Part IV
Pathways and transitions

Cycles of incarceration

From the "Third Reich" through British Mandatory Palestine to Mauritius

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In recent years, research on refugees from territories under the German "Third Reich" (1939–45) has become more focused on the Global South. [1],[2] A growing interest in case studies of refugees in British imperial territories is particularly pronounced in the field of exile studies, with some focusing on places of refuge and others on places of forced internment.[3] This article concentrates on a less known case study of 1,581 Jewish men, women and children who fled German-occupied territories,

1 The author would like to thank Tali Nates for her helpful suggestions regarding this paper. This work was made possible thanks to the author's tenure as a Junior Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Center for Holocaust Studies at the Institute for Contemporary History, Munich, Germany; a Phyllis Greenberg Heideman and Richard D. Heideman Fellow at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; a Research Fellow at the International Institute for Holocaust Research, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem; a Rosa Luxemburg Research Fellow at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre; and a Research Fellow of the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah, at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

2 Monica Bohm-Duchen (ed.), Insiders/Outsiders: Refugees from Nazi Europe and Their Contribution to British Visual Culture (London: Lund Humphries, 2019); Monica Bohm-Duchen and Judith Wassiltschenko (eds), Literatur im skandinavischen Exil, 1933 bis heute (Hannover: Wehrhahn, 2019); Swen Steinberg and Anthony Grenville (eds), Refugees from Nazi-Occupied Europe in British Overseas Territories (Leiden – Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2020); Irene Eber, Jewish Refugees in Shanghai 1933–1947: A Selection of Documents (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018).

3 Among others, see: Natalie Eppelsheimer, Roads Less Traveled: German Jewish Exile Experiences in Kenya (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019); Joan G. Roland, The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era (New York: Routledge, 2018); Alexis Rappas, "Jewish Refugees in Cyprus and British Imperial Sovereignty in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1933–1949," Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History 47 (2019) 1: 138–66; Steven Robins, Letters of Stone: From Nazi Germany to South Africa (Cape Town: Penguin Random House, 2016); Shirli Gilbert, From Things Lost: Forgotten Letters and the Legacy of the Holocaust (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2017).

survived a long journey to Haifa and were then deported by the British Mandate authorities in Palestine to the British colony of Mauritius. The deportees spent four years and seven months in the Beau-Bassin Camp before their release and departure from the island in August 1945. Although there have been some commemoration efforts since the 1990s,[4] the Jewish deportation to Mauritius has been largely neglected in most accounts of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

There was no comprehensive research into this deportation prior to the late 1990s. For instance, Dalia Ofer mentioned it only briefly in her prominent historical account of Aliyah Bet, *Escaping the Holocaust: Illegal Immigration to the Land of Israel, 1939–1944* (1990),[5] and her article "The Rescue of European Jewry and Illegal Immigration to Palestine in 1940: Prospects and Reality: Berthold Storfer and the Mossad le'Aliya Bet" (1984).[6] Indeed, for many years, the only detailed account of the deportation was a publication by Aaron Zwergbaum – a young lawyer from Brno with Zionist leanings who served as a leader of the detainees in Mauritius – that appeared in *Yad Vashem Studies* in 1960.[7] It was only in 1998, with the publication of *The Mauritian Shekel* by Geneviève Pitot – a native Mauritian who lived in Germany but formed a close relationship with one of the Jewish detainees on the island – that the first significant research into the deportation finally appeared in print.[8] More recently, Gabriele Anderl's "Auf dem Weg nach Palästina: Interniert auf Mauritius" was included in a comprehensive anthology edited by Margit Franz and Heimo

4 In 2001, Mauritian author Alain Gordon Gentil published his novel Le Voyage de Delcourt about a fictional romance between a young Jewish detainee and a Mauritian boy. The novel was adapted into a play titled Marika est partie in 2014 and performed in Mauritius, France and Germany. In 2007, Mauritian-French author Nathacha Appanah published her novel Le Dernier Frère about a fictional friendship between a Creole boy and a Jewish refugee from Czechoslovakia. A touring exhibition titled Boarding Pass to Paradise curated by Israeli curator Elena Makarova visited several European and Israeli venues between 2005 and 2008. A documentary entitled The Atlantic Drift was made by the Austrian producer Michel Daëron in 2002, and another entitled In the Shadows of Beau Bassin was produced by the South African independent filmmaker Kevin Harris in 2007. An archival collection containing photographs, documents, memoirs, letters and artwork was deposited in the Ghetto Fighters' House Archives, Israel, in 2008. Genèvieve Pitot's book The Mauritian Shekel (see note 7, below, for full reference) was translated into Hebrew in 2014, and the same year the African Jewish Congress established a memorial centre and exhibition in the Mauritian Jewish cemetery garden to commemorate the Mauritian story.

5 Dalia Ofer, Escaping the Holocaust: Illegal Immigration to the Land of Israel, 1939–1944 (Oxford – New York – Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990).

6 Dalia Ofer, "The Rescue of European Jewry and Illegal Immigration to Palestine in 1940: Prospects and Reality: Berthold Storfer and the Mossad le'Aliya Bet," Modern Judaism 4 (1984) 2: 159–81.

7 Aaron Zwergbaum, "Exile in Mauritius," Yad Vashem Studies 4 (1960): 191–257.

8 Genèvieve Pitot, The Mauritian Shekel: The Story of the Jewish Detainees in Mauritius 1940–1945 (Port Louis: VIZAVI, 2017 [1998]).

