



Lives In Limbo: Jewish Refugees in Portugal, 1940-1945

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I'd like to start with how I came to this topic. I have been writing about the history of German Jews for many years, so that is not new. What is new is the refugee crisis that has had global resonance for all of us in the last several decades. Today there are 80 million displaced people (not including Venezuelans) and 26 million refugees, defined as people forced to leave their countries because of persecution, war or violence.¹ The daughter of German-Jewish refugees myself, I began to think about those mostly German and Austrian Jews who had struggled and managed to get out -- but not to their final destination.

I first wrote a book about Jewish refugees in the small settlement of Sosua, in the Dominican Republic. Then I started wondering, since so many Sosuan Jews had transmigrated from Portugal: How did they get there? What did they do there? Most importantly, how did Jews react emotionally to the sites they encountered during their frightening odysseys and their fearful wait in an oddly peaceful purgatory.² An emotional history of Jewish refugees biding their time in Portugal may offer us a glimpse into their feelings then and also into feelings that many refugees on the streets of Paris, in cafes in Berlin, or under tents in Jordan may share today, no matter how widely divergent their original circumstances.

To begin:

In the opening scene of *Casablanca*, released in 1942 and one of the five most popular American films ever,³ the camera zooms in on a map of Casablanca in relation to Portugal. We learn that the refugees in Casablanca "wait and wait and wait" for visas to get to Lisbon, "the great embarkation point" for the "freedom of the Americas." At the end of the film, its heroes fly off to Lisbon. Most Jewish refugees, however, reached Lisbon via far more torturous paths, fleeing their homelands and then winding through the Low Countries, France, Spain and Portugal, arriving destitute and forlorn.

1933-1939: Portugal and Early Refugees

Before World War II, about one-third of German Jews fled Germany. Many of those seeking asylum from the Nazis went to neighboring countries, especially France and Holland.⁴ Even after the brutality of the Austrian annexation in 1938, very few Jewish refugees from Germany or Austria headed toward Portugal. Most did

¹ <https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/worlds-5-biggest-refugee-crises>. Accessed Jan. 7, 2020.

1951 Refugee Convention is a key legal document and **defines a refugee** as: "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion." For 2019, see also: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-48682783> This is the highest number in the UN refugee agency's almost 70 years of operation.

² "...They were all escaping from the past and striving for some safe shore of the future; the present in which they lived was a no-man's-land between the two..." Arthur Koestler, *Arrival and Departure* (New York, 1943), 19.

³ "AFI's 100 Years, 100 Movies," American Film Institute website. <http://www.afi.com/100years/movies.aspx>, accessed May 25, 2012.

⁴ Until the end of 1936, Palestine attracted the most refugees from Germany.

not even consider Portugal, a very poor, agricultural country under another dictatorship.^{56 & 7&8}

After the shocking violence toward Jews during the 1938 November Pogrom (also known as Kristallnacht), in which Nazis burned down close to 300 synagogues and in which over 32,000 Jewish men faced incarceration in concentration camps, German and Austrian Jews urgently tried to flee. However, immigration restrictions in foreign countries stymied many: one refugee wrote, “Every door ... is firmly locked and bolted – and so is every heart...”⁹

That same fateful year, Portugal began to issue only 30-day tourist visas to persons who could document that they already had visas and ship tickets to overseas destinations.¹⁰ Many refugees did not have these papers or the requisite funds.

Still, they came --- legally OR illegally.

Mass Flight

Mass flight began with the fall of France in spring 1940. Millions, not only Jews, fled south. Most foreigners — especially Jews -- had to get out of France,¹¹ where the police treated them with “a combination of muddle and brutality,” sometimes resorting to mass roundups that could end in a concentration camp.¹² Yet, leaving France proved treacherous since the French, now cooperating with Germany, refused to give exit visas.¹³ Spain’s stance on refugees crossing borders also grew increasingly unreliable, making it “hard to imagine a crueller way of torturing human beings.”¹⁴

So, how did refugees get to Portugal and how did they experience their stay? My research examined the many locations which refugees confronted in their attempts to flee Europe as well as their thoughts, fears and actions.

