

GERMAN-SPEAKING JEWISH REFUGEES AND THEIR INTEGRATION INTO THE POST-45 CANADIAN SOCIETY

After the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, Austrian and German refugees from Nazism, who initially had found refuge in Great Britain, became “enemy aliens”. In the course of the war (July 1940) approximately 6,750 prisoners of war, merchant seamen and civilian internees were deported as aliens from Great Britain to Canada; among them about 2,000 refugees from Nazism and a few from Fascist Italy, almost all Jewish. This was the biggest group of refugees from Nazism that arrived in Canada, but they came as “enemy aliens” and were interned alongside POWs, Nazi sympathizers and Italian Fascists in camps located in Eastern Canada.

The research aims to deepen the fragmentary knowledge about this special refugee group, which Patrick Farges describes as a “Schicksalsgemeinschaft im Exil” (“companions of fate in exile”). An important part is the evaluation of the composition of the group (e.g. age, civil status, place of last residence before flight, nationality, education, occupation both before and after emigration). This is based on a database analysis of an unexplored collection of 1,800 index cards of Jewish refugees from Austria, Germany and Italy from the Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives (Montreal). In order to complete biographical data of each interned refugee including information on their subsequent lives (so far as it is possible) further sources from other archives and institutions will be researched and gathered. A first evaluation of the index-card-collection shows that nearly two thirds of the interned refugees were expelled from Germany, about one third from Austria and ten men from Italy. The deported refugees were very young, about a third was only between 16 and 20 years old, two thirds of the deportees had been under the age of 30.

But behind these abstract figures relating to certain characteristics of the group of interned refugees, different individual destinies are hidden. Up to today, only a few stories of ex-internees are known, while most are forgotten. Previous research has concentrated mainly on those who belonged to the very young generation and who later achieved prominence in the academic, cultural and professional fields. Main reason for that is that the subject has received little attention in exile studies and historical research; qualitative research was conducted rather late, wherefore mainly the experiences and memories of the younger generation of such refugees could be documented and researched. Therefore, it is a big concern in the ongoing research to reconstruct also live stories of older interned refugees in order to create a more differentiated picture of the refugee group and their subsequent lives. In that context, also migration movements need to be investigated, because a part of former refugees later moved on to the United States, to Israel or to other countries, while only a small share returned to their native countries in Europe.

The research aims to deepen our existing knowledge about interned refugees from Nazism in Canada, if possible to create a collective biography, and thus to reduce the research desideratum. An in-depth research of that special group of German-speaking refugees in Canada and their subsequent lives seems likely to be fruitful not only in regard to refugee and exile studies or Jewish history, but also in the field of migration research and memory studies.