Halbrainer – *Going East – Going South. Österreichisches Exil in Asien und Afrika* (2014)[9] – and Ronit Frenkel and Kirk B. Sides's article "Exile in Mauritius: Colonial Violence and Indian Ocean Archives" (2016)[10] was published in *Critical Art*. The latter text focuses on the Indian Ocean archive as a lens for thinking about the history of the Holocaust from the Indian Ocean perspective.[11]

This article focuses on the incarceration experiences of a hundred Viennese deportees who were imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp for a few months in 1938–9 and released by the authorities on condition that they would leave German-controlled territory immediately. Therefore, they had already experienced the hardships of racial persecution and internment prior to the voyage that would eventually transport them to an island in the Indian Ocean. However, their escape from National Socialism did not mean their ordeal was over. For now, it was the turn of the British authorities to confine the deportees in squalid conditions behind barbed-wired fences, first in Mandatory Palestine and then in the colony of Mauritius.

It is important to stress that it is not my intention to compare German concentration camps with British internment camps, or National Socialist anti-Semitic policies with British colonial policies. Instead, by recounting in detail the story of this group of refugees, I wish to give a human face to impersonal historical processes that are often addressed as histories of the Holocaust, Jewish displacement, British imperialism, Palestine, and the Second World War. Using a micro-historical approach that incorporates detailed archival documents together with individual memories, testimonies, letters, and diaries, I tease out the deportees' varied experiences during incarceration to shed light on this under-studied episode by exploring the complex nexus of historical processes that played into, and were shaped by, the group's fate.

9 Gabriele Anderl, "Auf dem Weg nach Palästina: Interniert auf Mauritius," in Margit Franz and Heimo Halbrainer (eds), Going East – Going South. Österreichisches Exil in Asien und Afrika (Graz: Clio, 2014), 323–34.

10 Ronit Frenkel and Kirk B. Sides, "Exile in Mauritius: Colonial Violence and Indian Ocean Archives," Critical Arts 30 (2016) 2: 282–94.

11 It is important to stress that many memoirs have been published by ex-detainees in German, English, French and Hebrew since the early 1990s. See, for example: Karl Lenk, The Mauritius Affair: The Boat People of 1940/1941 (Brighton: R. Lenk, 1993); Rachel Springmann-Ribak, Sweet Lemons: Memories from an Internment Camp on Mauritius, 1940–1945 (Tucson, AZ: Wheatmark, 2011); Alfred Heller, Dr Seligmanns Auswanderung: Der schwierige Weg nach Israel (Munich: Beck, 1990).

From Austria to British Mandate Palestine

In 1934, one year after Hitler's rise to power in Germany, the Jewish community in Austria numbered 191,458. Thereafter, over the course of the four years leading up to the National Socialist annexation on 11 March 1938, only 1,739 left the country. More than 90 per cent of those who remained were concentrated in the capital city, Vienna, which meant they constituted the largest Jewish community in the German-speaking world.[12]

Historian Bruce Pauley argues that between the years 1933 and 1938, most of the Jews in Austria perceived National Socialism as a passing phenomenon: "Six decades of anti-Semitic agitation accompanied by next to nothing in the way of concrete anti-Semitic legislation played a central role in giving Austrian Jews a false sense of security."[13] Nevertheless, the persecution of Germany's Jews had a direct impact on Viennese Jewry as the former fled to the city in search of refuge, which forced the community's leaders to make arrangements to support them. Moreover, the Austro-Fascist government implemented its own anti-Semitic policies, including excluding Jews from government positions, banks and insurance companies, and restricting their access to academia. Finally, in 1936, the Austrian authorities started to suppress anti-National Socialist propaganda and granted amnesties to all of the country's imprisoned National Socialists.[14] Therefore, as Doron Rabinovici argues, "during the Austro-Fascist period, the Jewish community had already learned to cooperate with an authoritarian state as a means of protecting its interests."[15]

There were mass celebrations in Vienna following the 1938 "Anschluss," reflecting widespread support for Hitler and National Socialism.[16] Thereafter, the Gestapo oversaw the implementation of anti-Jewish policies in the city, and mass arrests became commonplace. In April 1938, the first transport left for the Dachau concentration camp, near Munich, with 151 deportees, 60 of whom were Jews. Over the next two months, the number of Jews deported to Dachau increased dramatically to 5,000.[17] As anti-Jewish oppression escalated rapidly, the November Pogrom – *Kristallnacht* – was merely one of several peaks in the ongoing brutal destruction of

12 Ilana Fritz Offenberger, The Jews of Nazi Vienna, 1938–1945: Rescue and Destruction (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 2; Doron Rabinovici, Eichmann's Jews: The Jewish Administration of Holocaust Vienna, 1938–1945 (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 17.

13 Bruce F. Pauley, From Prejudice to Persecution: A History of Austrian Anti-Semitism (Chapel Hill – London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 326.

14 Rabinovici, Eichmann's Jews, 22–4.

15 Ibid., 25.

16 Offenberger, The Jews of Nazi Vienna, 16.

17 Rabinovici, Eichmann's Jews, 24, 45.

Austrian Jewry. Following the pogrom, the police arrested a further 6,000 Austrian Jewish men and deported them to Dachau.[18]

Research in the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site archive reveals that at least 100 of the men who were deported to Mauritius in December 1940 had been imprisoned in Dachau for several months in 1938–9. Most of them were originally from Vienna and aged between forty and sixty.[19] Some were Zionists, but others were ignorant of both Zionism and indeed Judaism.[20]

Describing his first impressions of Dachau, twenty-six-year-old Simon Thieberg recalled, "The camp was surrounded with wires which were electrified and watch towers with machine guns on the top […] I was given a red and yellow star and a number, officially becoming a prisoner, not a person."[21] Rabbi Bela Fischer, who was deported to the camp on 23 June 1938 and later became one of the deportees to Mauritius, sarcastically recalled in his memoir:

> I admired the organization that was able to provide accommodation for such a large number of newcomers. The hut-prefects, Aryan prisoners themselves, took charge of a certain number of us. First, they gave us water to drink and a "one-pot-dish" which was not too bad after our long fast. Then they led us to the barbers' where they shaved us and cut our hair quite short […] Then we got a number and a Jew's distinctive mark i.e. a red and yellow David-Star, fixed both at the left side of the breast and on the trousers at the left knee.[22]

In addition to the hair-shaving, many memoirs and testimonies mention Dachau's daily roll-call. For instance, Chava Eva Guez, who was three years old when her father was released from the camp and returned to Vienna, recalled:

> I remember that when my father came back from Dachau, he was very bloated. My grandmother couldn't recognize him, and when she opened the door, she said: "Sir, what do you need?" I stood aside and said, "Dad, where's your hair?" because they shaved his head. In those days, the Red Cross was still allowed to visit the camps, so they put Brom[ide] into the food, which inflated them greatly […] He didn't say much about Dachau, however, he told us that it was snowing,

18 Pauley, From Prejudice to Persecution, 286–8.

19 All personal information, including full name, date of birth, hometown, date of imprisonment in Dachau and date of release, was extracted from the Prisoners Database at the archive of the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site.

20 Zwergbaum, "Exile in Mauritius," 3–4.

21 Testimony of Simon Thieberg, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, 23 April 1995.

22 Bela Fischer, "My Memories of Nazism," KZ-Gedenkstätte Dachau, Aktennummer 956, p. 5.

> and that he had to stand for hours in line, and he suffered from it as his feet and hands froze, and it greatly damaged his health.[23]

Rabbi Fischer similarly recalled, "They often kept us standing rigidly at attention five and more hours on the roll-call-square in any weather, when the 'Fuhrer' held one of his speeches, and at that time he was very fond of speaking and he spoke for hours without end."[24]

Thirty-three-year-old Hans Klein was also deported to Dachau in early June 1938. More than three months later, he was transferred to Buchenwald, where he was imprisoned for almost a year. He recalled:

> On 1 September 1939, I was taken [from Buchenwald] to the Gestapo, the office that had requested me. I was held in the Gestapo prison [sic!] in Rossauerlände for several more weeks, during which I had neither the opportunity to wash nor to shave. I was finally released on 19 October. However, I had to report continuously to the Gestapo office in Prinz-Eugen-Strasse [sic!]. When I was asked there when I would be leaving the country, I explained that I hoped to be ready in four weeks […] I remained free in Vienna, but, as before, had to report regularly to the Gestapo office, which continued to plague me with threats if I did not manage to leave the country as quickly as possible.[25]

Indeed, many of the Viennese Jews who were imprisoned in German concentration camps in 1938–9 had already secured emigration papers for themselves and their families. Therefore, to encourage Jewish emigration, Adolf Eichmann, who founded the Central Office for Jewish Emigration in Vienna in August 1938, approved their release on condition that they could – and would – leave immediately.[26] Furthermore, in 1939, Eichmann recruited the Austrian-Jewish financial advisor Berthold Storfer to head the Committee for Jewish Overseas Transports. By March 1940, Storfer was organising and coordinating all illegal immigration to Palestine.[27] He handled the Committee's financial affairs, negotiated with Jewish organisations, the German authorities and local travel agencies across the "Third Reich," and finally became the sole organiser of European Jewry's River Danube escape routes.[28]

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23 Testimony of Chava Eva Guez regarding her experiences in Vienna and Mauritius, V.T/4780, Yad Vashem Testimonies.

24 Fischer, "My Memories of Nazism," 7.

25 Hans Klein, "Meine Auswanderung in die Zwangs-Internierung von Mauritius," File 636, Wiener Library Collection, Yad Vashem Archives.

26 Rabinovici, Eichmann's Jews, 60.

27 Ibid., 83; Anderl, "Auf dem Weg nach Palästina," 324.

28 Ofer, "The Rescue of European Jewry," 175.

In the summer of 1940, Storfer chartered four Danube riverboats and three ships to transport 3,500 Jewish refugees to British Mandate Palestine.[29] On 4 September, 820 refugees from Prague and Brno along with 800 from Vienna and elsewhere who had been registered for Storfer's mass evacuation left the Austrian capital on two boats – *Schönbrunn* and *Melk*. A few hours later, they arrived in Bratislava, where another 1,880 refugees and two further boats – *Uranus* and *Helios* – were waiting to join the convoy. The four boats set sail the following day, and a week later they arrived at Tulcea, in Romania, where the refugees were transferred onto three ships – the *Atlantic*, the *Milos* and the *Pacific*.[30]

None of the 3,500 refugees had an entrance visa for Mandatory Palestine – where a strict immigration quota had been in place since the publication of a White Paper on the subject the previous year – so the British authorities regarded them as illegal immigrants.[31] Therefore, upon their arrival in Haifa in early November, the passengers on board the *Milos* and the *Pacific* were forcibly transferred to another ship – the *Patria* – for deportation to the British colony of Mauritius.[32] The *Atlantic* arrived in Haifa a few weeks later, on 24 November, whereupon the authorities started to load its passengers onto the *Patria*, too. However, overnight, the Yishuv's underground military organisation, the Haganah, smuggled a bomb onto the *Patria*, and at 9 a.m. on 25 November, while most of the *Atlantic*'s passengers were still awaiting their transfer, it exploded, killing more than 260 Jewish refugees.[33]

The British authorities permitted those who had been on board the *Patria* to remain in Palestine and transported them to the Atlit detention camp, near Haifa.[34] Meanwhile, some of the *Atlantic*'s younger passengers were sent to a jail in Acre, while the rest were interned in a separate part of the Atlit camp.[35] Years later, Simon Thieberg recalled his arrival in Haifa:

> [T]he British took us in a camp and interrogated us. One of the interrogators made a remark – "We can treat you like the Nazis treat you" because it was war and they thought maybe there were spies among us […] Some of the youngsters including me were sent to Acre, where members of the Irgun [another Jewish paramilitary organisation] were imprisoned too, under strict conditions. There,

29 Anderl, "Auf dem Weg nach Palästina," 324.

30 Moshe Silberhaft and Suzanne Belling, The Traveling Rabbi: My African Tribe (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2012), 298.