Here, I focus on only three such sites: the borders refugees nervously crossed, the lines at consulates and aide organization on which they fretfully, and the smoky cafés they uneasily inhabited. These sites triggered emotional reactions: sometimes feelings of anguish, other times relief, and often both.

Refugees with and without proper papers faced borders— 4 of them! — with angst and expectations. Would guards let them through or turn them back? Were their numerous documents sufficient, whether legitimate or forged?⁵⁹ At each crossing, anxieties skyrocketed: “Borders meant danger . . . something could go wrong, perhaps one didn’t have all the papers.”⁶⁰ OR forged papers could be challenged. German Jew, Hans Sahl, tensely crossed the border with his “brand new Danish passport,” made by “one of the best craftsmen in this field”.⁶⁸ Many refugees faced harsh scrutiny by German patrols at the French-Spanish borders, including being forced to strip completely. Some refugees made the desperate decision to flee France without any papers at all, avoiding all border guards. That could take between 3 and 10 hours up and a few hours down to Spain. Lea Lazego, with two children and a three-month old infant, climbed the Pyrenees on foot in 1943!

⁵ Based on an accord signed by the two countries in 1926. Irene Flunser Pimentel, “Refugiados entre portugueses (1933-1945),” *Vértice* (Nov.-Dec. 1995), 103.

⁶ Arquivos Nacional da Torre do Tombo (Portuguese National Archive, Lisbon), Ministério do Interior, Gabinete do Ministro, MC 486, PVDE, Lisboa, Nov. 1937, Liv 1-PV/L No. 96, NT 359-1 No. F. 20. Dossier sobre Emigracao.

⁷ The police focused on those with “visas made for Russians, Poles, [or] stateless.” Portuguese National Archive: “vistos’ feitos por russos, polacos, heimatlos, individuos de nacionalidade diferent do paiz que os documentous, assirios e libanezes.” MC 480

Sector PVDE, Lisboa, No.F. 13, No PT 7/21 NT 352. (*Stateless, Russian, and other individuals in Portugal requesting passports from countries different from their own country, 1936, Spr., 6-Jun. 5*). See Numbers 3 & 8 of this file. Apr. 18 and Apr. 7, 1936, respectively.

⁸ They did not single out Jews, although “Russians, Poles” and “stateless” surely included Jews. Portuguese National Archive: Ministério do Interior, Gabinete do Ministro, MC503 Caixa 61, Liv.3 PV/FI no.3. P. 8 of file: from Funchal (Madeira) on 29 Nov. 1938.

Pp. 11-14 of same file: letter from Civil Governor of Funchal, Jan. 29, 1939.

⁹ Salamon Dembitzer, *Visas for America: A Story of an Escape* (Sydney, 1952), 201.

¹⁰ Pimentel, “Refugiados,” 103 and Milgram, *Portugal, Salazar, and the Jews* (Jerusalem, 2011), 66.

¹¹ Varian Fry, *Surrender on Demand* (USHMM, 1997), 16.

¹² Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, 14.

¹³ Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, 122.

¹⁴ Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, 85 and *Assignment: Rescue* (New York, 1968), 95.

Portugal demonstrated generosity at first, admitting tens of thousands of transmigrants.^{15 & 16} By July 1940 Lisbon had emerged as the best way station for Jews to escape Europe for North and South America. Between 40,000 and 100,000 people reached Portugal in the year 1940/41, among whom about 90 % were Jewish.^{17 & 18} Most ended up in Lisbon, the capital and a lively port city of about 600,000, where the majority of Portugal's about 2,000 Jews lived.^{19 & 20} Portuguese government reluctance and the dizzying visa procedures notwithstanding, Lisbon soon became "the refugee capital of [western] Europe."²¹

While tens of thousands continued their exodus by boat and some by plane to distant shores, Lisbon still housed about 8,000 refugees in Dec. 1940, and 14,000 in June 1941.^{22 & 23} At that moment, the Nazis directly or indirectly controlled most of Europe with the exceptions of Sweden, Switzerland, Spain, and Portugal. [A few weeks later, 3.9 million Nazi troops invaded the Soviet Union.²⁴] And in Nov. 1942, a new influx of Jewish refugees appeared as Germany invaded Vichy France.

