

## Secrets and Lies: Achieving British Citizenship in the 1950s<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*My presentation concerns an aspect of the immigration experience and derives from a combination of family history and a broader overview of different research studies on immigration and refugees. My original aim was to make visible the lives of 'ordinary' immigrant women living in London during the 1940s and 1950s, with my mother and her sisters as exemplars. I was also interested in the interweaving of gender, social class and ethnicity in Britain in this period and the extent to which (first generation) immigrants share certain experiences. Thus my study sought to uncover how my mother and her two sisters re-created their lives, and the extent to which they suffered trauma, poverty, and poor health from the causes (and to some extent, the outcomes) of their refugee experience, as well their evident gratitude to their eventual country of domicile and aspiration for their offspring. However, confounding to some extent these perhaps rather worthy aims, I have uncovered a story of surveillance and scandal, state bureaucracy and secrecy, and one of my problems has been the extent to which I pursue this story or the wider project or both.*

### Narrative research

I have chosen *narrative* or *biographical* research as a means of capturing individual experience of what might be seen as the individual or ordinary. The ability of personal narrative to bridge the gap between personal experience and social structure is seen by Paul Ricoeur as offering a solution to a central question in the social sciences, namely the relative influence of individual agency and overall structure. Ricoeur (1980) argues that narrative allows individuals retrospectively to create plots out of occurrences in their own lives in order to manage the process of living. Thus, narratives form events into series or chronologies which personify and unify self-hood. Michael Erben (1998) likewise argues that narratives are *cohering mechanisms* that make human experience comprehensible by weaving social context into individual life-story.

However narrative has its critics who have argued that it can exaggerate the impact of individual action and/or provide a 'victory narrative' or 'triumph over

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adversity' account in placing the individual at the centre of events to which he or she may be peripheral.

Family history is a sub-variant of narrative research and is generally understood as a biography of a single family over several generations, based on genealogy (i.e. tracing a living person's pedigree back into time from the present) and fleshed out with the social history of the family, its achievements or failures and so on. Family-history research includes also 'one-name studies' (investigation of all persons with a common surname) 'one-place studies' (population histories) and family social and economic history (using oral and written records, or wider historical sources) (Kean, 2004; Hull, 2005). It is also often regarded as history from the bottom up. For example, the historian Hilda Kean (2004) uses the term 'off-centre-stage' to describe her family's ordinariness i.e. having no discernible links to local or national politics or popular movements,. Thus she says, 'these were lives conducted off-centre-stage on the margins, of what has been seen, even by progressive historians, as the sidelines of history' (Kean, 2004: 7).

Such bottom-up histories have been championed in particular by socialist and feminist historians but have often been 'the grand narratives and optimistic overview of working-class activists' rather than an illumination of ordinary lives (Kean, 2004: 8)<sup>2</sup>. However, Kean makes such an attempt and in so doing, rescues her family from obscurity. In the very act of constructing and writing her family history, Kean renders her family extra-ordinary. This was the original purpose of my research – to turn the focus on three ordinary immigrant women from Vienna between 1938 and 1955 and thus render them extraordinary. However, I was diverted from my intention – and this diversion and what I might do with it provides the main part of this presentation.

### **A Gap in the Literature**

There is much written about the period covered by my study (1939-1955) including social histories and more general histories of wartime and the post-war period (e.g. Wasserstein, 1996; Judt, 2005, Kynaston, 2007), studies of immigration and immigrants (e.g. London, 2000; Cohen, 2007), individual and collective autobiographies of holocaust survivors (e.g. Bauman, 1988; Smith, 2006 – see also

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of 'bottom-up' history are: E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*; Shiela Rowbotham, *Hidden from History*; Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*; and Raphael Samuel, *The Enemy Within: Pit villages and the Miners' Strike of 1884-5*

recent films such as *Tovarisch, I am not dead*<sup>3</sup> and *The Counterfeiters*<sup>4</sup>), and studies of East End London and other Jewish communities (Shapiro and Shapiro, 1994; Fishman, 2004). There has been, perhaps, more emphasis on understanding the broader picture, say, of the experience of internment (Seller, 2001) or being part of the kinder-transport (Benz, Curio and Hummel, 2004) or on the contribution that immigrants made to British culture or the economy (Malet & Grenville, 2002). Rather less can be found on little-known or ‘ordinary’ immigrants, in particular women in Jewish immigrant families (an exception is Brinson’s work on women in exile, 1998): hence, the focus on my family history adopted for this study.

