

## The English anti-Semitic perception: The build up of a stereotype\*

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*Abstract.* The aim of this essay is trying to describe the English anti-Semitism between 1930 and 1945 from a privileged point of view: perception. We'll focus on a few cartoons published on the main English newspapers of those years and on the news and articles that were on the local and national newspapers in the same years. We'll place side by side these elements and the "official" history, the one made by historiography and government acts. We hope we'll arrive to demonstrate that it is possible to describe the English attitude towards the Jews as an anti-Semitism because of perception.

*Key words:* Anti-Semitism, Perception, UK, Holocaust, World War Two, Refugees.

It is not simple to explain the relationship between the people and the British government and the Jewish community in the years between 1930 and the Second World War years. One should start from the roots of the Jewish community in Britain, study its composition, the arrivals, the degree of social integration, the response of the local population to the arrival of these foreigners and a long series of multiple factors. It is only in the light of this composed study, which is almost geological, that you will have a thorough picture.

However this is not the main purpose of the following proposed study. Or rather it is a part of it.

It is my intention, in fact, to try and analyze, and partially explain, the impact of World War Two on the relationship between the people and the British government and the Jews. Particularly, the first, immediate awareness that the war brought with it. It was, in different ways and to varying degrees, a traumatic event for both sides.

Indeed, it would not be too ambitious to state, supporting this argument with evidence, that the relationship between the British and the Jews (mainly perceived in this period as "refugees" or "victims") radically changed with the advent of World War Two, so as to give rise to an "English form" of anti-Semitism of non-ethnic array, not "racial", but dictated by historical and economic conditions. This statement does not intend to weaken the gravity of that anti-Semitism but it only tries to create a broader framework to it, and perhaps a different one from the rest of Europe.

In order to explain what I just mentioned, a different interpretation of events will be proposed: the British *perception* of the Jews. The question about perception of the so-called "public opinion" toward the Jews could in fact reveal a privileged point of view from which to study the subject matter.

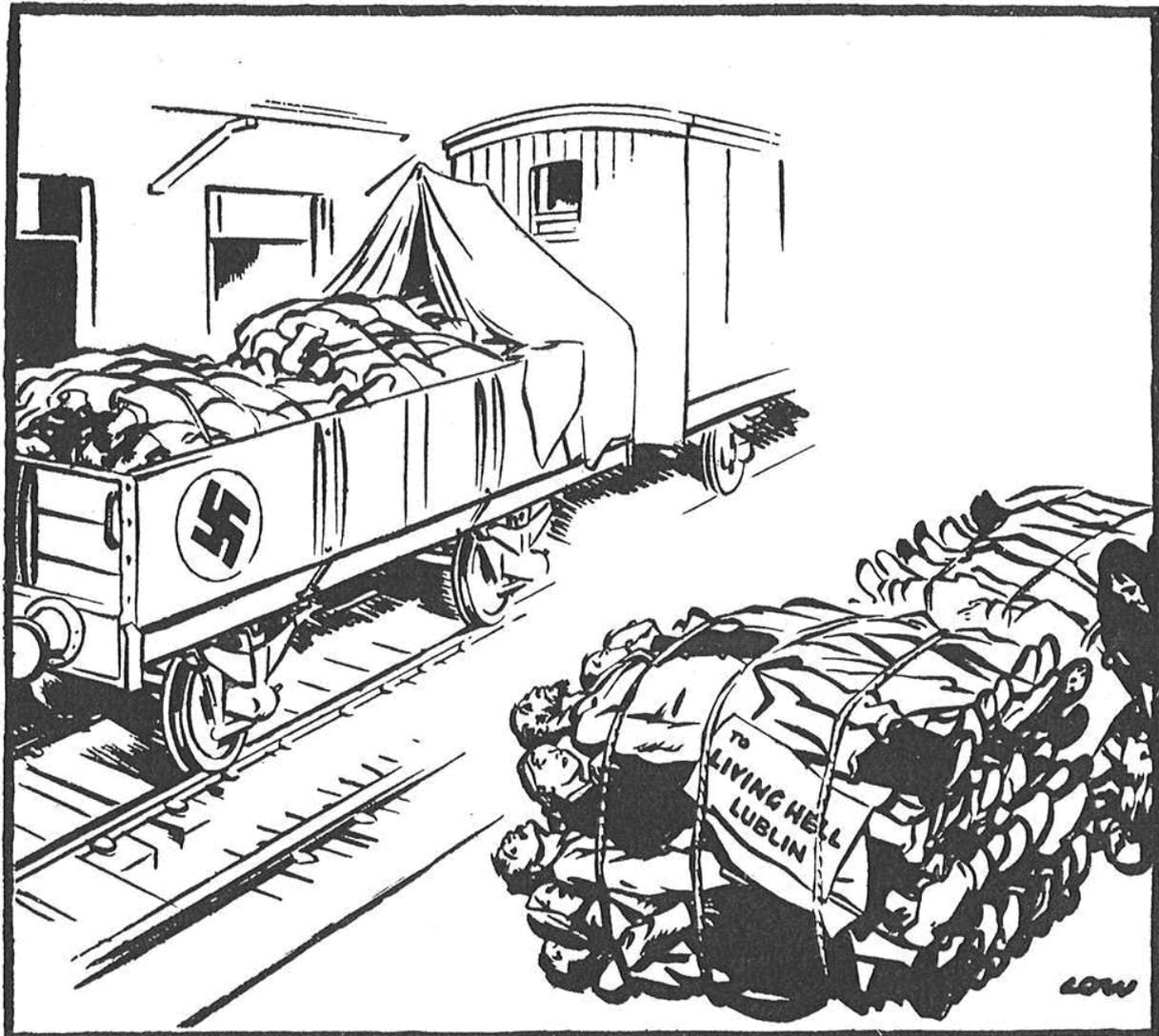
In the philosophical theory of modern thought, perception is in effect an act of knowledge. Indeed, it is a form of knowledge that relates immediately to a real object, whether physical or mental. Perception, in its very nature, is defined as a multi-layered knowledge that can unite the multiplicity of sensations related to objects (or subjects, in this case) other than the recipient. Beyond the philosophical controversy within perception, it is important to underline here its ability to create a system to order multiplicity and to be a point of view on the object, a shifting, contingent point of view, based on immediacy.