Portuguese Citizens' Reactions

Upon successfully arriving in Portugal, refugees had positive experiences with individual Portuguese and remained forever grateful for their kindness. Some arrived with money that would last only days,²⁵ others had relatives abroad who might finance their stay –but they had no idea how long they would be there or what it might cost, and most arrived "flat broke."²⁶ One woman, on a train heading to Lisbon and obviously starving, eyed a young girl eating bread. The Portuguese conductor, observing her glance, offered her a whole loaf of

¹⁵ Avraham Milgram, *Portugal, Salazar and the Jews* (Jerusalem, 2011). In the summer of 1940 when the Germans overran France, a veritable flood of refugees – Jewish and non-Jewish -- sought safety in Portugal. The largest number of Jews (13,000-15,000 – according to Jewish sources) passed through Portugal. (12) Milgram's statistics radically challenge long- established but fuzzy numbers ranging between Yehuda Bauer's estimate of 40,000 Jews passing through Portugal in 1940-41 (61) and the *American Jewish Yearbook* (1944) estimate of 100,000 mostly Jewish refugees. Still, Jewish sources cannot tell the whole story, since Jews also passed through Portugal on their own, without the assistance of Jewish organizations. Some also left Lisbon by air, usually at their own expense. Ronald Weber, *The Lisbon Route: Entry and Escape in Nazi Europe* (New York, 2011), 13. See also: zur Mühlen, *Fluchtweg*, pp. 151-52 who seems to lean towards 80,000 using Jewish and non-Jewish sources. He gives the 90% estimate of Jews among the refugees.

¹⁶ David Wyman, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis 1938-41* (Mass., 1968), 150.

¹⁷ Marrus suggests 100,000 but some estimates go as high as 200,000. Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted, European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford U Press, 1985), 265. The JDC estimated 100,000 refugees passed through Portugal between 1936 and 1944. JDC archives, Portugal, file #896-897, p. 365. Howard Wriggins, *Picking up the Pieces from Portugal to Palestine: Quaker Refugee Relief in World War II: A Memoir* (Lanham, Md., 2004), 18, suggests 200,000.

¹⁸ These collective transports (*Sammeltransporte*) soon ceased. Wiener Library: "Bericht ueber die Mitteilungen von Frau A.B. geb. Loewengard aus Wiesbaden." Personal Report. 3 pages. Done in Oct. 1955. DOC REF 047-EA-0500. Wiener Lib Ref: P.II.b. No. 166. See a similar locked or "sealed" train in: "An Octogenarian's records of his life and experience as a German Jew," 39 pages Wiener Lib ref. P. II.f.No.972. done 1958. 39 pps. [Author: M.M., from Freiburg I Br] and in Protocol Eva Marx (born 1890) Wiener Lib Ref: P.III.i No. 105. Recorded (interview) June 1955. See also Fred Mann, *A Drastic Turn of Destiny* (Toronto: Azrieli Series of Holocaust Survivor Memoirs, 2009), 171 (for trains through 1941.)

¹⁹ Four hundred families is the number cited by d'Esaguy; Chairman of COMASSIS, June 4, 1941. JDC archives, File 896 (2 of 3), Countries: Portugal general 1933; 1939-42, 1. The number of 2,000 Jewish inhabitants of Lisbon is in: *Jüdisches Nachrichtenblatt*, Dec. 10, 1940 (Berlin), 1. Patrik von zur Mühlen estimates about 1,000 in Lisbon, Porto, Far and Braganza together. *Fluchtweg Spanien-Portugal: Die deutsche Emigration und der Exodus aus Europa 1933-1945* (Bonn, 1992), 125.

²⁰ d'Esaguy; June 4, 1941. JDC archives, File 896 (2 of 3), Countries: Portugal general 1933; 1939-42, 1.

²¹ Marrus, *The Unwanted*, 263.

²² *New York Times*, Dec. 15, 1940. Wriggins suggests 10,000 Jews in Lisbon in 1940, p. 24. Zur Mühlen agrees that the influx of refugees during the war included "almost entirely ... Jewish refugees..." 124

²³ d'Esaguy; June 4, 1941. JDC archives, File 896 (2 of 3), Countries: Portugal general 1933; 1939-42, 2.

