

Sybil Campbell Library Monograph Number 8

BFUW and Academic Refugee Women

Summary of a seminar by Susan Cohen on 26th February 2008

Setting the Scene

Susan Cohen had studied the British Federation of University Women's work in the 1930s and 40s and the way they dealt with requests for help from academic refugee women. BFUW was set up in 1907 to support university women: their aims included encouraging independent research by women, facilitating cooperation between women of different universities, and stimulating the interest of women in municipal and public life. Sybil Campbell, Honorary Secretary during the 1920s and 30s, was largely responsible for the fund-raising campaign which enabled the Federation to establish Crosby Hall in Chelsea as an International Hall of Residence for women students. Crosby Hall became the very heart of the Federation and housed the BFUW headquarters, its library and archives. It played an invaluable role as a reception centre for the increasing numbers of academic women refugees fleeing Nazism in Europe. In 1992 the Federation was forced to move from Crosby Hall and the archives were sent to a temporary home in Portsmouth until 2000, when they were moved to the Women's Library at London Guildhall University. Eight years later, in 2008, the papers remain uncatalogued due to lack of funding for an archivist. They are effectively inaccessible.

However, Susan was granted access to the partially catalogued refugee papers in 2002, nine boxes out of a total of thirty-seven. Also, by chance, in 2005 the Federation discovered some stray refugee case files. Then, some months later, the BFWG Charitable Foundation found the complete set of Minutes of the Emergency Refugee Committee and some case files and correspondence. These had probably been used by a previous researcher and never replaced with the main archives.

The Sybil Campbell Collection has electronic copies of these 'found' papers, the outcome of Susan's chance meeting with a researcher from the Holocaust Museum in Washington. This lady's remit was to identify refugee archive material which was not easily available, have it electronically copied, at the museum's expense, so that it could be made more accessible. The museum donated a set of these copies to the Sybil Campbell Collection; the original papers joined the BFUW archives at the Women's Library.

A further aspect to this is that Sybil Campbell was personally involved in the rescue and welfare of several Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution and was largely responsible for the appointment, in 1938, of Dr Erna Hollitscher as Secretary of the Refugee Committee.

The BFUW Refugee Committee

Within weeks of Hitler's accession to power in 1933, BFUW began hearing from members in Germany asking for assistance in settling in Britain and finding work in their profession. Soon there were also requests from academic women in Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland. Following the annexation of Austria in March 1938 the trickle of calls became a deluge and so the BFUW Emergency Committee for Refugees was set up to cope with the crisis. Professor Edith Morley was one of the nineteen BFUW committee members dedicated to helping the refugees. The committee's remit was to deal with all matters stemming from requests from graduates, academics or professionals who were members of the International Federation of University Women, regardless of race or religion.

Priority was given where academic work ought to be continued and in all other cases consideration was given to age, probable adaptability and whether the refugees would make a positive impact on the host nation. Ages ranged from 18 to 66 but the majority were in their 30s and 40s. Applicants had to fill in a full questionnaire including educational background, academic qualifications and domestic skills (useful for initial employment). The committee did not ask about applicants' religion until late 1938 following Kristallnacht on 9th and 10th November, the eruption of the pogrom against Jews. In May 1939, of 69 adult applicants, 57 were listed as Jewish. Exceptionally, husbands and relatives, especially children, were helped.

A typical list of professional credentials of the October 1938 applicants included 9 medical women, 10 teachers, 7 technical and laboratory assistants, 1 dentist, 2 librarians, 2 art historians, 2 psychologists, 4 scientific researchers, 2 legal women, 1 journalist and 6 secretaries. The majority had medical degrees or PhDs. In total, during its existence, the refugee committee helped more than 400 of their international colleagues.

In September 1938 the committee appointed Dr Erna Hollitscher as secretary. 'Holly', born in Vienna, was a language graduate of Vienna University who, unable to find work in her field, had taken secretarial work. A Jewess, she fled from Austria in March 1938 and worked as an au pair in England before contacting BFUW. Sybil Campbell gave her hospitality and friendship. It was appropriate to have a refugee for the post of secretary, someone who had experienced forced migration and who had excellent translation and secretarial skills. It was also important that she was Jewish which gave her an empathy that only a fellow refugee could have with the increasing numbers of Jewish refugee women seeking help.