### Sources

The sources I turned to include documents in my possession for example, that associated with country of origin (birth certificate, exit documents), personal records (photos, correspondence, medical records, accounts) and records kept by British authorities. In the latter respect, my mother was more documented than her two sisters as a consequence principally of her two (unsuccessful) applications for naturalisation which both generated a substantial amount of bureaucratic paperwork and also meant that as an alien she was obliged to inform the police of any changes in job or address. I have also carried out interviews with various family members and friends, in the awareness that their availability is time-sensitive. Sadly, the three sisters died in the 1960s – so, excepting some personal correspondence, their voices and perspectives are missing from the study.

I have also consulted widely with Jewish refugee and other organisations, the National Archive at Kew, and various scholars active in related fields, and of course the Internet has been exceptionally valuable with, for example, the recent rapid digitalisation of population data (e.g. census, births and deaths).

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<sup>3</sup> *Tovarisch, I Am Not Dead* is a documentary film by Stuart Urban about his father Garri Urban (1916-2004), also the title of an autobiographical book by Garri Urban describing his survival in, and escape from imprisonment in Nazi and communist wartime and postwar regimes.

<sup>4</sup> *The Counterfeiters* (German: *Die Fälscher*) is a 2007 Austrian/German film which fictionalizes Operation Bernhard, a secret plan by the Nazis during World War II to destabilize the UK by flooding its economy with forged Bank of England currency. The film is based on a memoir written by Adolf Burger, a Jewish Slovak typographer who was imprisoned in 1942 for forging baptismal certificates to save Jews from deportation, and later interned at Sachsenhausen concentration camp to work on Operation Bernhard.

### Focus of Study

My original aim, as already noted, was to make visible the lives of ordinary immigrant women living in London during the 1940s and 1950s, with my mother and her sisters as exemplars. I was also interested in the interweaving of gender, social class and ethnicity in Britain in this period and the extent to which (first generation) immigrants share certain experiences. Thus my study sought to uncover how my mother and her two sisters re-created their lives, and the extent to which they suffered trauma, poverty, and poor health from the causes (and to some extent, the outcomes) of their refugee experience, as well their evident gratitude to Britain for taking them in as well as considerable aspiration for their offspring.

However, confounding to some extent these perhaps rather worthy aims, unlike Hilda Kean, I have uncovered a story of surveillance and scandal, state bureaucracy and secrecy, and one of my problems has been the extent to which I pursue this story or the wider project or both.

### A Brief Family Story

My parents were immigrants who came to Britain (England) at the end of the 1930s to escape Nazi persecution. They came from different parts of Eastern Europe. My father originally came from Lodz in Poland and worked as a coalminer in Belgium, and after an accident as a trader of various kinds until war broke out. My mother came from Vienna where her parents were shoe sellers, and previously, immigrants from Brody in Poland. They met in London and I was born towards the end of the war (May 1944). I was brought up by my mother and her two sisters, because in 1946 my father was refused re-entry into the country after a trip abroad. It is the lives of my mother mainly, her two sisters and families like them that I am interested in exploring as I denote a gap in the literature on this particular social grouping: immigrant, female, Jewish, and 'ordinary'.

Stefanie (aka Steffi), my mother, was one of seven children (6 girls and a boy) born in Vienna in the first decade and a half of the twentieth century to a Jewish shoe-shop owner, David Dinger and his wife Malke.

### (Grand) Aunt Tilde outside the family shoe shop in Vienna



### Family Business Card



As already intimated, my mother's parents were themselves recent migrants from Brody now in the Ukraine but before 1918, in Galicia which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Though the family were close to starving during the First World War and the youngest children (Tilde, born 1909 and Trude, born in 1917) were somewhat undersized as a result, from photographs it seems that the family had a more comfortable and prosperous life later in the interwar years.