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\* This essay is based on my degree thesis for the MA "Teaching the Shoah" ("Roma Tre" University), in 2011. With my Professor, David Meghnagi, I began working on perception and cartoons. Then I realized to focus my attention to the Great Britain, the major free-nazi country during the second world war. According to the MA Teachers Team I went to CDEC in Milan and at the Wiener Library, in London, for my researches

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Therefore to combine the "popular" perception with the public, the intellectual and the political and with the ensuing actions, seems a point of view that deserves to be explored to understand this historical short circuit.



LEBENSRAUM FOR THE CONQUERED

JANUARY 20, 1940

Hitler's plan for Poland included, after the executions and the mass-shootings, the systematic eviction of Poles from their homes, the drafting of Polish war prisoners into labour gangs for Germany, and the transport of Poland's three million Jews to a "Jewish reserve" in the barren region around Lublin.

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Cartoon no. 1. David Low, *Years of Wrath: A Cartoon History 1932-1945*, p. 98.

In this Low's cartoon (1940) we clearly notice the writing "The living hell Lublin" on the dead bodies. The bodies are wrapped up, ready to go in some concentration camps, we can suppose. So, looking at this cartoon, we can say that in 1940 all the people know about the European Jews' destiny. In this image we can argue that the people are Jewish but there is nothing else in the cartoon that suggests this.

In particular, it would be interesting to observe how some British newspapers have tackled the topic of the cartoons, especially satirical ones, and how these reflect the *zeitgeist* in a synthetic and ironic manner. This could be a good litmus test to see how the British saw (in the perception sense) these new Jews that were likely and were about to land on the island. Such an "invasion" was felt as frightening.

The use of irony is already a method in itself, for example, if we think of Socratic method. The Greek philosopher used the enquiry technique to push his interlocutor into finding the answers to his questions on his own. In the more specific case of cartoons, it is possible to talk about social irony, a kind of irony which belongs to a precise – social – context. It is only within that specific context that the meaning of a certain statement can be understood. The reason for this is because the statement derives from a representation of an object by a subject. If we consider the Jews as the object of such representation, we can infer from this the existence of a different form of anti-Semitism: the fact of perceiving a stranger as such. But the Jew is an alien and is different from the others: he lives in an extraordinarily and dramatically different time compared to what it used to be. Diversity and its perception play a key role in this matter.

In his introduction to the volume *Years of Wrath: a Cartoon History 1932-1945*, the cartoonist David Low says:

«"A cartoon tells more in a few lines than do ten thousand words" says a critic; and he is right – but only if the person who sees it is familiar with the imagery employed by the cartoonist and is more or less aware of what his cartoon is about».

And he continues:

«[...] and to link these circumstances so that the cartoons may appear not as individual flights of fancy careering hither and thither in airy independence, but connected, as part of a running commentary on a sequence of events» (Low, 1986).

David Low was one of the most important English cartoonists of those years. He was more or less a liberal even if he drew for the *Evening Standard*, a newspaper owned by Lord Beaverbrook, an "independent conservative".

Even in David Low's words one can find a clear reference to the importance of the context. One can say that the context is the key to understand the real nature of the cartoon that, however, wants to represent, to focus on an event, and even explain it.

But Low was not the only one who underlined the importance of understanding the context. Also Roy Douglas, talking about the cartoonists' vision of the war, says a very important thing:

«the different countries also have radically different perceptions of where the most crucial issues of war lay» (Douglas, 1990, p. XI).

And he continues talking about the fact that it is a very strange thing trying to explain the Second World War to the youngest people: how can we explain, he says, that there were millions of people prepared to kill and to be killed? Is it only a matter of military conscription or a genuine popular support? Douglas says:

«there can be little doubt that there was genuine popular support for the conflicting national causes throughout the war, and the cartoon often gives us a good idea of how that support was built up» (Douglas, 1990, p. XI).

Our research proposal wants to underline the image importance. Why the image? Why do we try to understand history (a part of it) by studying satirical cartoons through a perception analysis?