Holly was secretary for the 11 years of the committee's existence and worked for BFUW for 19 years. She dealt with an enormous amount of work, was extremely efficient and took a personal interest in almost every case. In the first 7 months of her employment a total of 1450 letters were written, interviews took place on and off all day, the telephone rang constantly, the committee was serviced. She linked job vacancies with suitable applicants and used her own contacts to find employment or hospitality. She visited refugees in hospital. She networked with other refugee agencies especially with the Society of Friends.

There were three main sources of finance for the refugee committee, donations from private individuals and Local Associations, gifts from sister organisations in America and the British Government which reimbursed the committee for grants it had made to Austrian and German refugees - £382 7s 3d in 1941-42. America sent £1,000 in September 1940, £1,000 in December and another £1,000 in May 1941. This enabled the Executive Committee to give Local Associations and Dr Hollitscher permission to make payments of up to £10 without referral to them. By June 1947 over £2,800 had been received from private gifts. The East Surrey branch used some of the £1,260 it had raised to pay for trainees at local hospitals and on farms. Grants were made for purposes such as pocket money during training, maintenance during illness, to cover emergencies and for railway fares.

For most refugees the key to entry into Britain was a work permit for which an income was essential. They could not take money out of their countries yet they needed to be financially independent to get into Britain. Women refugees were rarely able to get employment commensurate with their qualifications or within their field of experience. Residential domestic service posts in private households were the one area of work for which Home Office permits were available due to the shortage of home labour. There was a lack of academic and professional posts on offer because professional groups such as doctors, dentists, lawyers and academics demonstrated a strong anti-alien hostility and pressurised the government from as early as 1933 to limit admissions. Foreign qualifications were not generally recognised in Great Britain.

Nursing was the other main area of employment for refugee women. A scheme was set up in 1939 whereby women refugee doctors were sent to midwifery training schools for two years followed by two years work in rural districts. In London each of 37 Nursing and Midwifery training schools accepted two candidates for probationer training. One of the conditions was the ability to speak English. The refugee committee's minutes are full of references to the need to organise English classes as public provision was sadly lacking.

With the implementation of defence regulations in 1940 it became apparent that many refugee women had been forced to leave protected areas at short notice and go to places where they could not find work, leaving them penniless. The refugee committee helped as far as it could but funds were very limited. It was of the opinion that 'if refugees were debarred from earning their living they should be given adequate Government assistance or be interned'.

A Survey of Foreign Professional Women was mooted in 1941 but the Home Office, initially favourable, advised in 1942 that no such survey should be undertaken. The Refugee Committee proceeded with the survey regardless. Dr Hollitscher conducted personal interviews to establish the attitude of the majority of registered foreign graduates to the idea of staying, emigrating or returning home.

The Canadian Association was notable for the clothes and toy parcels it sent to BFUW and the committee was thus able to help by supplying clothing to those in need. Parents on a very small income found the purchase of clothes a real hardship and found the parcels a godsend.

Susan Cohen gives many examples of specific women refugees and their circumstances and of the families that sometimes received help. She cites cases of those who were able to study and gain university qualifications and embark on a new career. Some became well established and showed their appreciation by making donations to the Refugee Committee to help others.

The work undertaken by the BFUW Emergency Committee for refugees was extraordinary, probably unique. It certainly satisfied the objective set out in the IFUW Charter, "to promote understanding and goodwill between university women of all nations, regardless of race, religion or political creed". Its work put it in close contact with groups in Europe, North America, Australasia and South Africa as well as Local Associations at home. The women committee members acted in the best humanitarian traditions. The strength of character of the refugees and their resourcefulness and determination to make a new life for themselves is reflected throughout.

Summary by Cynthia Richmond

The full text of Susan Cohen's talk, with detailed references, is available elsewhere on the Sybil Campbell Collection web site <http://sybilcampbellcollection.org.uk>

"How the British Federation of University Women helped rebuild the lives of academic refugee women in the 1930s and 40s" © Susan Cohen 2008