²⁴ Antony Beevor points to the Empire's troops as well as Polish and Czech airmen, all of whom came to Britain's aid. Thus Britain did not stand entirely alone. *The Second World War* (New York, 2012)

²⁵ Friedrich Torberg, *Eine tolle, tolle Zeit: Briefe und Dokumente aus den Jahren der Flucht, 1938-1941 in Gesammelte Werke*, vol. XVIII (Munich, 1989), 123.

²⁶ Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, 103.

bread and gave her a place to lie down in first class.²⁷ Others, too, report receiving fruit and soup from poor peasants and townspeople upon their arrival in border villages.³⁰ Jews also noticed the lack of antisemitism in the Portuguese population.³¹ Moreover, even when Portugal placed restrictions on immigrants, the country still welcomed Jews with capital or businesses.³²

Most Jewish refugees saw Portugal as an interlude and simply tried to get along in the new surroundings. And the Portuguese proved hospitable to their new customers, tenants, and neighbors.³³ Unlike the generosity and friendliness of Portuguese individuals, however, the government and its dictator, António de Oliveira Salazar who ruled from 1932 until 1968, welcomed only wealthy refugees.³⁴ Poor refugees had to move on- theoretically in 30 days.

Salazar and his minions stressed their “neutrality” during the war, yet the warring sides both eyed Portuguese tungsten necessary for military production. Furthermore, Portugal’s Azores provided a source of tension. Both the Allies and the Germans hoped to use these islands, located in the North Atlantic, for air and naval operations. Ultimately (and late), Portugal tipped toward the Allies.³⁵

Strategic and economic issues certainly influenced Portuguese hesitations regarding refugees, but Portuguese leaders also worried about domestic issues. Some thought that the small country could not absorb huge numbers of immigrants, seeing themselves as a land of emigration, not immigration, losing about 50,000 people a year due to the poor economy.³⁶ Most importantly, Salazar and his cronies feared all aliens, Jewish and non-Jewish, as possible liberals and leftists who might destabilize the regime.

Significantly, Salazar did not evince antisemitism. For him, citizenship meant political and legal status; it was not a racial category. Portuguese Jews were simply Portuguese.³⁷ Although he opposed “liberals,” “republicans,” and “communists” – which could have been interpreted as code words for “Jews” -- he did not openly discuss Jews nor use terms like “Judeo-Bolshevik” or “world Jewry” as other European fascists did. Even Portuguese fascists who admired Hitler, did not oppose Jews entering Portugal to escape his violence.³⁸ The police certainly harbored anti-immigrant and antisemitic attitudes, but even as they harassed and threatened Jews, we know of few incidents where the police delivered them to the Germans.³⁹

Individual Portuguese consuls also came to the aid of refugees. Against the desires of his government, Portugal’s general consul in Bordeaux, Aristides de Sousa Mendes, wrote out at least 10,000—some count

²⁷ *Lisbon: Harbor of Hope*, film by Pavel Schnabel, National Film Network, 1994, 21:20-22:15

²⁸ Christa Heinrich, Hans Winterberg, and Barb Kirkamm, eds., *Lissabon 1933–*

1945: Fluchtstation am Rande Europas (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, Haus

der Wannsee-Konferenz, 1995), 8. One problem mentioned in several memoirs and in an irate letter to the JDC, was bed bugs in hotels. Horst Wagner reported that “During the night, our beds began to move. They were full of bed bugs. None of us could sleep and sat on benches on the street.” The JDC representative found them new accommodations. Wagner, “Wohin gehen wir?” 10, LBI. See also: Interview with Ruth Kohn by Dina Kohn, July 25, 1995, Passaic, New Jersey; Ernst Hofeller (1995), #937, “Refugee,” LBI, 29.

²⁹ Alma Mahler-Werfel, *And the Bridge Is Love*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 268-69.

³⁰ Zur Mühlen, *Portugal*, 163.

³¹ USHMM, interview with Isaac Bitton, May 17, 1990, RG-50.030*0027.

³² *Korrespondenzblatt über Auswanderungs- und Siedlungswesen*, August 1934, 12. in particular (and in order) women’s tailors, men’s tailors, knitters, watch makers, jewelers, furriers, and shoemakers. *Korrespondenzblatt über Auswanderungs- und Siedlungswesen*, Sept. 1935, 22

³³ Zur Mühlen, *Portugal*, 163.