**Steffi in the late 1920s**



**Steffi and Fanny Isenstein in Vienna in 1927**



**Dinger siblings, 1931**



During the interwar years the family was proud of being German-speaking, and having a German cultural heritage (Goethe and Schiller in particular), and was fashionable and cosmopolitan in its interests – as might be discerned from the photographs above. The family was also politically left-leaning, committed social

democrats (equivalent to today's 'old Labour'). Just before she left for Britain my mother was working as an administrator (in a factory) drawing no doubt on her earlier secretarial training. However, following the onset of the Third Reich in 1933, the *Anschluss* (German annexation of Austria) and *Kristallnacht* (destruction of synagogues and Jewish businesses and wholesale arrest of Jews) both in 1938, the family sought to escape in any way they could. And indeed, 130,000 Jews left the country, that is more than half of Vienna's pre-war population of 206,000. Three sisters (Steffi, Elsa and Trude) were the first of the children to leave, gaining exit visas to England guaranteed by a cousin (Fanny Isenstein), the daughter of an uncle who had come to London in the last decade of the nineteenth century to follow the family tradition of selling shoes, in this instance, in the Mile End Road, Stepney, in London's East End.

Tilde was the next to leave for the USA eastwards across Russia (in 1941) with her small son George (named after King George V), her husband having become trapped in Switzerland at the start of the war. Of the remaining immediate family, David Dinger had already died of natural causes in 1928, while his wife (Malke), oldest daughter Gisela and son Moritz continued to live in Vienna during the Nazi period. Gisela died of cancer in 1940, though the extent to which the difficulties faced by Jews then contributed to her death can only be surmised. Malke Dinger (my grandmother) was murdered in Treblinka in 1942 having been transported there via the holding camp of Theresienstadt, Friede her sister died, we do not know when, in the Lodz Ghetto, and Moritz died in a Soviet labour camp in 1945 (in Karaganda, in what is now Kazakhstan). A young family member in Britain remembers as a seven-year-old, the distraught response of the sisters in 1941 on hearing of the death of their oldest sister at the age of 38. The sisters received notification only in 1947, of the deaths of their mother and brother from the International Red Cross.

Steffi and Elsa arrived at Dover on the 12 December 1938 on a six months visa and two weeks later, Trude arrived on a 90 day visa. They all went to live in the small house in Harringay in North London of Fanny Isenstein (their guarantor) her printer husband (Joe) and their two daughters.



### **First base in London**

The sisters could speak little English, and were not entitled to seek employment though, fortunately, were exempted from internment. In order to guarantee their entry into England, Fanny had created 'jobs' for the sisters (as laundry maid, mother's help and Joe's secretary), and promised to ensure payment for their upkeep.

Having little to live on, the sisters went to the German Jewish Aid Committee (GJAC) for financial support, my mother receiving between £2.50 and £3 a month until she could find a job of some kind. In January 1940, the payment was temporarily raised by £1 per week because of blood poisoning which continued for about 9 months and for which she needed medical treatment. In June 1941 Steffi was working as a leather worker/glove maker at £2 per week though was once again unemployed and looking for work a month later (registered with the German and Austrian Employment exchange). She was ill on and off for the next few years, but in between had a variety of jobs including 'cap finisher' 'capstan operator', 'machinist', 'secretary' (for the Austrian Centre - but more of that later), and 'clerk' at various levels as her English improved. Trude worked for a Domestic Bureau from March 1940, became a cashier in 1944 and later a general office worker, and in the early 1960s was a home tutor for 'backward children'.

The sisters joined the Austrian Centre<sup>5</sup> which had a branch nearby, where they were able to meet up with other Austrian refugees. Though they said they mainly attended the Centre for social reasons, they were also engaged in the political debates going on there about the future of their country post-war, and at one point Steffi became the branch's paid secretary, and an official letter signed by her to the Foreign

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<sup>5</sup> The Austrian Centre opened in Westbourne Terrace, London on 16 March 1939 and rapidly became the main organisation representing Austrian refugees in Britain. Its main aims were to organise Austrians in the fight against Hitler, promote friendship between the British and the Austrians, foster the cultural life of Austrians in Britain and provide help and support for its members. It closed in 1947 (Bearman et al., 2008).

Secretary, Anthony Eden exists in the archives (Brinson, 2008, footnote 137).

However, though the Centre was broad-based, multi-party and predominantly a social and cultural focal point for Austrian refugees, it assumed a political role in which the dominant tone was set by the earliest arrivals, the Austrian communists (Brinson & Dove, 1999). This was later to cloud my mother's aspirations for British citizenship.