In *Jewish Images in the Media*:

«Kenneth Boulding defines image as “the total cognitive affective, and evaluative structure of the behaviour unite, or its internal view of itself and the universe”. Obviously, image serves as important filtering mechanisms in the perception of the self and the other, and such perceptions are, in turn, one of the key elements that influence individual and collective behaviour. Images linger in the mind, creating stereotypes, entering our subconscious and becoming part of our culture» (Liepach, Melischk & Sethaler, 2007, p. 7).

And stereotypes seem to be slow to change. But they take deep roots in the human mind and quickly show their ability to become a part of social culture, of a way to see the world all around us. And all the matters about a Jews stereotypical view seem to be very important: its build-up and its resistance are two elements that we need to focus on.

To illustrate our proposal we proceed in two parallel lines: we try to explain, generally, the historical, social, political and economic context and then we attempt to underline the cartoons' importance. To analyze and focus on satirical cartoons is a way to understand what happened in Britain in those years, what people and Government thought and felt.

We also naturally mention the press, the reaction of some national and local newspapers about the arrival of Jewish immigrates and about what contemporarily happened in the Nazi occupied Europe. Anti-Semitism never wasn't a specific German problem (we can remember, just to make an example, copious and violent pogrom in the East Europe in several centuries) but it became a German specific problem when the Nazi got government. From 1933 the Jewish problem became European because of the people's stream who went from East to West Europe and away from the old continent. But these poor refugees, ad the Nazi Government knew it well, should be a burden for the other European Government: who did feed them?

So it is also important to emphasize the relationship between the actions of the British government toward the Jews, in particular refugees, and popular reactions. And vice versa: the popular reaction against the fury of Nazi anti-Semitism in Europe and the "Jewish question" in relation to the Jews who tried, wanted, were forced to arrive on the island of His Majesty. How and to what extent did the public opinion influence the political choices of the British government? What was the popular vision of the Jews fleeing Nazi persecution, trying to find shelter in England? Why does the English experience show us a form of anti-Semitism with different shades than the rest of Europe?

After all, Richard Bolchover in his Introduction to *British Jewry and the Holocaust* defines the British Jewish community as "unique":

«this community was unique in that it was the only Jewry in a democratic country which, while actively engaged in and physically close to the war, was never occupied by the Germans» (Bolchover, 1979, p. 1).

The uniqueness of British Jews' community derives from several elements. One of the most important of these is its own setting up. This unique community was

«one of the largest settled communities of German speaking Jews who fled abroad before the war. The conditions under which the Jewish refugees came to Britain and the procedure by which they were admitted were very important to the nature and development of that community; immigration to Britain proved to be a kind of selection process that determined the community's composition, dictating who was admitted and who was not» (Grenville, 2010, p. 1).

In the first chapter of his book *Britain and the Jewish Of Europe 1939-1945*, Bernard Wasserstein claims that the Nazi policy built up anti-Semitism as a European problem: in the history we clearly can find heavy traces of an anti-semitism view, but with the Third Reich these traces become something else, as we know.

As a Nazi anti-Semitic policy generates another very serious problem: immigration flows across Europe, to Palestine too.

And there is more. The German Government's Jewish policy made things difficult for Britain (and all the other western countries) by creating economic restrictions against the Jewish people. The Jewish that wanted to leave Germany were obliged to give all their riches to the Nazi.

And here again one can see the overlap of the economic, political, social and human factors in relation with the British – but not only - version of the Jewish problem.

As noted by B. Wasserstein (1979), the pre-war British hospitality toward the Jews was, unlike other countries, relatively generous: in Britain there was a degree of public considerable sympathy toward the Jews persecuted by the Nazi regime. Indeed, continues the researcher, it was noted that

«the Nazi treatment of the Jews before the outbreak of the war did more than anything else to turn English moral feeling against Germany» (Wasserstein, 1979)

However, it is also known that between 1933 and 1939 there were many forms of opposition to the arrival of Jewish refugees in England.

In 1933 about 330,000 Jews lived in England: a low percentage of the population, approximately equal to 0,7%. These numbers did not suggest that the Jews could be a threat to the British, neither political nor economic. They would not have stolen jobs from the English still shaken by the great economic depression that had hit the West; they would not have struggled to fill places of prestige at a political, social, cultural and intellectual level. And even if they had, their forces, because of their small number, would not have rung the alarm so loud as to not be tolerated.

There was a well-established Jewish elite, the descendants of the late nineteenth century immigrants who had landed in British ports. And exactly this elite, as T.S. Hamerow (2008) has noted in *Why we watched: Europe, America and the Holocaust*<sup>1</sup>, did not so warmly welcome the arrival of new Jews.

«The Jews who had managed to gain acceptance not only on paper, but also in everyday life - says Hamerow - felt threatened by new arrivals from Eastern Europe. In England, the Jews had succeeded with increasing success to be admitted to the rank of nobility, mingling with the proud descendants of Anglo-Saxons and Normans. [...] One of them was even Queen Victoria's favorite prime minister, although he had to convert to Anglicanism. Their ability to climb seemed endless. But the strange immigrants from Eastern Europe were now threatening the hard-earned achievements of the local Jews. It is not surprising that a large part of the old guard looked at the newcomers with disgust and resentment, usually in a disguised way, but sometimes openly» (Hamerow, 2008, my translation from the 2010 Italian edition).

