Where would you have found, in 1940, ‘the most elite university in the world in terms of the pool of scholars it contained’? The answer, according to the editors’ introduction to *Ark of Civilisation: Refugee Scholars and Oxford University 1930–45*, isn’t any of the great institutions that may come to mind, but Hutchinson Camp on the Isle of Man. As the result of a slightly panicky policy of interning ‘enemy aliens’ after the fall of France, large numbers of refugee German scholars – most but not all of whom were Jewish – found themselves in this unlikely spot. They immediately set about giving lectures and conducting seminars. Activities for the week beginning 21 October 1940, for instance, included Dr Unger on ‘Greek Philosophy: Plato (continued)’, Mr Stadler on ‘History of Medieval Culture (continued)’, and Professor Marx, ‘Study Group on Goethe’. The exiled journalist Rudolf Olden was also interned there, and ‘in the exceptionally fine summer of 1940’ delivered ‘memorable political analyses on the Hutchinson Square lawns to audiences of 300–400’.

Other domains of culture were not neglected. It was at Hutchinson Camp that the members of what became the Amadeus Quartet got to know one another. Kurt Schwitters was not Jewish, but his work had been included in the Nazi denunciation of ‘Degenerate Art’. Having fled first to Norway and then to Scotland, he was interned in the summer of 1940 and held in Hutchinson Camp for more than a year. There he conducted a thriving little business in painting portraits, though his abstract collages were less well appreciated: he ‘produced sculptures in porridge, though the latter did not last long and could not be exhibited because of fears over health and safety as they grew mould’. Paul Jacobsthal, a distinguished classical archaeologist and art historian, formerly a professor at Marburg, later recalled his dream of ‘opening the German Manx University with terms during the Oxford and Cambridge vacations so that advanced people could come here for courses’.

As a result of Italy’s declaration of war on Britain in June 1940, refugee Italian scholars were caught in the same net. The ancient historian Arnaldo Momigliano and his family had managed to escape to Britain in March 1939 thanks to some prompt and admirably unbureaucratic assistance from the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning, but he too was rounded up as an ‘enemy alien’. As Oswyn Murray reports, ‘it is alleged that when Momigliano presented himself at Oxford Police Station, he was asked to empty his pockets, and extracted John Stuart Mill’s essay *On Liberty*.’ He was duly sent to the Isle of Man. There was a separate camp for interned Italians, and
after a while the commandant took pity on the three professors in his care – the economist Piero Sraffa, the philosopher Lorenzo Minio-Paluello and Momigliano – and offered them a transfer to the German camp, where they might find more intellectual company. The others were keen to go,' Murray writes, 'hoping it might improve their German, but Momigliano dissuaded them on the grounds that it was better to be three Italian professors in a camp full of waiters and restaurateurs than three waiters in a camp full of German professors.'

The fact that Jacobsthal and his colleagues took for granted that ‘advanced people’ from Oxford and Cambridge would have much to learn from the internees may partly have been expressive of the sense of standing natural to a ‘Herr Professor Doktor’ in Germany before the war, but it may also have been an accurate reflection of the relative achievements of British and German academic culture in several fields. The impact of refugee scholars on British (and American) culture and science more generally after the war has long been acknowledged, but Ark of Civilisation brings together 23 essays that concentrate specifically on the role of Oxford University. The story isn’t always a happy one, but the benefits, for the institution as well as the scholars to whom it gave shelter, were substantial and long-lasting. For example, ‘when Oxford established its chair of the history of art in 1955, the two candidates – Edgar Wind and Otto Pächt – were both Jewish refugee scholars’: in terms of schools or approaches, Oxford was choosing between Hamburg and Vienna. Or again: ‘When an Italian scholar was asked in the 1950s which was the best German department of classical philology, he is said to have replied “Oxford!”’

Scholars were, of course, only a small part of a much larger exodus, which gathered momentum through the 1930s. Many long-assimilated German Jews couldn’t quite believe what seemed to be happening, and it may now appear remarkable how late many of them stayed in Germany: 23,000 Jews left in 1937, 40,000 in 1938, and 78,000 in the first eight months of 1939. Some academics, dismissed from their university positions by Nazi decrees in 1933, had initially chosen to stay, eking out a living in other ways; some had fled to other European countries, only to be forced into a second exile when Europe fell in 1940; some found a temporary refuge in Britain before moving on to the United States. It has been calculated that altogether about two thousand university post-holders and research workers lost their posts in Germany and Austria, only a minority of whom quickly managed to re-establish their careers elsewhere. By February 1939, appointments had been found in Britain for 128 academic refugees, 27 of them in Oxford, with as many again provided with some form of support but no post. However, such numbers tell only a small part of a complex and moving story.