All three sisters met their future partners/husbands through the Centre. First, Steffi met Uszer Frucht, a Polish Jew, previously a coalminer, trader, political activist and sometime actor and communist activist in 1943, and set up home and had a daughter in May, 1944 (me). Trude married Johannes Spitz (who later changed his name to John Spencer), previously an importer/exporter then railway clerk in July 1944 and had a son (Alexander) in March 1946. And Elsa married Max Mowbray (previously Maximilian Mauruber) in October 1947, following his demobilisation from the British army. She remained childless though I found out recently that she had had a miscarriage.

**Sisters at Elsa's wedding in 1947**



**and in the late 1950s**



In 1944 Steffi amended the nationality on her British registration document to Austrian from German when that became possible. Trude and Elsa gained naturalisation (that is British citizenship) on marriage (Elsa) and on her husband's naturalisation (Trude), although Steffi remained stateless because she and Uszer remained unmarried.

Uszer had been married previously and was unsure of the fate of his family. He later learnt that his wife and children were safe and living in Belgium though



suffering poverty and ill-health. He visited them in 1946, primarily the records state, to negotiate a divorce from his wife in order to marry Steffi. However, he was prevented from re-entering the country, and was turned away once more in 1947. In 1948 he was arrested for trying to enter illegally, and spent some time in Lewes prison awaiting deportation. He had originally entered Britain illegally in 1939, and was designated as an 'enemy alien' and scheduled for deportation. However this order was revoked when war broke out. When the authorities saw that he had somewhere to go, however, the decision was taken to forbid him re-entry. Steffi remained in London with her daughter, sisters and their families and applied for naturalisation in her own right in 1951 and 1955, unsuccessfully on both occasions. The reason given in her record (though not to her personally) was her association with known communists, particularly Uszer and her pro-communist beliefs, which she herself denied. Steffi changed her name to Frocht by deed pole in 1951 so that she would have Uszer's surname and thus conceal the illegitimacy of her daughter.

The three sisters worked for much of their time in Britain mainly in clerical jobs, as we have seen, often in immigrant or family businesses and organisations. All were dogged by ill-health: Steffi suffered minor ill-health from early on, but also had a very serious tram accident when evacuated to Leeds late in 1944, retaining a limp and twisted arm for the rest of her life; Elsa had very poor eyesight and an early heart condition; and Trude was undersized and frail for most of her life. Trude was the most politically active in Britain, and an early campaigner for cervical smear tests for women, though all three sisters were left-leaning in line with much of the country at the time.

Elsa died in June 1962 (aged 56), Trude died in October 1966 (aged 49) and Steffi died in September 1969 (aged 66). Tilde lived longest in New Jersey, USA and following the birth of a daughter in 1946, the death of her husband in 1955 (in an industrial accident) and remarriage, died aged 93 in November 2002.

### **A Side Story: Uszer Frucht**

One of the main mysteries of my study has been the seemingly ghostly and ephemeral presence/absence of my father Uszer Frucht, also known as Edi to Steffi, but who appears at various points as Asher/Osher/Usyer Frucht/Frukht/Frukt.

### Uszer/Edi Frucht/Frocht



I met him several times as a child and adult, and have some photographs (see above) and memories, although I lost contact with him in the early 1970s after my mother died. For this study, however, I was able to find little documentation on him from the ‘usual’ places, i.e. Home Office (which says it has a file on him but that it has been destroyed) or the National Archive, save from the Association of Jewish Refugees<sup>6</sup>, a file card on his imprisonment in Lewes jail, and occasional appearances in my mother’s documentation. I have discovered from other sources that he was the publisher of a Yiddish-language pamphlet celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Revolution (published in 1942), and a senior member of the Jewish Cultural Club which was frequented by nationalist Polish Jews from Occupied Europe, who were either communist or sympathetic to communism.<sup>7</sup> On the actual date of my birth (9 May 1944) my father is reported as speaking at a conference at Beaver Hall, Stepney organised by the East London District of Communist Party as follows: ‘Asher Frucht of the Jewish Cultural and Alec Waterman both spoke of the need to persuade more Jews to become Communists’ (Srebrnik, 1995: 73).

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<sup>6</sup> The *Association of Jewish Refugees* is the principal organisation representing former Jewish refugees. It was founded in 1941, and continues until today. There has been very little academic study of this refugee community. Naturalisation was one of the dominant topics of the early years of AJR information. An ‘exhortatory’ rhetoric enjoined the refugees to act as loyal citizens, be grateful for being allowed to stay and not to rock the boat nor allow anti-Semitism to emerge (Grenville, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> The JCC was allegedly a conduit for information between Moscow and London during the war. Money was raised by JCC for the Russian front and members met regularly and remained friends until 1956 following the splits after the Hungarian Uprising (interview with relative of original organisers).