³⁴ Reynolds & Eleanor Packard, *Balcony Empire: Fascist Italy at War* (New York, 1942), 361.

³⁵ Douglas L. Wheeler, “In the Service of Order: The Portuguese Political Police and the British, German and Spanish Intelligence, 1932-1945,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 18, No. 1 (Jan. 1983), 6-9. Notwithstanding their tilt toward the Allies, Portugal ranked second to Switzerland in the amount of looted gold it received from the Nazi government. See: Antonio Louça and Ansgar Schäfer “Portugal and Nazi Gold: The ‘Lisbon Connection’” in the *Sales of Looted Gold by the Third Reich* (Createspace, 2011). See also: “Nazi Gold and Portugal’s Murky Role,” *New York Times* (Jan. 10, 1997).

³⁶ *Korrespondenzblatt über Auswanderungs- und Siedlungswesen*, August 1934 (Berlin), 12. This occurred until Brazil placed restrictions on immigration in 1933 when only 9,000 people left Portugal. *Korrespondenzblatt über Auswanderungs- und Siedlungswesen*, Sept. 1935, 22. Nearly 2 million Portuguese left for the U.S. and Brazil between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries.

³⁷ Pimental, “Refugiados,” 109.

³⁸ Milgram, *Portugal*, 11, 43.

³⁹ Wheeler, “Service,” 11-12. Berthold Jacob was a famous exception. He was well known for exposing the illegal rearmament of the Weimar Republic and Hitler’s military ambitions, Berthold perished in a Berlin prison in 1944.

far more-- visas for refugees, both Jewish and non-Jewish, from every part of Europe.⁴⁰ He issued so many visas that his government sent two officials from Lisbon to bring him home⁴¹ and severely punished him.⁴² But his very lucky recipients went on to Lisbon.

Once having arrived, how did they make ends meet?

Local and International Help to Refugees: Lines, Lines, Lines

As mentioned, the majority of refugees came without money. As it ran out, many needed subsidies for their rent and food bills. Moreover, those relatives and friends caught in the Nazi trap beseeched these same penniless refugees for support. Some families occupied small apartments or had cooking facilities in their rooms. One interviewee remembered many versions of sardine dinners “because that was the main affordable food.”⁴³ Those without sufficient income or who stayed in rooms without hotplates, trekked up the Lisbon hills at noon to receive a free hot lunch from the Portuguese Jewish community’s soup kitchen, subsidized by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee or JDC.⁴⁴

Many, maybe most, Jewish refugees depended on subsidies from local and international aid organizations, especially the Jewish ones. These Jewish organizations – HIAS, HICEM, the JDC, World Jewish Congress, and the Portuguese-Jewish relief committees – supported refugees in a spirit of solidarity with Jews in trouble, but also in order to prevent them from burdening the state.⁴⁵ The Quakers, the Catholic Relief Services, and the Unitarian Service Committee among others, helped non-Jewish refugees, but often Jews as well. All of these aid groups also attempted to find visas and ship passage for refugees, especially to the United States.

As people on the ground felt then, and as historians have since verified, the US State Dept. created a cumbersome process. In part, its leadership worried about Depression-induced fear of job competition⁴⁶ as well as “fifth columnists” or “Trojan horses” -- supposed Nazi agents who might sneak into the U.S. among the refugees. In addition, attempts to persuade the U.S. administration and elected representative to welcome more refugees “ran into the stone wall of anti-Semitism”. Severe entrance limitations⁴⁷ and excruciatingly slow application processing reduced immigration to a crawl.⁴⁸ [Not unsimilar to today in the USA!]