Nationally, the key organisation was the Academic Assistance Council (AAC), founded in 1933 largely at the prompting of William Beveridge, then director of the London School of Economics. It was renamed the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL) in 1936, and today – its services are needed as much now as they ever were in certain parts of the world – it is known as the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA). A central principle from the outset was that displaced academics shouldn’t merely be given assistance as refugees, but should be enabled to continue to function as scholars. Admirable as this goal may have been, it was in practice difficult to achieve. Most British universities were small and not well funded: they had known straitened
times in the 1930s, with few new posts, so there was already a backlog of well-qualified British candidates even for temporary appointments. Refugee academics were sometimes shut out by a nativist prejudice in favour of British scholars. One Oxford don even objected on these grounds to his college’s proposal to provide support for Albert Einstein, though his colleagues decisively dismissed such small-mindedness.

Oxford was better off than other universities, or at least many of its constituent colleges were, but even here the creation of new permanent appointments for relatively senior German scholars was, for the most part, out of the question, and anyway not everyone welcomed an influx of foreigners. Those who did recognise the obligation to try to assist their displaced colleagues had to be resourceful and imaginative, not just in raising funds but in inventing ways to channel them to the most deserving cases while allowing those individuals to retain some sense of dignity and autonomy. There were impressive instances where, a small sum of money having been raised from various sources, including personal donations, a case would be mounted to demonstrate the ‘need’ for a lecture course that only a certain German professor could provide, or the ‘necessity’ of employing a particularly learned German colleague if a long-term research project were to be successful. Nearly all these arrangements were ad hoc and temporary; college governing bodies were forever being asked to consider the renewal of the small grant made the previous year to Professor X or Doctor Y. Some of the poorer Oxford colleges felt unable to make any contribution, but several of the richer ones come out well from the account given in *Ark of Civilisation*: ‘All Souls stands out,’ we’re told, making substantial sums available through a variety of grants and stipends. Oxford University Press also found ways to contribute, including acting as a conduit for anonymous donations by the Rockefeller Foundation.

Certain individuals emerge as the quiet heroes of the story. It was fortunate that A.D. Lindsay and W.D. Ross, both eminent philosophers and, respectively, master of Balliol and provost of Oriel, were exceptionally sympathetic to the plight of academic refugees, since they possessed the institutional clout to get things done. Similarly, J.L. Brierly, Chichele professor of international law and fellow of All Souls, was notably creative in finding ways to extend institutional support. Above all, Gilbert Murray, Regius professor of Greek till 1936 and perhaps the most prominent representative of liberal internationalism at Oxford, not only took the lead in various schemes, but he and his wife provided accommodation, hospitality and personal support for numerous displaced scholars.

Others, while well-meaning, sometimes adopted a somewhat superior tone. The Regius professor of history, Maurice Powicke, genuinely helped the Renaissance scholar Nicolai Rubinstein, but when the latter finally got a permanent post in London, Powicke couldn’t resist a homily: ‘You will be a welcome addition to the academic life in London and will play your part as a gentleman; but I trust you will never forget the fair-mindedness and generosity which, by overriding a natural preference for our own people, have opened the door to you.’ One cannot help wondering whether the committee that eventually appointed Rubinstein hadn’t found it just a little bit easier to override that ‘natural preference’ given that all three of the other applicants on the shortlist were women.
Age was one significant variable in determining how the chances fell out for particular individuals. An academic in early or mid-career might be expected to adapt to local ways, and to become proficient enough in English to make an effective teaching contribution. Older scholars were perhaps less promising on these grounds. Against this, it could help if the refugee had published work whose significance was widely acknowledged in the sometimes rather insular academic world of British universities, especially if that work had been translated, though it seems likely that a higher proportion of British scholars and scientists read German in the 1930s than would be the case now.