Perhaps he belonged to the London Yiddish Theatre under the direction of Mark Markov, or something similar, which was trying to foster and preserve the Yiddish culture under threat from the Nazis (Srebrnik, 1995: 27) - because it was as a performer that he first met my mother. Only recently have I seen a description of him from Steffi's Home Office record - which however does not tally with other evidence I have seen:

Mr Frocht was a Russian who, on being expelled from Belgium in 1939, then entered the UK illegally. His deportation order was not enforced and eventually revoked in 1946. In the same year he visited his wife and three children in Belgium (about whom no details are given) and subsequently was refused re-entry into the UK. He later moved alone to France, where he resided from about 1950 onwards. He continued to receive short annual visits from the applicant [Steffi], who travelled abroad to see him (Appeal Review, 2007).

Indeed the rejection of my mother's application for naturalisation had a strongly gendered component, based principally on the perceived pernicious influence of my father.

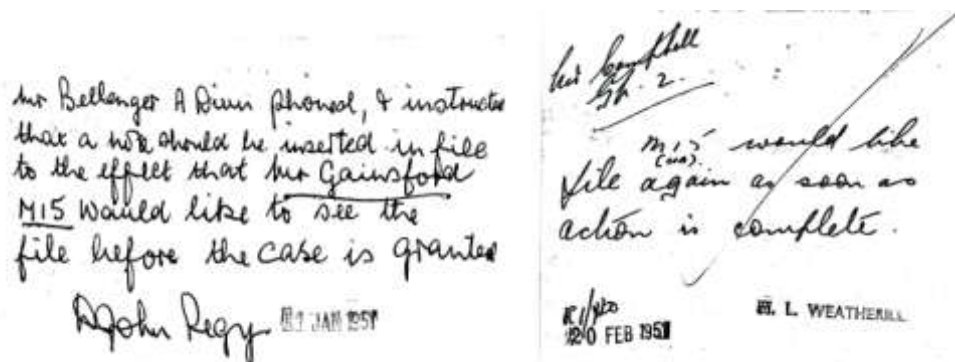
The applicant [Steffi] continued to hold strong pro-Communist views after the war and maintained her connection to Frocht, a fellow Communist. It was feared that should Frocht divorce his wife in Belgium, as promised to the applicant, he would then seek UK residency, where he was already regarded as an undesirable alien, because of his Communist views (Appeal Review, 2007).

The interest of the security services (Special Branch and MI5) in my mother (and presumably my father) is evident in several parts of my mother's file and also noted in the review of the appeal against my restriction of access under the Freedom of Information Act.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> An Act to make provision for the disclosure of information held by public authorities or by persons providing services for them and to amend the Data Protection Act 1998 and the Public Records Act 1958; and for connected purposes

### Appearance of MI5



Other 'glimpses' of my father include:

- \* report of deportation (though not carried out) in a Foreign Office file of 1939;
- \* file-card indicating that he was in Lewes jail in 1948;
- \* notes made in Steffi's German Jewish Aid Committee file, due to Uszer's presumed responsibility as family wage earner, e.g.

March 1945: *Man earns £4.10*

June 1946: *Co-habitee, Mr Frocht, returned from Belgium on 9.6.46. AB instructed that no further payment can be made*

August 1946: *Mr Frocht and Miss Dinger called – Interviewed by Miss Goldschmidt*

January 1948: *Inviting child's father Uszer FROCHT CF12202 for 2 weeks to discuss future plans. Her brother-in-law Max Ivor Mowbray A1167 guaranteeing his maintenance*

- \* letter and postcard to my mother sent some months before she died indicating that they were still in regular contact.
- \* extracts of reports in Steffi's Home Office file with regard to his political views and previous family in Belgium, and undesirability as an illegal alien. It is also stated that he did not come to the attention of the authorities during the period of his sojourn in Britain between 1939 and 1946, save in relation to his original illegal entry and visits to Belgium in the mid 1940s.

However what is apparent is that the branch of MI5 which was interested in my mother's application for naturalisation was neither aware of Uszer's political

activities while in Britain, i.e. involvement with Communist Party and Jewish Culture Club, nor of his imprisonment in Lewes jail in 1948.