How did refugees react to this situation? The answer: they stood on “Lines, lines, and more lines.” Forced to engage in a “paper chase,” refugees spent anxious moments on lines at the post office, at aid organizations, and at consulates. A repetitive schedule of errands demanded time and attention.⁴⁹

The Pekelis couple, having fled Italy, passed long days engaging in the anxious rituals of refugee life: pursuing documents to secure their safety. This meant lining up at police headquarters for permissions to remain in Portugal, and at consulates for visas to get out of Portugal. In order to acquire proper papers, Carla Pekelis and her husband turned their Lisbon room into an office. While Alex went out to “visit consulates, police commissioners, travel agencies...in search of a million things: travel permits, proofs of citizenship, money exchange, ship passage...and so on ... [she] pounded out letters on the typewriter addressed to friends and relatives, especially in New York, with requests that went from a simple testimonial, authenticated by a notary, to the all-important ‘affidavit’ that would place the responsibility for our future on the shoulders of whoever acted as our guarantor.”⁵⁰

Refugees seeking visitors’ extensions or visas waited on endless lines wherever they went.⁵¹ Erika Mann,

⁴⁰ Marrus, *The Unwanted*, 263.

⁴¹ Peter Hellman, *Avenue of the Righteous* (London, 1981), xi.

⁴² Marrus, *The Unwanted*, 264.

⁴³ Henri Deutsch, Shoah Foundation video, #10463, seg 57-65.

⁴⁴ *New York Times*, Dec. 15, 1940 for the trek; zur Mühlen, *Portugal*, 162, for subsidy.

⁴⁵ Milgram, *Portugal*. HICEM resulted from a merger in 1927 among three Jewish migration associations: [HIAS](#) (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, NY), [ICA](#) ([Jewish Colonization Association](#), based in Paris), and Emigdirect, a migration organization ([Berlin](#)).

⁴⁶ Wriggins, *Picking up the Pieces*, 12.

⁴⁷ Richard Breitman and Alan Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945* (Bloomington, 1987), chap. 6. “Spy hysteria” by Margaret Jones, AFSC, Breitman, 131.

⁴⁸ Breitman, *American Refugee Policy*, 135-36.

⁴⁹ *New York Times*, Dec. 15, 1940.

⁵⁰ Carla Pekelis, *My Version of the Facts*. Translated by George Hochfield (Evanston, Ill.: Marlboro, 2004), 134-35.

⁵¹ Sol Hasson, Shoah Foundation video, #1937, seg. 71-72.

on a short trip to Lisbon from England in the fall of 1940, had to appear at the police office for foreigners. She walked eight minutes to the end of the line. She thought that the line at the American embassy had “no end at all.”⁵² Carla Pekelis summed up: While waiting, refugees faced “a jungle of consulates, police stations, and government offices...bureaucratic red tape, loneliness, homesickness, and withering universal indifference.”⁵³ She concluded: “It would have taken the pen of a Kafka...to depict the world of visas in all its surrealistic absurdity; that of a Dostoyevsky to render the nightmare of the petitioners’ struggle for survival....”^{54&55} In the end, the refugees had only one “occupation”: “waiting ... waiting, waiting!”⁵⁶

These consulate lines heightened anxiety, frustration and—often-- dejection. Many refugees, like Anny Coury’s parents waited on lines “for visas to go anywhere.”⁵⁷ Countless began to feel that no country wanted them. Black humor made the point: A refugee enters a travel agency and says he’d like to go to any country in the world. The agent brings out a globe, and the customer studies it carefully, finally asking, “Is that all you have to offer?”⁷⁹

Besides lining up for police and consuls, most refugees also waited at aid agencies. Daily interactions with these organizations provided relief and exasperation. The refugees themselves understood that American Jewish organizations offered a lifeline. Hans Sahl wrote that they paid their hotel or boarding house, the food they ate, the doctors they needed, and “the pills for anxiety and ... sleeplessness.”⁵⁸

Gratefulness, however, clashed with frustration similar to the resentments and mistrust that often complicate relations between social welfare organizations and their recipients. Refugees had suffered drastic economic and social decline: Hannah Arendt saw “parables of increasing self-loss.”⁴⁵ She explained: “We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in the world.”⁴⁸ She continued: “Once we were somebodies about whom people cared, we were loved by friends, and even known by landlords as paying our rent regularly.” She described a frustrated middle-aged man who had appeared before countless aid committees “in order to be saved.” At one aid organization, his emotions triggered an exasperated exclamation, “Nobody here knows who I am!” Nobody knew who he had been, or the kind of people he had come from, or the heights from which he had dropped. In despair, he realized that he could not overcome the gap between how others saw him and how he wished to be seen. These refugees—much like so many today-- had become Arendt’s “new kind of human beings—the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends.”⁴⁰