As already mentioned all this must be set in the frame of the economic crisis and the constant flow of migrants in Europe and moving to the United States. If, at first, the Jewish immigrants, because of their customs, dress, language, were seen as something strange but harmless, now they are beginning to be perceived as a threat: mouths to feed and people to be given a roof over their heads. A roof and food that the British people were lacking. The economic reasons, to use a generic term, mix with the social ones and should be followed to try and define this peculiar form of British anti-Semitism.

In his book Hamerow shows the result of a series of surveys on anti-Semitism made by various bodies. In 1939, for example, there is not an increase in the perception of anti-Semitism, however, a

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<sup>1</sup> I used the Italian version of Hamerow's book: *Perchè l'Olocausto non fu fermato. Europa e America di fronte all'orrore nazista*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 2010.

dilemma, a conflict emerges between the human feeling of compassion - empathy with the chosen victims of Nazism - and a desire to maintain the *status quo* within the nation. Were the fleeing refugees to be accepted? Were the Jews to be considered as “special” refugees?

Unemployment, poverty, popular discontent would have increased in parallel with the number of people arriving. In a period of severe economic crisis and political uncertainty, due to the fear of another war in Europe, preserving social position had a determining weight in popular choices and ideas and more.

But the issue seems to be more specific. The Jews were perceived as strange, partly responsible for their fate of being persecuted, people with a strong sense of clan, which tend to separate rather than to mix with society. It is no coincidence that the newcomers among the Jews, those from Eastern Europe (the usual victims of the pogroms over the centuries), were "different": their characteristic dress, hair and beards, their music, language (Yiddish), their will to be autonomous and financially self-sufficient within society.

Andrew Sharif (1964) interestingly observes the perception diversity on the press with two examples. The first example is taken from a Northern provincial paper:

«at least nine-tenths of the inhabitants of the British Isles think the worse of a man if they are told he is a Jew» (*Daily Dispatch*, Oct. 17, 1932. Quoted in Sharif, 1964, p. 194).

The second one is from a *Spectator's* article by 1936 (Jan. 3, 1936), the following observation was made:

«It is quite true (the Nazi are right there) that the Jewish mentality is a distinctive thing. Even those Englishmen who are most deeply attached to their Jewish friends must feel at times a profound sense of the generic, and not merely individual differences that mark them off. One would not wish England to be represented in the world solely or even mainly by Jewish minds; for in the truth then she would cease to be England. But a great nation, sure of itself, will not harbour this fear» (*Spectator*, 3 Jan 1936. Quoted in Sharif, 1964, p. 195). «So – Sharif (1964) asked to himself – what is the significance of these four passages? They show that the belief existed that 'nine-tenths' of Englishmen, or at least 'not a few' of them, disliked the Jews because they were “different”» (pp. 194-195).

However the English form of anti-Semitism did not seem to be based on ethnic prejudice or on a demonstrated belief in racial diversity. It rather seemed a form of hostility, starting from the apparent diversity of the Jews, that matched with their traditional (hi)story of people dedicated to trade, arts, science ("Many of them pretend to be analysts", quotes Hamerow from the "Sunday Express". He continues "An analyst has no need of medical training, but will retain the functions of a doctor. And he often gets a power on the patient which is a dishonor, if he is not a good person"). All this was grafted on the already fertile ground created by the fear of the global economy crisis effects and the fear of a (new) World War.

The "Jewish question" was widely debated among people and on the newspapers, not to mention the government buildings. But it is the intertwining of these views at different levels that is the basis of English behavior towards that question.

The economic consequences of a massive influx of Jewish refugees worried the population. The fact that the refugee problem was described as a "Jewish question" and that the intrinsic motivation of the war could be given to the Jews (their defense) was a concern for the government (both in the pre war period and in the early years of the war; this last point in particular also assailed the U.S. government).

A widespread view among those who, while declaring themselves opposers to the Nazi anti-Jewish persecution, were against the admission of Jewish refugees in England was the following: to admit a large number of persecuted foreigners (Jews in particular) would not only have threatened the economic welfare of the nation but would have led to an increase in anti-Semitic feeling. There was a risk, according to this way of thinking, that large segments of the population in financial straits

would see again the Jew as a scapegoat. The common interest did not lie therefore in mutual help but in limiting the arrivals and in striving to maintain the *status quo* and, at the same time, in protecting the Jews.

The real face of the matter is well known by the Anglo-Jewish community: in 1933 they made a political and economic deal with the English Government just trying to save as many refugees as they can. According to that deal, the Anglo-Jewish community will take charge of the Jewish refugees, in giving them a house, a work, some food. But the agreement were renegotiated in 1938, when the Anglo-Jewish community did not find economic resources for their project.

Jeremy D. Harris (1996) in his *Broadcasting the Massacres. An Analysis of the BBC's Contemporary Coverage of the Holocaust* analyzes how the BBC reported what happened to Jews of Europe, mainly between 1940 and 1945. He writes:

«What was very clear in the BBC policy statement of November 1943 was that the BBC were very aware of anti-Semitism in Britain at this time and that it was feared that the BBC might encourage what the corporation called “latent anti-Semitism”. There was a constant anxiety that if they talked about Jewish affairs and Jewish issues it would only make people at home worry about the Jews they knew. The BBC and the Ministry of Information's public research led them to the conclusion that news about Jews being massacred abroad was making the public more anxious about the Jews in Britain and would only increase anti-Semitism at home» (Harris, 1996).