### **Making Sense of the Evidence**

So what can be made of this glimpse of events and people long ago? Is it possible to interweave personal experience and larger structures? Does it reveal how ordinary immigrants lived their lives? Can it tell us anything useful for today? My response is a guarded 'yes' to all these questions, though with some qualification as will be seen below.

#### **1. Power of narrative (unfinished)**

I suggest that the various narratives that have merged from this study – the family story, side story, documentary story and the story of the process of conducting the study itself - separately and together provide a strong narrative line and give a sense of the lives that were lived. But most interesting for me is that they have not taken the direction I anticipated. While I have gained some sense of how people lived in wartime and the immediate post-war era, I have gained more of an insight into the impact on them of the bureaucracies active in this period. The denial of naturalisation of my mother (which at the time was thought of as unjust and undeserved) has yielded an unexpected bonus in terms of the records preserved that would otherwise have been destroyed. These records provide an exemplar of how British civil servants carried out their business at the height of the Cold War. Also, while joined-up policy-implementation was an aspiration and to some extent seemed to function well, i.e. collaboration between the Jewish voluntary organisations, police, special branch, passport control, MI5 and so on, errors were made and prejudices were exercised that were not challengeable then though perhaps there is some opportunity now.

#### **2. Struggle over access to sources and documentation (then and now)**

During the period covered by this study, it is possible to see a clear demarcation between the reports on civilians (citizens) that were open to the subjects involved (e.g. registration documents) and those that were not (comments on suitability to enter Britain or for British citizenship). Given that the period was characterised by warfare and global political hostility, the practice of secrecy is not surprising. What is surprising is the inaccessibility of such documentation today, notwithstanding the recent Freedom of Information legislation. My mother's file was original closed until 2069, and the date for open access is now 2046. At present, as her only child and

because I am mentioned in the file, I am the only person allowed to see the entire file, but under the Data Protection Act rather than the Freedom of Information Act. I have had a struggle thus far to gain the information in the public record, and am still denied the names of friends of my mother who were also under surveillance. Whose interests are being prioritised, I want to ask, and who is protecting whom, and for what reasons? How might the rights of family and individuals to know about their past be judged against, in this case, the anachronistic interests of the state? Or is there something else being kept hidden?

### **3. Management (or manipulation) of categories in the interests of the state (then and now)**

Language as we know, particularly that of bureaucracy creates, produces and reflects cultural and political norms. Particularly fascinating is how objects of policy, in this case my mother (and father and her sisters and their husbands) are referred to in documents. Impersonality or desensitisation is the stance largely adopted by, e.g. the German Jewish Aid Committee (GJAC). Here people are principally referred to in the passive e.g. 'entered the country with a HO permit D5811' or, impersonally, as 'woman', e.g. 'woman has blood poisoning – hand in sling' or as 'R' (meaning recipient, refugee???) while other informants e.g. social workers, are referred to by their initials or names. Only from 1946 are names used e.g., 'Mr Frocht and Miss Dinger called' and this then continues until the GJAC record ends (in the late 1940s). The passive voice is also used in the Home Office file but when the detailed discussion of naturalisation takes place, full names are almost always used. Steffi is referred to at the age of 36 as 'girl' in the late 1930s, and also as 'alien' (in 1950, 1953, repeated 1954) 'applicant' (for naturalisation in 1951-5), and 'Jewess' (1955).<sup>9</sup>

### **4. Human consequences**

How might we judge the impact of policies on immigration and citizenship on the individuals involved? First it needs to be noted that the refugees like my mother and her sisters who were accepted into Britain, the USA, France, Belgium, Palestine etc. were the lucky ones. Those that were refused mostly died. Also bureaucracies placed on a war footing are likely to act in favour of the state rather than the individual.

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<sup>9</sup> A further linguistic shift is indicated in a note from the department of Immigration and Nationality at the Home Office dated 1968 stipulating the downgrading of the security classification of the file from 'secret' to 'confidential', probably due to the fading influence of the Cold War and consequent reduced fear of the spread of Communism in Britain.

Against that background, it might be considered that any minor harassment perpetrated against incomers is the price they have to pay for the right to survival. And indeed, that is largely how my mother and her sisters understood their reception in Britain. However, is that good enough? This study shows that arising largely out of innuendo and prejudice (including anti-Semitism/racism, and sexism) on the part of public officials, which was reproduced again and again in documentation, a family was forever split, a child was denied a father and legitimacy, and a law-abiding woman was deprived of the rights to citizenship. And because decisions were taken in secret, there was no space for or right of appeal.

