The Holocaust and Wales –
Episode 3: Life in Wales During the War

Transcript

Morris Brodie: In July 1939, a young Renate Collins, from Czechoslovakia, arrives at the home of her new foster parents in Porth, South Wales.

Renate Collins: And when I came to Porth, my foster mum, she took my plaits out, washed my hair and found I had ringlets, so of course, ringlets I had to have after that, and when she held me on her lap, I wondered what she was doing [...] Mum was quite loving, because she looked after everybody in the church, you know, if they were ill, she'd go and see them, and so I had a...a first Welsh cwtch.

Morris Brodie: 1st September 1939. Germany invades Poland. At the same time, a group of German-Jewish children travel from London to Abergele, in North Wales, to begin training for their new lives as agricultural workers. Herman Rothman is among them.

Herman Rothman: On the day war broke out, I was actually on my way to Gwrych Castle [...] Children of my age did not understand the full impact of war. It's an experience which you learn then very much the hard way [...] For most of us, we thought, in any case, it's not going to last very long, two or three months, and then there will be peace, and everything will be back to normal.

Morris Brodie: The start of the Second World War changed the landscape of Europe for Jewish refugees. Escape to Britain became much more difficult, and as the war progressed, those who had managed to find sanctuary came under suspicion as 'enemy aliens'. Added to this, a slow drip of information coming from friends and relatives on the Continent hinted at the horrors to come.

I'm Morris Brodie, historian at Aberystwyth University. In this third episode of The Holocaust and Wales, we look at how refugees adapted to their new lives in Wales. How did the local community welcome them? What challenges, and opportunities, did they face? And how did their status change as the war progressed?

Adjusting to life in a different country after fleeing their homes and support networks was a traumatic experience for many refugees. The change required was quick, often too quick. Des Golten, from Slovakia, remembers his mother's difficulties after arriving in Cardiff.

Des Golten: Well, you see I remember, when we came, and [...] my mother was very, very upset, and she was crying all the time because she felt that she's now in a different country. She doesn't speak the language. She doesn't know anybody. And she felt very left on her own.

Morris Brodie: Many Continental refugees were from well-to-do, middle or upper-class backgrounds, and unused to the more rural life found in Wales. Gaby Koppel's parents were from Germany and Hungary.

Gaby Koppel: Between my parents I think one got a sense of Cardiff being a little bit of a backwater. You know, obviously they'd lived in major European capital cities, in my dad's case, Berlin and Prague, in my mother's case, Budapest and Paris. My mother definitely felt, you know, it was a little bit Hicksville, and [...] she had lots of stories about that kind of thing, where she said she went into a wine shop and asked for a rosé and they like, didn't – it was a wine specialist – they'd never heard of it, they didn't know what a rosé was. And that seemed to encapsulate, you know, what Wales was like.

Morris Brodie: Lia Lesser came on the Kindertransport and stayed with a guardian in Bull Bay, on Ynys Môn/Anglesey.

Lia Lesser: It was a white bungalow on top of a hill, and you approached it along a lane with two gates, and then you went up two fields. And when I lived there originally in '39, we had no running water, no gas, no electricity, we cooked on paraffin and we carried water from the well, and if it rained we were lucky enough to have water in the tanks.

Morris Brodie: Despite these obstacles, many refugees found a warm welcome in Wales. Fanny Höchstetter and Anton Hundsdorfer were both refugees from Germany, but met after moving to Llangollen, where they married and started a family. Here's Ernie Hunter, their son.

Ernie Hunter: They always felt the Welsh people were warm and welcoming. So, for example, when my brother was born, neither my father nor my mother earned particularly much, or had particularly much, they didn't own a property, they were rented accommodation. The Welsh ladies went around lending my mother all sorts of things for the newborn child [...] so she was lent a pram. Apparently, one of these big nanny-type prams you see on television, etc., which my parents could never ever afford. It wasn't given to her in the sense of 'keep it forever', but 'I'm not gonna use it, you have it.'

Morris Brodie: Some refugees managed to forge a connection to Wales before relocating. Kate Bosse-Griffiths came to Britain as a refugee from Wittenberg in Germany in 1937. An Egyptologist, she eventually got a job at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, where she met her future husband, the Welshman Gwyn Griffiths. They moved to the Rhondda in 1939. Heini Gruffudd, Kate's son, thinks this helped her to assimilate into Welsh society.

Heini Gruffudd: And having met my father, married swiftly, because of the war, and came to the Rhondda where she was part of a very close-knit family. So, in a way, she was...had a safety net in a Welsh family and Welsh culture, which I imagine other refugees wouldn't normally have.

Morris Brodie: To many locals, refugees from Europe were a real curiosity. Herman Rothman, who lived in a Jewish children's colony at Gwrych Castle, remembers being quizzed by a group of Welsh farm workers after arriving from Germany. To avoid any unnecessary tension, he told them he was Polish, where his father was from.