This meant support to the victims of the Nazi persecution not to their emigration, at least not in the UK: "The Observer" called this a "*matter of heart-rending seriousness*." Less ecumenical were instead the "Daily Express" and the "Sunday Express". Not only did they consider the economic threat but they were also convinced that those who fell victims of ethnic hostility were somehow also the cause of it, as if it were a side-effect of being Jews. Of course, the condemnation of Nazi racist policies was clear, but why should this have had consequences on British society?

The problem for Jewish refugees worsened after the German annexation of Austria and the advance of the Nazis to conquer Europe.

Gemma Romain published a very interesting essay in “The Journal of Holocaust Education” entitled *The Anschluss: the British Response to the Refugee Crisis*. Here the author explores a short period of time (March 1938 - July 1938) but provides good elements to analyze the reality that was slowly emerging in Britain starting from March 1933, that is the date of the Austrian *Anschluss*. The violence of the Nazis' annexation was reported by all the press: all the UK knew about what had happened and how grave it had been. What happened persuaded the British government into reviewing its policy towards foreigners and this led in fact to further constraints on the "visa system". Romain also notes that this period coincides with the decision of the British Jewish community to renegotiate what had been stated in 1933, namely that it would give financial aid to the Jewish newcomers.

«This period is of added interest, since one major feature of the response to the Anschluss Crisis was the failure of the British Jewish community to provide financial aid to any new refugees. This was contrary to the declaration made in 1933 by the Anglo-Jewish leadership that no Jewish refugee would become a burden on the state» (Romain, 1999, p. 88).

A burden on the state then, this was the bilateral perception of Jewish refugees.

Now it was not only a humanitarian issue but also purely political and economic one. The criteria for judging the event and those involved in it go beyond the humanitarian field and have an impact, at this point, on a broader and more complex reality.

Were the British indifferent to the refugee problem? Or was William Rubinstin right, when, in 1997 (quoted in Romain, 1999), he said that the allies could not have saved one single Jew more? This question haunts the modern era when it reflects on the Holocaust and on the responsibility of the West in relation to this traumatic event. However it must be considered as the end and not as the starting point of the reflection.

Romain maintains that the British response to the refugee crisis has to be analyzed in relation to different factors, primarily the attitude of the German government towards the Jews until the adoption of the Nuremberg Laws and then she says

«an assessment will be made of the role of socio-cultural motives influencing British refugee policy, such as Britain's self proclaimed reputation of refuge for all, and its economic and social climate in contemporary which immigrants, Jews and particularly, were depicted as strange and un-British» (Romain, 1999).

The Jews were stateless people without a home state, without, in short, a nationality. And in view of this it was necessary for the British government to try and predict what Third Reich would have done about the Jews who wanted to leave Germany.

The author of this essay makes it clear that British control of immigration was based mostly on the desire to help the Jewish refugees in so far as such assistance would have been acceptable for British interests and helping these refugees would have been useful for the economy. At the same time, the government work would have appeared in a favourable light. So, government action should have taken into account both the humanitarian side and the British interests. If the Foreign Office thus thought that it would not have been desirable to reduce the possibility of immigration for Austrian refugees, in fact a limit was actually put through the "visa system". That the British government was really concerned about the fate of the Austrian Jews and socialists is demonstrated by a telegram sent to Vienna which reads: "Desire of His Majesty's Government to Protect the Jews in Austria and the Socialists." However, the issue is linked to political and economic factors that go beyond humanitarian concerns.

All British wished Britain continued to be perceived as a tolerant nation. However British politicians' concern was: what would these immigrants do once landed on English soil? The refugees were not considered as personally unacceptable but they represented a problem. Over time, the tax burden imposed by Germany on the Jews who were trying to leave the country grew heavier and heavier. More and more of them would finally migrate taking with them less and less assets. In addition to this, the danger of espionage and infiltration of foreigners was considered more than possible and concrete. The refugee problem was tied to that of national security: the refugees were seen with suspicion and the situation did not improve, as noted by Tony Kushner (1995, pp. 147-166) in his essay *Holocaust Survivors in Britain: an Overview and Research Agenda*, at the end of the war when, with the outbreak of the Cold War, most of them were regarded with suspicion. Every Jew in fact seemed to have some relationship (social, cultural, etc.) with the Soviet Union.

What should the government do then? Romain concludes that in broad terms, while the British unreservedly condemned the Nazi anti-Semitic policy, they would not have done anything more than necessary to save the victims of that policy. The point here, is, thus, to understand what "necessary" means.

Setting limits and restrictions on immigration policy was, according to some, a better answer than being forced to send refugees back at the end of their journey of hope.

Romain gives a clear example of this. After the British government decided to deny permission to land to some refugees arrived in Folkestone, Austrian politicians from the Aliens Department of the Home Office, as Sir Ernest Holderness, were concerned about the fact that public opinion would not consider favourably the government decision to send exiles back to Germany, unless they were regarded as particularly undesirable<sup>2</sup>.