Cafes: Sites to Support and Compete With Eachother

When the refugees finished their visits to consulates, aid organizations, and shipping offices, they often headed to the central square, the Rossio, to sit in cafés, a kind of diasporic homeland. This new transnational and temporary “home” offered a site where⁵⁹ “one heard more German and French ... than Portuguese.”⁶⁰ Some, like the Café Palladium, seemed “filled with refugees.”⁶¹ Lisbon cafés, no longer simple sites of sociability -- although this may have been a pleasant byproduct -- offered indispensable locations in which to share advice and rumors (“the refugee telegraph”) about the war and about possible visas.^{62&63} Conversations circled around various consulates and aid committees to which individuals had appealed.

This liminal world of café identities allowed most Jews a semblance of normalcy, a place to remember who they once were and feel recognized by others from their previous worlds. Stretching a cup of coffee for hours,

⁵² Erika Mann, “In Lissabon gestrandet,” In *Im Fluchtgepäck die Sprache: Deutschsprachige Schriftstellerinnen im Exil*, ed. by Claudia Schoppmann (Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1991), 148–60.

⁵³ Erich Maria Remarque, *The Night in Lisbon* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 4.

⁵⁴ Pekelis, *Facts*, 149.

⁵⁵ Pekelis, *Facts*, 149. Many refugees referred to Kafka. Wriggins felt that his office mediated between the refugees and Kafka’s *The Castle* where “authority was pervasive but unreachable....” Wriggins, *Picking up the Pieces*, 30.

⁵⁶ Pekelis, *Facts*, 149.

⁵⁷ Anny Coury, Shoah Foundation video, #11780, seg. 47-57.

⁵⁸ Sahl in Daniel Blaufuks, *under strange skies* (Lisbon: LX Filmes, 2002) DVD. He bought them in the Café d’Oro.

⁵⁹ German intellectual Eva Lewinski in Pimentel, “Refugiados,” 105.

⁶⁰ Fred Mann, *Drastic Turn*, 173.

⁶¹ Mann, *Drastic Turn*, 156.

⁶² Rumors about the war in Janina Lauterbach, Shoah Foundation video, seg 36-41. The “refugee telegraph” in Wriggins, *Picking up the Pieces*, 58.

⁶³ Helene Arnay, Shoah Foundation video, #4265, seg 22-23.

women and men found solace among people in the same situation.^{64&65} Many faced the same “psychic hell,”⁶⁶ worrying about family and friends left behind, mourning the loss of their homes, positions, and reputations, fearing the process of starting all over again in a new place with a new language and new rules.^{67 68}

By sharing angst and empathy, café patrons bonded, yet they were also rivals enveloped in their own misery. They depended on one another for friendship and support, but they also competed for scarce visas and insufficient space on ships. Sharing hope, they needed to repress envy when someone else succeeded. When one woman received her American visa, the café in which she passed her days first erupted in a flurry of questions: “What kind is it, a visa to immigrate or an emergency visa? Where did you get it? Certainly not here? When do you leave?”

Despite their companionship, these cafés also did not provide freedom from danger, since occasionally, the police swooped down on these cafes and arrested individuals with inadequate papers.⁶⁹ Moreover, rumors increased nervousness: One family heard “partly in jest, partly in earnest, that Germany would take Spain in a day and capture Portugal by telephone.”⁴⁶

From Pearl Harbor until war’s end, refugees remained in limbo, confronting more lines at consulates and police stations. Visa ran out. Many faced quasi-incarceration in small villages, locations that the Portuguese government called “fixed residences.” They could only leave these villages with special permission, but they often needed to travel to Lisbon to gather necessary papers and tickets. One social worker observed that the refugees lived “in a hiatus, rather like a patient with an unknown disease who waits anxiously for an unknowable diagnosis.”⁸⁸ Arthur Koestler put it more dramatically: “They were all escaping from the past and striving for some safe shore of the future; the present in which they lived was a no-man’s-land between the two....”⁷⁰

Conclusion

Those refugees lucky enough to jump the myriad hurdles between their country of origin and the Portuguese coastline had suffered enormous physical and mental anguish. En route to Portugal and penniless, many searched for food, for shelter, and for visas.⁷¹ They crossed terrifying borders, lined up at exasperating consulates for increasingly unattainable visas and at aide organizations for support that most of these formerly middle-class people had never required, and sat in cafes, those “meeting [places] of refugees from all over the world,”⁷² exchanging rumors, vying for visas, and consoling each other.