31 Lauren Elise Apter, "Disorderly Decolonization: The White Paper of 1939 and the End of British Rule in Palestine," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2008, 136.

32 Anderl, "Auf dem Weg nach Palästina," 324.

33 Ofer, Escaping the Holocaust, 31–2; Arieh J. Kochavi, Displaced Persons and International Politics (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1992), 8, 42.

34 Ofer, Escaping the Holocaust, 36; Zwergbaum, "Exile in Mauritius," 203.

35 Anderl, "Auf dem Weg nach Palästina," 325.

> we were held for seven days […] The British Colonial Police treated us like enemies, especially the young ones.[36]

Those who were sent to Atlit reported similar treatment. The camp contained about 100 barracks and tents, and barbed-wire fences were used to divide it into discrete sections, including the one that separated the *Atlantic*'s passengers from their fellow-refugees who had been on the *Patria* at the time of the explosion.[37] Aaron Zwergbaum wrote in his diary:

> All indications are that our stay is going to be a long one. Blankets and cutlery are handed out, interrogations – yet superficial – are conducted, personal details are taken down, and after two days the luggage is handed out […] Unfortunately it is quite impossible to establish any contact with the people from outside. We can talk across the fence with the *Patria* people and are happy to see many acquaintances.[38]

Contrary to Zwergbaum's prediction, just two weeks later, on 9 December 1940, he and the rest of the camp's 1,580 *Atlantic* refugees were returned to the port of Haifa, where they were loaded onto two ships – the *Johan de Witt* and the *New Zealand* – and deported to Mauritius.[39]

Josef Adler, a refugee from Czechoslovakia, was just twenty years old when he and the other deportees were evacuated from Atlit:

> The police officers took the men one by one and forcibly led them to the cars. Those who tried to resist were violently thrown into trucks. Most of the young men were completely naked. We went out in a convoy of trucks to the port of Haifa, and they divided us to two ships […] the men were brought down to the bottom of the ships, the heat was unbearable and as we passed through the Red Sea it became even worse.[40]

During their transfer from Atlit to Haifa, the refugees were escorted by a military convoy and forced to undergo what the British authorities termed a "customs examination," in the course of which their watches, glasses, cutlery and other personal belongings were confiscated.[41] Moreover, as Zwergbaum wrote in his diary, "During

36 Testimony of Simon Thieberg.

37 Pitot, The Mauritian Shekel, 120.

38 Aaron Zwergbaum, "Aliyah from Bratislava to Mauritius: The Journey from Presburg to Mauritius," US Holocaust Memorial Museum Archive [USHMM].

39 Anderl, "Auf dem Weg nach Palästina," 326.

40 Josef Adler, "Memories of my Life before and during the Deportation to Mauritius," Mauritius Exiles Collection 6501, Ghetto Fighters' House Archives, Israel.

41 Zwergbaum, "Exile in Mauritius," 203.

the first days [at sea,] the refugees were kept in the holds of the ships which were unbearably hot […] On one of the ships headed to Mauritius the men's hair was cropped close, not for hygienic reasons, but in order to annoy and to humiliate them."[42] This measure was all too traumatically familiar for the ex-prisoners of Dachau.

Moshe Shertok (Sharett), who was secretary of the Jewish Agency's Political Department at the time, described the deportation as "a horrible act that did not exist in the history of the Land of Israel" and the Beau-Bassin Camp on Mauritius as "a British Dachau."[43] It is highly unlikely that Shertok intended to equate the British detention camp with the German concentration camp; rather, it seems his aim was simply to shed light on the British authorities' harsh treatment of the Jewish refugees. As I explain elsewhere, British colonial documents dating from the second half of 1940 suggest that both the Colonial Office and the High Commissioner for Jerusalem considered the ongoing arrival of Jewish refugees as an immediate threat to security in the Middle East as it would increase the likelihood of a fifth column in Palestine, given the Germans' encouragement of – and active involvement in – Jewish emigration from their territories.[44] For instance, in a telegram sent to the governor of Trinidad on 14 November 1940, Lord Lloyd, Britain's secretary of state for the colonies, argued that the government was facing an urgent problem of "disposal of considerable number of Jews from Central Europe who are expected shortly to reach Palestine coast with a view to illegal entry."[45] He continued that the governor of Mauritius had already agreed to provide accommodation for a considerable number of people and asked if Trinidad would be willing to contribute to the war effort by doing the same. He described the refugees as "Jewish internees [who] would have to be kept under restraint and this would involve the camp being surrounded by barbed wire and the provision of guards […] [because they] might include enemy agents."[46]

Lloyd's stipulation that the camp must be guarded and encircled with barbed wire reflects the perception among some British politicians and officials that the Jewish émigrés might be enemy agents who should be restrained and detained, as opposed to refugees who had escaped brutal persecution. Although Prime Minister

42 Ibid., 204.

43 Mapai meeting, 15 December 1940, quoted in Ahuva Malkin and Eli Shaltiel (eds), Making of Policy: The Diaries of Moshe Sharett (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1979), Vol. 5: 144–5; Gerald Ziedenberg, Blockade: The Story of Jewish Immigration to Palestine (Bloomington, ID: AuthorHouse, 2011), 67.