Herman Rothman: They heard I could speak English, and what a wonderful moment that was. We were in a big shed. He called everybody in. They sat in a circle and I, they said, 'You go and sit in the middle of it.' And they fired questions at me with their Welsh accents. First of all, I thought, that is very, very strange. I was taught English [...] they, they pronounced it all completely different. They must have taught me the wrong English [...] So they said, 'Have they got cows in Poland?' So I answered, 'Yes.''Have they got horses in Poland?' I answers [sic] in the affirmative [...] I thought these questions were very elementary, yes? I thought, well, I didn't think that a life in...and I thought

perhaps life in...in Wales was elementary [...] I, I felt very flattered by...by being the centre of attraction in this, in this cow shed, or whatever it was.

Morris Brodie: Renate Collins left such an impression on locals in Porth that she started a new baby name trend.

Renate Collins: And of course I was the seven-day wonder, wasn't I, this child that had come from the country they'd never heard of, and eventually I had three Renates there, the church members, they had grandchildren, 'Oh, what a lovely name', and I'd love to know where they are now, ha!

Morris Brodie: Child refugees needed to adapt, not only to a new school, but a new language – or two, if they found themselves in a Welsh-speaking area. For Renate, being plunged into a new culture may have led her to forget her own.

Renate Collins: Well, the first year I went to the senior school, you had to do Welsh. And of course, Mum Coplestone was...was from Fishguard, she was Welsh-spoken anyway, she preached in Welsh [...] then the first year after Welsh, they put me in the German class. Do you know I was bottom? [...] I literally was bottom [...] And, do you know, I'm certain that was psychological. I wanted to obliterate my...my past. Not intentionally.

Morris Brodie: Once the war started, some children were targeted for their German or Austrian heritage. George Schoenmann came to Wales after his father moved his business from Vienna to Treforest Trading Estate, near Pontypridd. George attended school in Cardiff.

George Schoenmann: And I was teased [...] you know, they would call me names, Jerry was the favourite one [...] They would run round pretending to be aeroplanes as little children did in those days with arms outstretched, making noises, and I was always the, the Messerschmitt which got shot at. Anyway, it was, it wasn't very pleasant and the fact that I couldn't speak a word of English of course and no effort was really made to include me in the lessons. So, every day at breaktime, at ten o'clock, I sneaked out through the gate and ran home.

Morris Brodie: During the war, the Czechoslovak government-in-exile set up a school for Czechoslovak children in Britain, initially located in Shropshire. In 1943, the school was relocated to the village of Llanwrtyd Wells, in Powys. Around 140 students were taught at the school, including Jewish refugee Milena Grenfell-Baines, who grew up in Proseč, about 150km to the east of Prague.

Milena Grenfell-Baines: It was very interesting because when we came here, this...it wasn't a town at the time...and they had hardly seen any English, never mind a whole troupe of Czech children, and so we decided to give them a concert, and sang for them – everything sang in Czech – but at the end, we sang Mae Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau, and I think from that day the town adopted us.

Morris Brodie: Lia Lesser also attended the Czechoslovak State School, having initially been schooled at Amlwch.

Lia Lesser: The class I remember best of all is the third class, and it used to be a...a hut [...] it used to have a big stove in the middle, and for our elevenses we used to have sliced bread and put it against the side of the stove and on the top, and we used to have lovely burned toast, and used to look forward to that every morning. But we had a lovely time, because everybody was lovely.

Morris Brodie: One of the hubs for adult refugees in South Wales was Treforest Trading Estate, which hosted a number of factories started by refugee industrialists. Des Golten remembers how refugees transformed the area in the late 1930s.

Des Golten: In 1939 and beginning 1940 there was hardly any English spoken on the Treforest estate. The language spoken was either Czech, or German, or Hungarian. And [...] at the top of the, of the war there must have been easily 15,000 people working on the estate.

Morris Brodie: George Schoenmann's family ran a box and cigarette paper company from Treforest.

George Schoenmann: They made boxes, well, I don't know, you could put shoes in them [...] All that sort of thing. Although, of course, they didn't do so well in the war because on the one hand there was very little new stuff being produced, and the one thing that you didn't need was luxury boxes, so they did struggle a bit and the main revenue stream was from the cigarette paper.

Morris Brodie: The estate was packed with refugee firms.

George Schoenmann: General Paper and Box.

Des Golten: Metal Products (Treforest) Limited.

George Schoenmann: Planet Gloves.

Des Golten: Aero Zipp Fasteners.

George Schoenmann: OP Chocolate. Burlington Gloves and Burlington Fabrics.

Des Golten: Lein Brothers.

George Schoenmann: Stewart-Singlam!

Morris Brodie: Treforest was an important employer in South Wales, and one that fellow refugees could benefit from. Refugees elsewhere often faced unfamiliar employment prospects. Fanny Höchstetter was originally a civil servant in Stuttgart, but in Wales, she worked as a chambermaid at the Hand Hotel in Llangollen. Her son Ernie Hunter describes how she dealt with it.