Academic specialism was a further crucial factor determining whether any opening could be found or created. The story of refugee scientists has been told more than once, and Oxford does not figure prominently (Manchester seems to have played the leading part among British universities). It is important to remember what an overwhelmingly ‘arts’ university Oxford was in the 1930s: only 15 per cent of the honours degrees awarded in 1938 were in science; 21 per cent of the teaching staff were in just one faculty, Literae Humaniores. It is also worth remembering what a parochial university it was when compared to the great international centres of learning on the Continent. It has been calculated that in 1938, 83 per cent of the fellows of Oxford colleges were Oxford graduates; approximately a quarter of the fellows of any college had been undergraduates at that college (whereas ‘today 50 per cent of Oxford tutors have been born outside Britain’).

In addition, some disciplines were, because of their content or their history, more internationally minded than others. Classics had been central to the European republic of learning in the 19th century, with German scholars increasingly setting the pace. Medieval and Renaissance history were also transnational and multilingual scholarly enterprises, with German scholars again prominent. By contrast, work on recent aspects of British culture, politics and literature tended to be more inward-looking and it would have been difficult to countenance, let alone justify, giving priority to a displaced German scholar. In some disciplines there were also distinctive national traditions that could impede the easy transfer of expertise. Philosophy was an interesting example at a time when the subject in the UK was moving further away from a common post-Kantian inheritance towards more purely analytical techniques. This particularly affected the question of whether an émigré philosopher could fit in with Oxford’s tutorial model of teaching. SPSL’s initial assessment of Raymond Klibansky found him ‘probably not well fitted’ for ‘the ordinary work of academic philosophy’, characterising him as ‘the embodiment of the “researcher”’, the quotation marks indicating a non-native species. Moreover, his specialism, medieval philosophy, was ‘outside the scope of existing academic curricula in this country’. However, he had a champion in Ros, who managed to get a lectureship in medieval philosophy created for him at Oriel, where he spent most of his time compiling the huge Corpus Platonicum Medii Aevi, before leaving for a post at McGill in 1946.

And of course it helped enormously if the displaced scholar already spoke good English. When the eminent post-Kantian philosopher and former rector of Hamburg University Ernst Cassirer arrived in Oxford in 1933 at the age of 59, he gave his first lectures in German, to correspondingly
tiny audiences. He soon moved on, first to Sweden, then to the US. By contrast, Theodore Schüller, who had been in the same class at Gymnasium as Ernst Gombrich, quickly found publishing jobs in Britain, eventually working for OUP. 'He was helped in his emigration ... by the fact that he spoke fluent English, having had an English nanny.' Paul Jacobsthal may not have strengthened his own case when, in his application to the AAC in 1935, he declared that his spoken English was fluent because he had 'lectured in English and talked shop with my English friends since 25 years'.

One figure who merits, and receives, special attention is Eduard Fraenkel, described as 'one of the great classical scholars of the 20th century'. By 1934, when he was 46, Fraenkel had already held chairs at three German universities. His family were typical of the stratum of prosperous, cultivated Jews who regarded themselves as Germans. As his son recalled, 'he enjoyed his ham and bacon, and believed in no god ... It was Hitler who made him and us feel Jewish.' Forced to stop teaching, Fraenkel left for Britain in 1934, where his scholarly reputation eased his path. Maurice Bowra organised a whip-round of sympathetic Oxford classicists to provide some immediate financial aid, and both Corpus Christi and Christ Church extended him support; A.E. Housman seems to have spurred Trinity College, Cambridge to offer him a five-year fellowship. Not that Fraenkel had arrived as the typical penniless refugee. When he brought his family over from Freiburg later in 1934, they came 'with two railway carriages of possessions, including Fraenkel's violin and his wife's Bechstein grand piano'. But what made his case exceptional was that he soon walked into one of the plum jobs in British academia: in December 1934 he was elected to the Corpus Chair of Latin at Oxford, his academic admirers in Britain having paid the costs of printing numerous testimonials in his support.