That is probably the reason why, to quote Romain again, the British government decided not to make public its intention to apply restrictions on the "visa system" until the end of April 1938.

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<sup>2</sup> Sir Ernest Holderness on March 18, 1938 wrote to Sir Neville Bland: «Our actual difficulty, of course, is that public opinion would not permit us to send refugees back to Germany once they are here unless they are particularly undesirable».

Besides the concern for the public opinion, the British government also feared an excessive interest in the Jews would encourage the countries of Central Europe to solve the Jewish question by favouring even by force, the migration to Britain. And the high figures of Jewish communities in Europe were terrifying under all points of view.

Britain home front situation was very problematic. The immigration problem mixed with economic and political issues. In a particular way it mixed with a matter of home security. About the new rules for the visa system the British Government proceeded with caution to avoid to admit any spies with the refugees.

Just to make an example one can see some pages from the press, like the *Sunday Express*. November 10<sup>th</sup> 1940 we can find an article, like other ones published in those years, “The spy who got ten years”. Under an “exclusive picture” (*sic!*) we read:

«This is Anna Wolkoff. It is the first picture to be published in Britain of the Russian-born woman who became a German spy for revenge, who betrayed her adopted country, and who for her treachery was sent to penal servitude for ten years at the Old Bailey on Thursday.

Anna Wolkoff, childhood friend of the Duchess of Kent, was a household name among London's leaders of fashion, just before the war.

She designed her own materials: a colour – Blue Anna – was named after her: the Duchess of Gloucester, the Duchess of Windsor were among her clients.

Her sister, Kyra Wolkoff, in an interview with the *Sunday Express* told:

-Anna was artistic, creative. She designed dresses, and eventually built up a salon in Conduitt Street, W. By the time she was thirty the salon was famous.

Hatred of Jews (in capital letters)

She came to the conclusion that the instigators of all international troubles and revolutions were the Jews. With the zeal of the reformer she decided to do something in her small way, and to this end became a member of the Right Club of which Captain Ramsay M.P. was president. Then she met Tyler Kent, U.S. Embassy clerck, who had been junior secretary at the American Embassy in Russia. He was her accomplice and was sentenced to seven years penal servitude. She did not see through him until the very last. Even when both were in jail she forgot her own trouble in trying to alleviate his» (From the Wiener Library Archive. Press cuttings [5] reel no. 148 exps 768).

Something must be said about the news report and then examples should be taken from the satirical cartoons.

Andrew Sharif wrote about the press on page 11 of his 1964 book *The British Press and Jews under Nazi Rules*. Here he asserts that we have to take a special look at three national dailies: *The Times*, *The Manchester Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph*. According to Sharif *The Manchester Guardian* (that “had a strong traditional interest in the well-being of minorities, reinforced by a traditional dislike of any kind of right”) gave a lot of space to the Jewish question.

Sharif writes:

«the prominence it (*The Manchester Guardian*) gave to Hitler's persecution of the Jews was, in this early period, no greater than that to his persecution of political opposition groups. Quite naturally, the two aspects were often linked by the *Guardian* as by most of the *Press*, but the specific attitude of the *Guardian* tended in its reporting (though not at all comments) to blur distinctions both between different opposition groups, and between such groups on the one hand and the Jews on the other, as object of persecution» (Sharif, 1964, p. 12).

Broadly speaking one can think that Sharif clearly underlined a specific credit in the matter of perception: the daily *Manchester* paper understood the Jewish exception in the Nazi persecution policy. Even if, like Sharif says, this sensibility is hard to define: there was a common tendency to minimize the significance of particular stages. The Nazi persecution policy was so cruel and inhuman, so far from a reasonable sensibility that a lot of the press (and politicians too) not immediately see, for example, what the Nuremberg Decrees meant for the German Jews. At first not even the *Manchester Guardian*.

In fact it was hard for the British journalists and political commentators to understand the real reason of the Jewish persecution. Jews in Germany and all over Europe were not persecuted because of some specific crimes or for anti-social practices but, we can say, because they were what they were. And what they were was mixed with some stereotyped issues.

The other “more popular” press was focused on the Jews like an immigration matter.

“Britons help Britons” was the bold type title of the *Daily Express*' October 3th 1933. The article was talking about the arrival of two Jewish refugees as “the first of 60.000 of their race who had fled from Germany” (Daily Express 3 October 1933 quoted in Sharif, 1964).

In an era of economic depression it would be very hard for any British Government to accept such a consequence: the Jewish refugees escaping from Germany were poor people and they were in need.

All the social classes were worried about the immigration consequences: each refugee admittance, as we already said, meant an Englishman unemployed.

All the British press, with some exception, openly showed its dislike towards the Nazi racial political behaviour but the press showed a limit, too.

This limit was, probably, the deep misunderstanding of the specificity of what was happening in Europe. This limit, again, can be understood, if we underline the missing logical link between what was happening to the European Jews (persecution, concentration camps ecc.) and a “passive” approach to the refugees problem.

Now we need to reiterate that all the elements seem to demonstrate that the perception of the refugees problem takes us back to an economic, political and social issue.

This blatantly emerges from newspaper articles, readers letters, poll results and, last but not least, satirical cartoons.

The greatest fear was that the refugees arrival would damage the English standard of living. The press was often the spokesman of such a fear in a sometimes popular, sometimes more intellectual way.