44 Roni Mikel-Arieli, "The Jewish Question in the British Colonial Imagination: The Case of the Deportation to Mauritius (1940–1945)," Jewish Social Studies (forthcoming).

45 Telegram from Secretary of State for the Colonies to Governor of Trinidad, 14 November 1940, Prime Minister's Office Papers 1940–1945, R98.210 228, Bavarian State Library, Munich, Germany.

46 Ibid.

Winston Churchill argued that "it is very unlikely that these refugees would include enemy agents," [47] Lloyd insisted:

> There is evidence to show that these voyages are organized and financed by Jewish agencies with the active assistance of the German authorities. Without such assistance the traffic could not be carried on at all. Is it indeed likely that the Nazis would neglect so good an opportunity of getting their agents into the Middle East?[48]

Indeed, as Tony Kushner argues, while the British government's policies were not anti-Semitic, some governmental officials not only held anti-Semitic views but also had sufficient authority to influence the government's response to Jewish immigration to its territories.[49] Thus, the deportation of more than 1,500 Jewish civilians to Mauritius may be considered one example of British colonial officials' racist perceptions driving the distorted implementation of London's colonial policies.

Interned in the Indian Ocean

The island of Mauritius, in the Indian Ocean, was once the capital of French power in the East as well as the base from which corsairs pursued British merchants as they plied their trade between India and Europe.[50] British imperial control of the island was established after an invasion in 1810 and continued until 12 March 1968, when Mauritius achieved independence.[51] During the Second World War, two-thirds of the local population were of Indo-Pakistani origin, primarily descendants of indentured labourers who had been shipped to the island to work on sugar plantations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; a quarter were Creole (mixed French and African descent); a small number were Chinese in origin; and there was a tiny yet powerful Franco-Mauritian elite.[52]

On 20 November 1940, the local daily newspaper, *Advance*, reported an announcement that Sir Bede Clifford, the island's governor, had made during the

47 Telegram from Churchill to Lord Lloyd, 20 November 1940, Prime Minister's Office Papers 1940–1945, R98.210 228, Bavarian State Library, Munich, Germany.

48 Telegram from Lord Lloyd to Churchill, 21 November 1940, Prime Minister's Office Papers 1940–1945, R98.210 228, Bavarian State Library, Munich, Germany.

49 Tony Kushner, The Persistence of Prejudice: Anti-Semitism in British Society during the Second World War (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 160.

50 Ashley Jackson, War and Empire in Mauritius and the Indian Ocean (London: Palgrave, 2001), 325.

51 Richard B. Allen, Selves, Freedmen and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

52 Anderl, "Auf dem Weg nach Palästina," 326.

previous day's meeting of the Legislative Council: "refugees shall be arriving in Mauritius." The paper clarified that the new arrivals would be "Jews, citizens of Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Germany who have been expelled from these countries."[53] However, the report continued, the deportees were "persons with an average or high standard of education and living which is why it was not contemplated to allow them to stay in Mauritius after the war. Thus, they cannot be referred to as refugees or deportees, but rather as 'detainees.'"[54] The following month, on 23 December, the British authorities on Mauritius issued a local ordinance that defined the Jewish refugees as "European Detainees," authorised the governor to detain them in the colony and equipped him with the tools he needed to discourage contact between the local population and the new arrivals.[55] Specifically, any Mauritian who attempted to offer assistance to the "detainees" risked a two-year prison sentence.[56]

On 26 December 1940, after a seventeen-day voyage on two overcrowded ships, 849 men, 635 women and 96 children disembarked at the harbour of Port Louis, the capital of Mauritius.[57] Two days later, they were all transferred to the Beau-Bassin central prison,[58] which had been hastily converted into a detention camp with new boundaries, administration and regulations.[59] The official documents that initiated this process left no room for doubt: the new arrivals would be prisoners, detained in a secure facility and obliged to respect a clear disciplinary code. They were not free people. Thus, Simon Thieberg's first impressions were correct: "It was a jail, a big jail with very high walls […] It wasn't like a German concentration camp, but we had no freedom […] we each got a cell, but the door was open."[60]

53 "Le Gouverneur annonce que des refugies viendront à Maurice," Advance, 20 November, 1940, 1.

54 Ibid., 1.

55 "The European Detainees (Control) Ordinance 1940," Ordinance No. 57 of 1940, 23 December 1940, 112–13, The Mauritius Gazette, Mauritius National Archive.

56 "The European Detainees (Control) Ordinance 1940 – Boundaries of Detainment Camp," Government Notice No. 281, 114, The Mauritius Gazette, Mauritius National Archive.

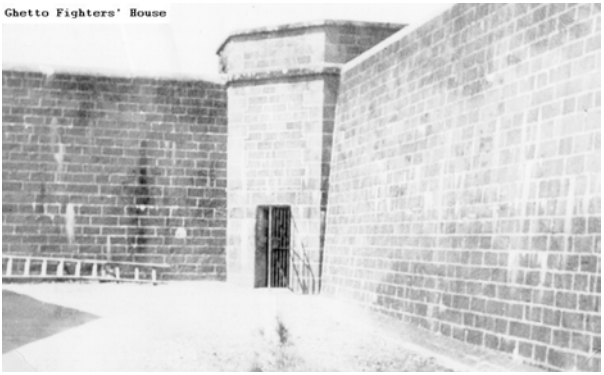
57 To be precise, 1,581 refugees arrived at Port Louis. However, a few days later, Anita Hirschmann, a thirty-year-old woman originally from Germany, died of typhoid. See Pitot, The Mauritian Shekel, 112.