##### **5. Historicity of bureaucratic categories (then and now)**

State self-interest was balanced against humanitarian concern in the British response to the plight of European Jews at the onset of Nazism as Louise London (2000) shows. In fact British generosity to Jewish and other refugees in the 1930s and 1940s has been mythologised, Louise London argues, especially when compared to the actual policies pursued

The relative generous face of British policy towards the Jews is more familiar than its self-interested aspects. Indeed, the tendency to focus almost exclusively on the welcome which Britain gave to Jewish refugees still helps to propagate a number of myths: that refugee policy was more humane than it actually was; that Britain put no limits on aid to persecuted Jews; or even that Britain has never turned its back on genuine refugees (London, 2000: 273).

Thus while some working at Whitehall were compassionate and had genuine concerns about the fate of European Jews, British self-interest consistently sought to limit immigration and the economic cost of refugees – and this policy stance is visible in my mother's case too. Decisions about who should be allowed entry were to an extent random. British officials, for example, categorised Czech Jews as 'economic refugees' in order to distinguish them from other (German) political refugees who were seen as more vulnerable to persecution and therefore more acceptable for refugee status. They rejected the very old and the very young, men more than women (the latter of whom were preferred as domestics), and those who were seen as likely to be a burden on or threat to the state or likely to take jobs from British workers or professionals. Refugee agencies also played their part in choosing who should stay and who not. Thus, as Louise London notes,

Anglo-Jewish leaders favoured German Jews over Austrians and declined responsibility for Jews from Czechoslovakia' (London, 2000: 274).

Also the fear was expressed over and over again by government, civil servants and refugee agencies that too many of the 'wrong' Jews would threaten an explosion of British anti-Semitism.

After the war, notwithstanding the revelation of the full horror and extent of Nazi crimes against them, Jews were still perceived as undesirable immigrants – as in the case of my father! As also a solicitor specialising in immigration law today, Louise London implies that similar policies are in existence currently with regard to immigrants and refugees. In particular, she argues that penalising asylum-seekers who come into the country as visitors and then apply for asylum, pays no regard to the desperate circumstances from which many of them have fled.

#### **6. Xerox (and digital) democracy (since the 1960s)**

On a more positive note, from the 1960s onwards, the development of a technology of duplication of materials (photocopying, internet communication, digitalisation, mobile phone imaging and so forth) has contributed hugely to the capacity of scholars and amateurs to scrutinise and interpret public documents. Access has been democratised in the sense that this has made documents available to a wider group of people. Thus in my work, I have benefited from the photocopier for access to the 11 pages of notes on my mother accumulated by the German Jewish Aid Committee largely in the 1940s, the National Archive website ([www.nationalarchive.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchive.gov.uk)) for (eventual) access to my mother's police file and for a historical background to naturalisation and British citizenship, and the Vad Yashem central database of Holocaust victims for confirmation and details of my grandmother's death in Treblinka ([www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org)). And I am currently tracking down my father's brothers and sisters from the Jewish Records Index for Poland ([www.jewishgen.org](http://www.jewishgen.org)). Emailing as opposed to 'snail-mail' (both of which I have used) has likewise been invaluable for seeking out long-lost relatives, scholars and specialists in similar or related fields of interest, and for gaining speedy access to documents and pictures and thus short-circuiting what has become a lengthy investigative process.

#### **Concluding points**

In conclusion, I wish to make several brief points arising from my study thus far. First, *ordinary is never ordinary*. Rather, the act of research inevitably renders the



ordinary or marginal extra-ordinary, and it seems to me that achieving this transformation is the responsibility of social scientists concerned about equalities and social justice. Second, *individual stories* (including narratives and family histories) *are invaluable* in that they ‘personalise’ and make real, historic events. They thus have important contributions to make to mainstream history as well as being particularly good at catching the public imagination. Third, the message of this story – about *the nature and impact of secrets and lies* and the damage that they do to those involved - is strengthened if we substitute ‘Muslim’ for ‘Jew’ and ‘terrorist’ for ‘Communist’. It is clear that similar examples of injustice are being perpetrated today. So most importantly perhaps, we need to fight to protect and enhance human rights and encourage openness and public access to public documentation; otherwise injustices will continue to be perpetrated without any possibility of redress

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