The real problem for the Jews is that they represented simultaneously two stereotypes in the perception that the British had of them. Two potentially very dangerous stereotypes. The Jews were both “refugees” and “aliens” but mainly they were treated as aliens (Aliens Act, 1919). Refugees were a burden for society; aliens were different, it was difficult to understand their language as well as their conception of society. Moreover, as the war went on, they were considered as potential spies, too.

After the war the Jews were suspected of being Bolshevik since many of them arrived from Eastern Europe.

Concluding his argument on the relationship between the press, society and the Jewish question, Sharif states that the British generated their own version of the Jewish stereotype.

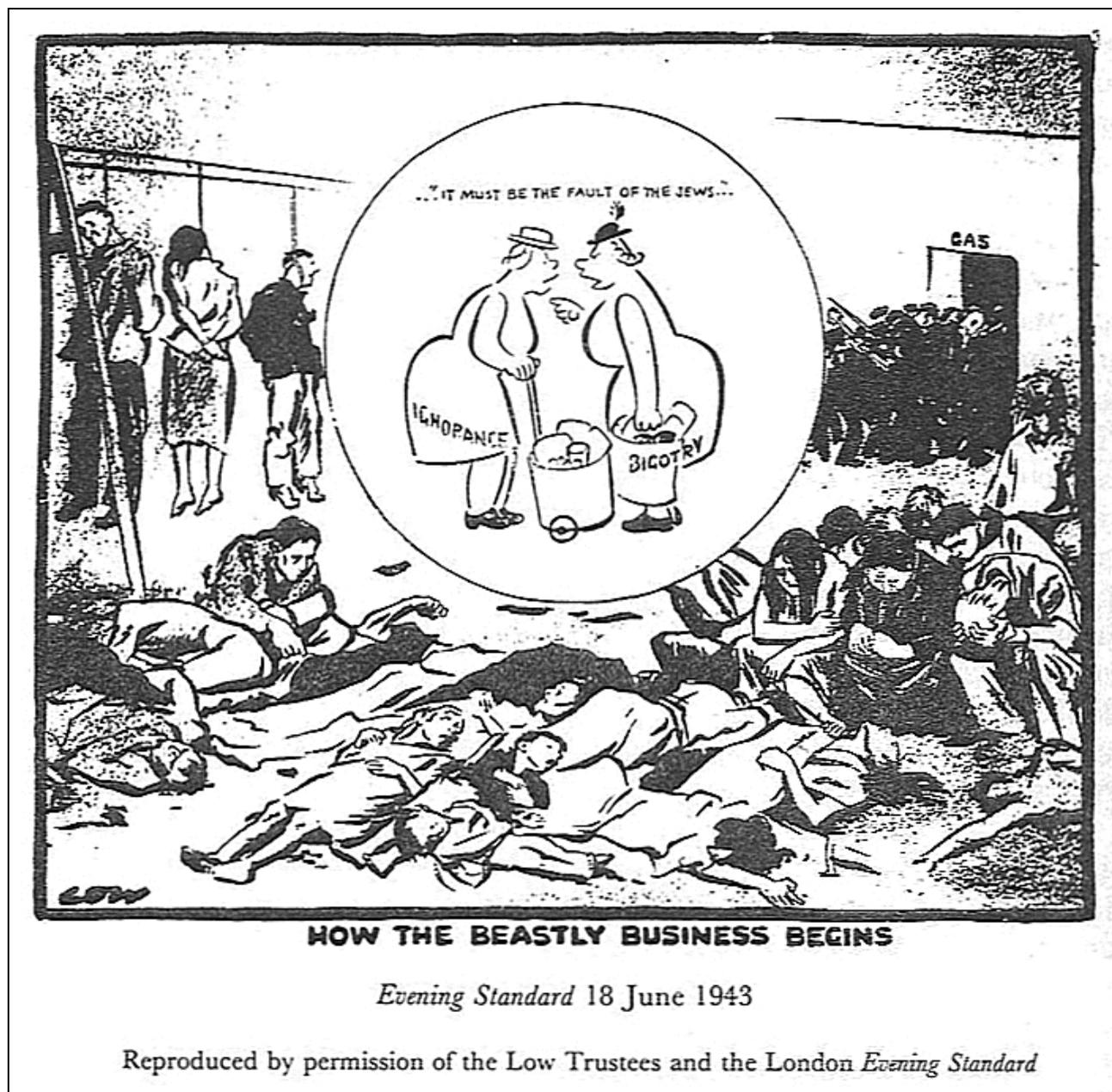
«[the British version of a Jewish stereotype was] much less vicious, of course, than the Nazi variety, it tendend to portray the Jew as 'shrewed, mercenary, industrious, intelligent and loyal to his family'; in other words, as a potential danger to the happy-go-lucky Briton. It was precisely during our period, when the Jewish population of the United Kingdom was noticeably increased, when many a Gentile met a Jew for the first time in his life, that an opportunity presented itself of really showing that, in those respect which had apparently worried the Gentile, the Jew was much the same as he. In other words, the only good that might have come out of all this evil was a better understanding between differing cultures, a lessening of traditional British isolation» (Sharif, 1964, p. 207).