Ambivalently and ambiguously, Portugal, a poor country whose dictatorial government feared foreigners and leftists, offered a (relatively) safe haven to refugees. Its rich and poor extended solace and support and left strong positive impressions with the Jewish sojourners. Lisbon emerged as a symbol of temporality and transition, and Portugal ultimately saved the lives of tens of thousands of Jews who managed to get there.⁷³

Despite vast contrasts in time, place, religion, ethnicity, and regimes, refugee groups share similarities, especially their feelings about being forced to flee homes and loved ones while waiting for the world to react. No one flees home unless they have to: as Warsan Shire, the first Young Poet Laureate for London (2013), put it “No one leaves home unless/home is the mouth of a shark.” “No one puts their children on a boat unless the water is safer than the land.”⁷⁴ During World War II, Jews, and more recently middle Easterners, Africans, and Central/South Americans have fled their homes and histories while begging strangers for kindness. Even if each refugee crisis is historically specific, studying refugees’ feelings helps transform statistics into people. As the U.S. Supreme Court put it in 1977, “individuals who testified about their personal

⁶⁴ View of refugee inside Cafe Boccage at Caldas da Rainha.

http://www.criticalpast.com/video/65675029919_Cafe-Boccage_refugee-town_Jewish-refugee_cattle-fair_improvised-Synagogue. Accessed Aug. 8, 2012.

⁶⁵ Betty Harris, Shoah Foundation video, #13459, seg 49-51. The main cafes were close to the embassy and the airline offices. Pimentel, “Refugiados,” 106.

⁶⁶ Wriggins, Picking up the Pieces, 58

⁶⁷ E. Mann, “In Lissabon gestrandet,” 151.

⁶⁸ E. Mann, “In Lissabon gestrandet,” 157-60.

⁶⁹ Von Mühlen, *Portugal*, 158-59.

⁷⁰ Koestler, *Arrival and Departure*, 19.

⁷¹ Gallagher, “See you in Lisbon,” 190-92/

⁷² Betty Harris, Shoah Foundation video, #13459, seg. 49-51.

⁷³ I am using Milgram’s data which seems the most reasonable. *Portugal*, 289.

⁷⁴ “Home” by Warsan Shire. Beyonce repeats lines from Shire’s poem in *Lemonade*.

experiences...brought the cold numbers ...to life.”⁷⁵ Paying careful attention to the words of refugees in Portugal may help us to understand Jewish heartbreak and perseverance in the 1940s and also to listen compassionately to refugees’ stories in our own time.

I would like to leave you with such an individual experience. Since many of the Jewish refugees were children and over half of today’s refugees are children, this is the story of Annette Szer.

Without the required papers or money, some refugees walked through Spain. In 1942, it took eleven-year-old Annette Szer and her parents three months to do so. One cold night, as they tried to sleep in yet another barn, warmed by the breath of cows, she realized it was December and began to cry. She declared “it must be Hanukkah and we have no menorah [traditional candelabra].” This moment turned into a lasting memory when her father responded: “What do you mean, we don’t have a menorah, we have the most beautiful menorah in the world.” Opening the barndoor a crack, he said: “Pick out the shiniest star....That will be the shamas [the candle that lit the others] Now find the other candles.... So, I found four on each side and we lit a menorah in the sky.” This may have been the one bright spot in her wanderings. Fifty years after her odyssey, Annette Szer Finger admitted “I felt I was on borrowed time since I was ten.”⁷⁶

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⁷⁵ Teamsters vs. United States 431 U.S. 324, 338-339 (1977).

⁷⁶ Joseph Shadur, *A Drive to Survival: Belgium, France, Spain, Portugal, 1940*. (South Deerfield, Mass.: Schoen, 1999), 103; Gould Coll., RG-02.141, 11, 13, USHMM; Edith Jayne Personal Coll. 1784, Accession # 2009/13, Wiener Lib.; Finger, #6981, Shoah.