58 Anderl, "Auf dem Weg nach Palästina," 327.

59 "The European Detainees (Control) Ordinance 1940 – Boundaries of Detainment Camp"; "The European Detainees (Organization and Administration) Regulations, 1941," "The European Detainees (Performance of Detainment Area Duties) Regulations, 1941" and "The European Detainees (Discipline) Regulations, 1941," The Mauritius Gazette, Mauritius National Archive.

60 Testimony of Simon Thieberg.

Figure 1: The Beau-Bassin Prison, Mauritius



Source: Mauritius Exiles Collection, Ghetto Fighters' House Archive, Israel.

The high walls of the main prison compound meant that it was a simple matter to segregate one group of prisoners from the other: while the men were accommodated in the original prison cells, the women and children were housed in a compound of recently erected huts.[61] In his first annual report of January 1942, the detainees' designated representative, Aaron Zwergbaum, suggested that "the lack of freedom […] and the impossibility of leading a normal family and sex life" were the two main hardships of camp life.[62] Only in July of that year, after a long struggle, were wives finally granted permission to visit the men's camp at certain hours of the day.[63]

Two days after the *Johan de Witt* and the *New Zealand* docked in Port Louis, *Advance* published an editorial that stated: "The arrival of the detainees in Mauritius shows the complexity of the problems which have arisen because of the war. The Jewish problem is an example of how the British administration tackles it with efficiency."[64] Here, it is important to stress that the Franco-Mauritian elite were still a powerful minority on the island because a small group of families' pragmatic decision to cooperate with the British Crown after 1810 had enabled them to retain

61 "The European Detainees (Organization and Administration) Regulations, 1941," "The European Detainees (Performance of Detainment Area Duties) Regulations, 1941" and "The European Detainees (Discipline) Regulations, 1941," The Mauritius Gazette, Mauritius National Archive.

62 Zwergbaum, "The First Year in Mauritius," USHMM, 24.

63 Zwergbaum, "The Second Year in Mauritius," USHMM, 7–10.

64 "The Detainees," Advance, 30 December 1940, pp. 80–81.

control over the local sugar industry. Therefore, their positions were usually in line with those of the British officials.[65]

The editorial also asserted that the detainees had received a warm welcome from the Mauritian population: "We have seen the detainees as they pass our office. Thousands of Mauritians had gathered to extend to them the love and welcome that are the inevitable characteristics of this island home of ours. They [the detainees] looked cheerful and we could see on their face a glow of hope."[66] This outpouring of affection is confirmed in many of the detainees' own memoirs, diaries and oral testimonies. However, all stressed that this unexpected welcome was primarily extended by the island's Indo-Pakistani and Creole populations, so they interpreted it as an act of colonial resistance. For instance, in his account of the voyage, Zwergbaum wrote, "It was overwhelming to see how friendly, even enthusiastically we were greeted by the Coloured. What a contrast, remembering what we had suffered under Whites in Europe!"[67] Similarly, Amnon Klein, who escaped from Vienna with his mother when he was just twelve years old, recalled,

> The local population threw flowers on the road as we passed on our way to the camp. Apparently, they thought that we were German prisoners, and it turned out that they hated the British so much that they preferred the Germans over them […] [F]or me, as the son of a former prisoner of the notorious German camp, Dachau, it was an ambivalent feeling to be considered German.[68]

A few weeks later, on 13 January 1941, an official delegation visited Beau-Bassin and subsequently published its report in the local newspaper. According to the article, "the Detainees' camp has been transformed from a prison house into a nice-looking village where every little thing is provided to make these victims of the Nazis as happy as possible. It looks like a miniature official world where nearly every department has its representative."[69] In reality, though, it was anything but "a happy village," as the large number of detainees who were admitted to the island's mental hospital testifies.[70] Zwergbaum's first annual report draws attention to this issue,

65 Tijo Salverda, "Sugar, Sea and Power: How Franco-Mauritians Balance Continuity and Creeping Decline of Their Elite Position," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, VU University Amsterdam, 2010, 1–2.

66 "The Detainees."

67 Zwergbaum, "Aliyah from Bratislava to Mauritius," 20.

68 Testimony of Amnom Klein, 15 July 2003, Record Group 0.3, File 12247, Yad Vashem Testimony Archive.

69 "With the Detainees," Advance, 5 February 1941, pp. 85–9.

70 See, for example: "Grievances," Advance, 7 January 1941; "Au Camp des internes," Cerneen, 13 January 1941; "Les Internes," Le Mauricien, 17 January 1941; "Au Conseil," Advance, 6 February 1941.

particularly among men who had endured periods of imprisonment in German concentration camps:

> If one asks what is worst about the entire detention, it is one's state of mind. Life here stresses and strains one's nerves. Sometimes it is the walls and being locked up that is hard to take, then you are worn out with worry about relatives, you get depressed that you are wasting the best years of your life here, then again it is the uncertainty of the future. For some, particularly among the detainees who had been imprisoned in German concentration camps, this state of mind manifests itself in a state of apathy. Others try to get over it by fooling around, and still others become increasingly nervous and irritable.[71]

During its visit to Beau-Bassin, the official delegation paid a visit to the camp school, where an Austro-Jewish teacher was delivering a Hebrew lesson. The delegation's account stated:

> As we looked into his eyes, we felt how miserable this patriarch must be. Snatched from his house, driven from his country, dispossessed of his wealth, hunted from one place to another, he was a man who to all appearances was a great scholar, and yet undergoing such suffering endured with a fortitude that could move the most indifferent to depths of pity. He was originally from Vienna where life was smiling [on] him and when came Herr von Hitler, he was sent to the brutal Nazi camp which he described as the tragedy of his martyrdom. The sight of that intellectual was itself […] proof of the tyranny which is let loose on all conquered peoples by the forces of Hitlerism and no wonder that when we ask[ed] a man of age if he was a German, he spat three time[s] on the ground ejaculating each time "German no people."[72]

In its concluding remarks, the article declared, "By providing a shelter to these detainees, Mauritius is helping the Empire's war effort in a manner which should not be underrated. It has more value in one sense than other material contributions, for we are all aware what a great danger [it] is to leave refugees in the war zones."[73] However, while the delegation's report acknowledged the hardships the detainees had suffered in their homelands, including incarceration in German concentration camps, it neglected to mention that these unfortunate people were now incarcerated once again in a camp where they were treated as detainees rather than refugees. They lived in a prison compound, their freedom was highly restricted and their fate was unknown.

71 Aaron Zwergbaum, "The First Year in Mauritius," USHMM, 26.

72 "With the Detainees," p. 87.

73 "With the Detainees II," Advance, 6 February 1941, pp. 90–94, at 94.

The captives' plight was amply represented in a letter that Dr Alfred Heller – a detainee from Munich who had spent a month in Dachau in late 1938 – wrote to a Mr Gitlin of Cape Town, South Africa, two months after his arrival on Mauritius:

> We must have a ground to stand on. Nowhere is there a ground, history and destiny which would inspire us more than Palestine. Our brethren there have shown what they are able to achieve on their own ground, even without freedom. We are sitting in the wilderness, dreaming. You don't think, Sir, that telling dreams is useful, do you? And yet, in a dream there is sometimes a spark; something sometimes catches fire. Maybe somebody perceives that there is a spark and somewhere a gleam of hope may flare up.[74]

A comparable sense of despair is evident in an April 1942 report by the South African Sub-committee on Mauritius.[75] After a meeting in Durban with a group of Czech volunteers who had been released from Beau-Bassin in order to join the Allied forces in the Middle East, Mr J. Meyer, the sub-committee's chairman, stated,

> I have come to the conclusion that the greatest mistake committed by the Imperial Government was to transplant indiscriminately a heterogeneous group of people from Central Europe to a tropical island [administered by] a colonial government that could not possibly be expected to understand the mental and physical background of the people who were entrusted to their charge by the accidents of war.[76]

In addition to suffering mental distress, many of the refugees arrived on the island in poor physical health.[77] Thirteen-year-old Arie Leopold Keller, from Danzig, wrote in his diary: "When we arrived in Mauritius, many of us were sick and weak. Every day we had to bury at least one deceased person."[78] The detainees' frailty is

74 From a letter by Dr Alfred Heller to Mr Gitlin in Cape Town, South Africa, 20 February 1940, on display in A Brief History with Illustrations, Beau-Bassin Jewish Detainees Memorial & Information Centre, Mauritius.

75 While the Jewish institutions in South Africa were unable to stop the closing of the country's gates to Jewish refugees, they made enormous efforts to assist those refugees who arrived in southern Africa. The South African Jewish Board of Deputies, together with the Council of German Jewry in London, formed a committee in Johannesburg to dispense relief, while the Council for Refugee Settlement was established and eventually extended its activities to Mauritius. On the establishment of the relief committee, see "Notes on Refugee Funds Raised in the Union," 2–3, Austrian and Polish Relief Fund, Report 1941, ARCH 216.1, File 4, SAJBD Archive, Holocaust-Related Records, USHMM.

76 Minutes of Mauritius Sub-committee meeting, Johannesburg, South Africa, 27 May 1942, Rochlin Archive.

77 Anderl, "Auf dem Weg nach Palästina," 328.

78 Arie Leopold Keller, Mauritius diary, File 40284, Mauritius Exiles Collection, Ghetto Fighters' House Archives, Israel.

also reflected in the local authorities' regular reports to the secretary of state for the colonies, which include the names of those who have died over the previous month, cause of death, age and nationality. Close analysis of these lists reveals that the cause of death was usually typhoid, although some died from malaria, with cases of the latter increasing over time.[79]

Notwithstanding their mental and physical suffering, however, it is important to note that the detainees managed to establish and maintain a rich cultural and social routine within the compound. There were two active synagogues, schools, adult education centres, youth movements, theatre groups, a Zionist association, a library, a newspaper, coffee shops and even a soccer team.[80] As Zwergbaum wrote in his January 1942 report, "Many different various events took place here, and one must realize there was no censorship. Furthermore, all religious customs could be observed without any obstacles. The recreation room was very attractive for stage productions, but then the radio redirected a lot of interest away from the theatre."[81]

Detainees' manufactured toys, bags and other goods out of recycled paper and wood in the camp's workshops. These products were then displayed in a showroom in the camp's external office building and sold to locals.[82] Moreover, in late 1941, some of the skilled detainees were granted temporary permits to work outside the camp as electricians and telephone engineers, in cosmetics and toy factories, and as music, art and language teachers in the local primary schools.[83] Thus, the strict segregation of the detainees from the local community, which the imperial authorities had deemed essential less than a year earlier, was partially abandoned to the two groups' mutual benefit.

79 See, for example: Letter No. 28 from the Governor of Mauritius to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 10 February 1941; Letter No. 63 from the Governor of Mauritius to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 26 March 1941; Letter No. 92 from the Governor of Mauritius to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 2 May 1941; Letter No. 136 from the Governor of Mauritius to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 6 June 1941; all in Out Correspondence Colonial Section, Mauritius National Archive.