The cartoons contain these same elements. This stereotyped vision finds its ultimate expression in some cutting representations.

This does not mean that all cartoonists vehiculated such a vision. Indeed, exactly because they

were immersed in that context and they were aware of the popular perception, they managed to convey British fears in an immediate and satirical way.

Some of cartoons included in this dissertation and presented without following a particular order, try to explain exactly this theory.



**Cartoon no. 2. From: Bernard Wassertein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945***

On the Evening Standard of June 18th 1943 this cartoon by Low appears. On the backcloth of the sufferings of concentration camps – the entrance to a gas chamber is clearly shown – two British middle-class ladies discuss about the war while they are doing their shopping. One lady represents ignorance and the other bigotry. They say: “... it must be the fault of the Jews!!”. However it is only the context that tells us that the suffering people beneath are Jews because there is nothing else in the cartoon that suggests this.

THE END OF THE WAR IN EUROPE

Cartoon 20.3 'The whole German people. . .' *Evening Standard*, London, 19 April 1945



The public reaction to revelations about conditions in German concentration and extermination camps in the closing phase of the war was intense. Everybody in the Allied countries had long known of their existence, and that many horrible things were done inside them; but the extent of the atrocities was not generally appreciated until Allied troops actually arrived.

The 'gut reaction' of the British civilian reading the news in this cartoon is extreme, but similar views were certainly expressed. The reproof of the inmate is unanswerable.

**Cartoon no. 3. From: David Low, *Years of Wrath: A Cartoon History, 1932-1945*, p. 242**

Another *Evening Standard* cartoon by Low – April 19<sup>th</sup> 1945 – shows a distinguished English gentleman, well dressed, reading a newspaper reporting all the horrors committed in concentration camps. As in a dream, suffering bodies and faces appear to him (here again there is no clear indication of them being Jewish, or maybe it is a clear cartoonist's desire not to explain it). These people can hardly stand up and almost walk on some dead bodies. The gentleman looks up, almost imprecating or cursing someone and says: "The whole German people should be wiped out for this!" Another voice: "Don't forget some of us are Germans, friend".

These two cartoons, a part from presenting the humanitarian side and indignation, as already mentioned, also contain another element: the identification of guilt, of the responsibility and the consequent punishment. But this goes beyond the scope of our discussion.



DRIFTING

FEBRUARY 15, 1943

Hundreds of thousands of Jews were wandering helplessly away from massacre, starvation and ruthless cruelty in Central Europe. Only a small number were permitted by Britain, the mandatory power in Palestine, to find rest there because of the active opposition of Arab nationalists.

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**Cartoon no. 4. From: David Low, *Years of Wrath: a Cartoon History 1932-1945*, p. 234**  
(Always David Low on the *Evening Standard*, February 15, 1943, "Drifting")

The cartoon is self-explaining. An entire population is adrift. Old people, women and children are on a raft, each one looking in a different direction. Desperation is evident on their faces as well as their disorientation.

If we carefully look at the image, the raft seems still, at the mercy of the waves, without a direction. They probably do not know where to go.

Also in this cartoon we identify the people as Jews because we already know it, not because of some specific details. Even if we read the author's words - written several years after the end of the war – we can notice that he identifies the people as Jews.

The situation, as mentioned, did not change with the end of the conflict. Despite the need to restart the economy, weakened by the war years, Britain did not reckon to need many Jewish workers. Leaving aside here the age-old and painful question of the survivors of the concentration camps, one can not but agree with Kusher that only a small fraction of these arrived on the island. The Aliens Restriction Act of 1919 was still in force without exception. The Jews, moreover, had not been treated as "exceptional" victims (in the negative term) of Nazi policy.

This obviously can not overshadow the merits and timely actions taken by the British in Europe, immediately after the liberation of concentration camps. The intervention in the liberation of Belsen, medical care, the willingness to shoot and to tell the horror hidden beyond that barbed wire. Nor can we forget the importance of many humanitarian efforts to help the survivors, in particular children and young people, some of which were transferred temporarily or permanently in Britain. In these episodes, the British are the heroes, the liberators. Domestic policy was a totally different matter.

The humanitarian response is always accompanied by the economic and political necessity to defend the inside from the outside, what belongs to the nation from what does not, from what is uncontrolled.

Having thus hinted, however superficially, at certain aspects of the relationship between the Jews and Britain, then strained by the experience of World War II, we hope to have been able to outline some points of departure of the study to be eventually developed and we hope to find confirmation in the direct and indirect sources.

The general idea on which the opening of the project is built is to use a perspective that can be both historical and meta-historical, if by meta-historical here we accept the idea of perception as described at the beginning. Historical facts are *facts* but getting to explain them in a different way can be rather challenging for reflection and knowledge. Rethinking the tragic experience of the European Jews between 1930-1950 through the eyes of contemporaries should not prevent us from trying to read the reality of that same period with an internal point of view, that of perception.

The short consideration in these pages does not mean to offer a thorough or exhaustive historical reconstruction.

What could appear as an entangled skein has the specific purpose of underlining how the question on the perception of the Jews – between 1930 and 1948 – is indeed an unravelled problem.

It seems that in order to explain anti-Semitism from the perception point of view it is necessary to entangle rather than to explain.

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