *Generation Exodus*, Walter Laqueur concludes that most of the refugees who reached the US, Latin America and elsewhere were not particularly politically minded, and that there was very little radical politics among them. In the immediate post-war years, the ideal was to integrate as quickly as possible and become a loyal member of one's new homeland.⁷³

While the lack of engagement with South African politics makes sense against this background, particularly in the early years of settlement, it must also be acknowledged that what began as a tacit acceptance of the status quo later became, for some, a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Like most South African Jews, refugees from Nazi Germany came to enjoy the economic benefits of apartheid, and to live comfortable, if not affluent lives as white South Africans. Aschheim suggests that the professional and economic success they gradually acquired 'was a powerful combination limiting, if not entirely eliminating, any inclination to generalize from their own experience of racial injustice in Germany and protest against

68 Steven E. Aschheim, *In Times of Crisis: Essays on European Culture, Germans, and Jews* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 2001), 59–63 (60–1).

69 Shimoni, *Community and Conscience*, 6.

70 Hannah Arendt, 'We refugees', in Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (eds), *The Jewish Writings — Hannah Arendt* (New York: Schocken Books 2007), 264–74 (274).

71 David Bruce, interviewed in Suttner (ed.), *Cutting through the Mountain*.


72 Steven Robins, *Letters of Stone: From Nazi Germany to South Africa* (Cape Town: Penguin 2016), 279.

73 Walter Laqueur, *Generation Exodus: The Fate of Young Jewish Refugees from Nazi Germany* (London: I. B. Tauris 2004), 149.

what was happening in South Africa'.⁷⁴ Further research is required to understand more fully the extent to which economic concerns shaped Jews' attitudes toward apartheid, but their success in this sphere was undoubtedly an element of their comfort in South Africa, and at least partially accounts for their withdrawal from politics.⁷⁵

At the same time, there were those German Jewish refugees who took note of South African racism and its effects, though they did so in ways different from those of radical activists. The UKV was unusual among refugee institutions in that it openly addressed questions of 'race relations', but even this engagement was largely intellectual rather than political, and those who pursued these concerns in their working lives did so judiciously and legally, in spheres such as education, journalism, social work and liberal politics. In part, these choices reflected their middle-class German origins, in stark contrast to the influences that led some Eastern European Jews to trade union work, socialist and communist politics, and later anti-apartheid activities. They must have also, however, stemmed from their inclination to find stability and security in the aftermath of such traumatic personal experiences.

The nature and impact of German Jews' activities in these areas deserve fuller exploration, not only to amplify our knowledge of this particular group and to compare it with other dispersed refugee communities, but also because they challenge our understanding of South African Jewish responses to apartheid more broadly. While the radical Jewish activists who opposed apartheid are prominent in historiography and popular memory, and the responses of the official Jewish leadership have provoked extensive debate, little attention has been paid to the responses of ordinary Jewish men and women at home, at work and in society. The responses of German Jewish refugees, informed by the distinctiveness of both their backgrounds and the circumstances of their migration, offer a fresh perspective on this question, and remind us that we still have much to learn about the engagement of Jewish South Africans with apartheid.

Shirli Gilbert is Professor of Modern Jewish History at University College London and co-editor of *Jewish Historical Studies: A Journal of English-Speaking Jewry*. She holds a D.Phil. in Modern History from the University of Oxford and was a postdoctoral fellow in the Society of Fellows at the University of Michigan. She has published widely on the Holocaust and its legacies, modern Jewish identity and Jews in South Africa, and her publications include *Music in the Holocaust* (2005), *From Things Lost: Forgotten Letters and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (2017) and *Holocaust Memory and Racism in the Postwar World* (with Avril Alba, 2019). Her current research is focused on Jewish refugees in Africa. Email: shirli.gilbert@ucl.ac.uk  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8471-4603>

74 Aschheim, 'Excursus', 61.

75 Shimoni, *Community and Conscience*, 194.