80 Pitot, The Mauritian Shekel, 161, 165–7; Anderl, "Auf dem Weg nach Palästina," 329–30.

81 Zwergbaum, "The First Year in Mauritius," 34.

82 Minutes of Mauritius Sub-committee meeting, 16 February 1942, Johannesburg, South Africa, the Rochlin Archive.

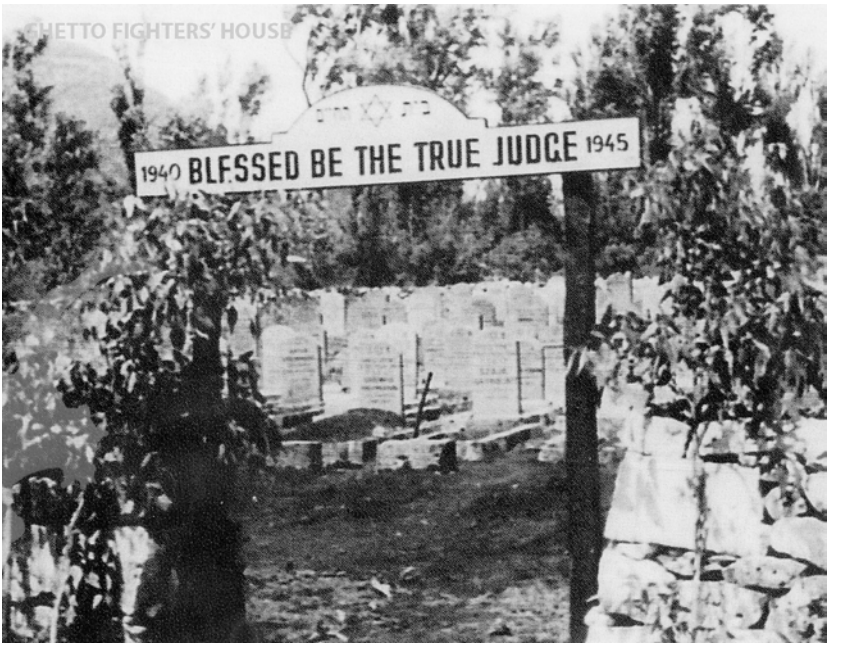
83 "Des Experts," Le Mauricien, 2 February 1942; Anderl, "Auf dem Weg nach Palästina," 327, 330.

Figure 2: A group of men praying at one of the synagogues set up in the Beau-Bassin camp

Source: Mauritius Exiles Collection, Ghetto Fighters' House Archive, Israel.

On 21 February 1945, the island's governor informed the detainees that the British authorities had decided to allow them to enter Palestine. However, it was another six months before the refugees finally left Mauritius. The following year, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies acquired Saint Martin Jewish Cemetery, on the outskirts of Beau-Bassin, where 126 of the detainees were buried. Five of the dead were members of the Viennese group who had been imprisoned in Dachau in 1938–9.

Figure 3: Saint Martin Jewish Cemetery, Mauritius, where 126 of the Jewish detainees are buried



Source: Mauritius Exiles Collection, Ghetto Fighters' House Archive, Israel.

Conclusion

More than two years after the deportation of 1,581 Jews to Mauritius, at the opening of the 10th Session of the Assembly of Representatives in Jerusalem on 9 March 1942, Moshe Shertok proclaimed,

> Mauritius and Dachau are completely different, as different as light and darkness. In terms of the regime, the treatment, the public responsibility and, most importantly, in terms of the prospect to stay healthy and alive […] However, from a Jewish perspective, Mauritius is as oppressive as Dachau! Both in Dachau and on Mauritius we are imprisoned as Jews, we are thrown into these camps and imprisoned there as Jews.[84]

84 Moshe Shertok speech at the 10th Session of the Assembly of Representatives, Jerusalem, 9 March 1942, quoted in Moshe Sharett Political Struggle 1942 January–May: An Anthology of Speeches and Documents, edited by Yaakov Sharett (Tel Aviv: The Society to Commemorate Moshe Sharett, 2009), Vol. 1, Part 1: 251.

Indeed, it is impossible to equate the physical conditions in Dachau with those in Beau-Bassin; nor should anyone draw parallels between the two camps' regimens or their treatment of their inhabitants. Nevertheless, as this article has demonstrated, some comparisons are inevitable and justified. The Jews who were deported to Mauritius had already experienced the rise of Hitlerism in Europe, including the National Socialists' occupation of their homelands, the passing of anti-Jewish policies, the November Pogrom and ongoing racial persecution that, in many cases, led to their incarceration in concentration camps. However, because they were fortunate enough to escape anti-Semitic persecution in Central Europe, their stories have been omitted from the vast majority of studies of the Second World War and even the Holocaust. Yet, these Jewish refugees eventually became victims of another form of persecution – colonial persecution in a detention camp on a remote outpost of the British Empire in the Indian Ocean. Of course, most of them still had friends and relatives in German-occupied territories, and the imperial authorities were not averse to implying that they should be grateful that they had ended up in Mauritius instead. As Aaron Zwergbaum astutely pointed out in his account of his time in Beau-Bassin,

> It was perhaps symbolical that the detainees were put into cells where before them criminals had served long terms of imprisonment […] It was sometimes discreetly suggested to the detainees and at other times they were told quite bluntly, that they ought to compare their position with the fate of the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe […] There was undoubtedly an immense difference between the detention camp in Mauritius and a German concentration camp, but such comparison was an insult: it implied that the Jews are not entitled to equal rights like other people but ought to be content with any status that was better than outright persecution.[85]

85 Zwergbaum, "Exile in Mauritius," 210–11.