Ernie Hunter: She buckled down to it [...] it's as simple as that, and from what I gather, did [...] whatever was needed, even though she was certainly, most certainly, not used to it. So, how efficient she was, I do not know, because she was certainly not used to that sort of work, doing it at all.

Morris Brodie: Some refugees fully immersed themselves in Welsh cultural life. Kate Bosse-Griffiths learned the language and even published novels, short stories and non-fiction books in Welsh. She never lost her German accent, though, as Heini Gruffudd, her son, remembers.

Heini Gruffudd: Oh yes, I mean her Welsh to outsiders would be difficult to, to understand because of the accent until they tuned into it. The 'oo' [w] would always be pronounced as 'v', so 'wedi' is a word that comes up often – 'I've gone' – 'mi wedi mynd', so 'vedi mynd' she'd say – that kind of thing [...] together it was...she didn't lose her German accent!

Morris Brodie: Events on the Continent, however, were never far away. From the beginning of the war, all adult Germans and Austrians living in Britain were classified as so-called 'enemy aliens'. Some were jailed, but initially most were permitted to live freely, albeit with certain restrictions. George Schoenmann explains how refugees at Treforest coped with the government-mandated curfew.

George Schoenmann: And you had to be in your house by seven o'clock and you were not allowed out after seven. So, a lot of my friends were Czech, and of course they weren't subject to the curfew [...] because the Czechs were allies and the Austrians weren't, so mostly the, the visitors came to my parents because they were free to walk around in the evening, and my parents weren't. So, this went on – there was a different night – it worked like a railway timetable, if it was [...] Tuesday, you knew the Millers were coming, if it was Wednesday, it was the Tofflers, if it was Thursday, it was the Kurtzmans, if it was Friday, it was another family and this went on week, week after week.

Morris Brodie: In May 1940, the German occupation of the Low Countries and France panicked the British government and prompted the mass internment of German and Austrian citizens. By June, 28,000 aliens (most of whom were Jewish refugees) were arrested and sent to various camps across the country, the largest of which was on the

Isle of Man. Gaby Koppel's father, Henry Koppel, was one of the youngest to be interned, and was subsequently deported to Canada. He tried to make the best of it.

Gaby Koppel: He was sent to Huyton in Liverpool, which was a holding camp, then he was sent to the Isle of Man, and he did tell all these stories [...] about how the Isle of Man, it was like a university to him, he learned such a lot about music, the Amadeus Quartet, he heard them play, he learned to play bridge, which was his lifelong passion [...] My dad did always tend to look at the bright side, I'd say, and he was a pragmatist [...] I think it was a bit of an adventure for him [...] he saw the world, he went to Canada [...] the food, cause you had the rations, you know, were absolutely rubbish in Canada, but, you know, you had all these Viennese pastry chefs, and they'd take all the rations and they...all this sort of awful meat, quality of meat, they were being sent – make it into salami and sell it back to the Canadians at a profit.

Morris Brodie: Internees were eventually released, but the war affected refugees in other ways too. Des Golten was in Cardiff when it was bombed by the German Luftwaffe.

Des Golten: I remember [...] Cardiff being raided by the German air force. And I remember, we were living in, in Heathfield Road on top so we can overlook Cardiff, and I remember an aeroplane – I didn't see the plane because it was at night – but I remember the explosion and the aeroplane being shot down.

Morris Brodie: Refugees received war news either by letters from family members or through the Red Cross. Herman Rothman remembers receiving news that, back in Germany, his father had been arrested and sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

Herman Rothman: I took this letter into the lavatory, the bathroom, and I...for the first time, I burst out crying. Because I always kept myself as manly as possible, without showing my emotions [...] I went to the toilet. I remember this very, very clearly, because I knew that is the end for my father [...] From time to time, my mother said he's alright, she heard from the concentration camp, she's alright. In May of 1940, I received a letter, which was the best letter ever. She said he has been released from concentration camp in Sachsenhausen [...] and he is immediately going to Palestine illegally [...] Now, I

celebrated, you would say I celebrated Christmas, but I did it in a Jewish way on May Day.

Morris Brodie: Few letters from Europe had such happy endings. The last communication Renate Collins received from her parents was in June 1942 for her birthday.

Renate Collins: That's the last communication I had from my mother, that was the 10th of the 6th 1942, via the Red Cross, but it didn't say where she was, it said where it was going to, which was 8 Vaynor Street in Porth, 'Many Happy Birthday wishes, we think continually of you. Are well, hope you too. Much love, kind regards and thanks to your foster parents.' Now they...they were supposed to be able to be replied, but...when Coplestone tried to, they said 'No, there's no reply.' So that's the last communication.

Morris Brodie: Both Renate's parents, and 62 other members of her family were murdered in the Holocaust.

By the end of 1944, it was clear that Germany and its allies would lose the war. What was less clear, at least to many, was the scale of industrialised murder perpetrated against the Jews of Europe by the Nazis and their collaborators. In the next episode, we hear the stories of those refugees who took up arms against their former homeland, as well as those Welsh people who bore witness to the horrors of the Nazi camps at the moment of liberation. Until next time, thanks for listening.