Fraenkel was, according to the editors of this volume, 'possibly viewed as the greatest "catch" for Oxford of all its refugee academics in the arts and humanities'. He also provides an interesting test-case for assessing the intellectual impact of the German-Jewish émigrés. He remained in his Oxford chair till his retirement in 1953, after which he continued to run an advanced seminar almost until his death in 1970. Hugh Lloyd-Jones's verdict was that Fraenkel's influence 'created an amalgam of German Altertumswissenschaft with English classical scholarship', but his brand of European learning may not always have been welcomed by college tutors immersed in the task of taking their first and second-year undergraduates through their time-hallowed linguistic drills. Fraenkel attempted to import the Continental tradition of the professorial seminar for advanced students. His seminar on Aeschylus' Agamemnon ran from autumn 1936 to spring 1942, progressing, as Christopher Stray calculates in his excellent essay on Fraenkel, at a rate of just under ten lines per hour. Various figures have recorded their recollections of this remarkable institution, which Jaś Elsner, one of the editors of this collection, calls 'the most famous seminar in the history of Oxford classics'. (A less flattering account described it as 'a circle of rabbits addressed by a stoat'.) Fraenkel seems to have completed his mammoth commentary on the play by 1946, and it was eventually published in three volumes by OUP in 1950. Elsner speaks of it as 'perhaps the greatest of all commentaries on a Greek play or indeed in any area of classical scholarship'. Yet even Fraenkel, one of the indisputable success stories in Oxford’s engagement with refugee scholars, did not always find adaptation easy. Stray reports that when his great commentary was being reprinted in the early 1950s, Fraenkel complained to OUP that the
umlauts in the names of the classical scholars Müller and Löfstedt were missing: ‘Investigation revealed that the staff who checked the bromide films used for the reprint had thought they were specks of dirt and removed them.’

Heartening as some of the individual stories are, the response to the general problem was patchy at best. What emerges over and over again in this volume is that personal connections were crucial. Where the displaced scholar was already known to colleagues in Oxford, he (they were almost all men) could benefit from testimonials, intercessions, and the quiet word in the ear that was the modus operandi of established society. A special case might be made for such an individual, especially if he was also well liked, whereas other equally deserving scholars might fall through the net.

Moreover, a case made by an Oxford dignitary still carried some weight in official circles, given the ties of background and culture that bound the different branches of the British establishment together. For example, though Paul Jacobsthal had been treated comparatively well in Oxford, his right to reside in the UK had only been extended for a year at a time. In September 1938 he asked for help from George Gordon, president of Magdalen and the incoming university vice-chancellor: ‘I should be very much obliged to you, if you would kindly go into touch with the Home Office on my behalf’ (three years in England hadn’t ironed out all the quirks in Jacobsthal’s English). Gordon wrote to Sir Ernest Holderness, the senior civil servant at the Home Office, setting out Oxford’s continuing need for Jacobsthal’s services, concluding: ‘Hitherto Dr Jacobsthal’s permission to reside has been for periods of one year only, and I should be grateful if that limit could be removed.’ It was duly removed.

However, for every scholar who was found a temporary berth or provided with a short-term subvention, there were many others who were neglected or simply snubbed. Even those who were given some modicum of help weren’t always warmly welcomed in Oxford. A certain kind of German professor was apt to be perceived as stiff-backed and unclubbable when faced with the ritualised bonhomie of many senior common rooms. Some eminent refugee professors did not hide their opinion that Oxford scholars were amateurs and too absorbed in coaching undergraduates. Many of the displaced academics arrived with families, but one learns little here of the experiences of the wives exposed to the unforgiving social protocols of interwar north Oxford. And then there were the covert, and sometimes not so covert, workings of anti-Semitism, a topic only lightly touched on in this book.

The range of disciplines covered by the individual essays is somewhat restricted – chiefly classics, archaeology and history, plus some discussion of art and music – and this colours the picture presented. The treatment of, for instance, refugee legal scholars would have highlighted other problems, since it could be difficult to find roles in a common law culture for those schooled in civil law traditions. And social scientists are almost entirely absent from this account. These disciplines were not always securely established in British universities in the interwar period, and Oxford was notably slow to embrace them: refugee social scientists were more likely to be drawn to various institutions in London, though it would have been interesting to have some
discuss[...]

In 1939 the composer and musicologist Egon Wellesz, one of the few to eventually obtain a full-time position in the university, told a correspondent that he regarded Oxford as ‘an island of the blessed’, while in the same year Nicolai Rubinstein, another who was well supported there, enthused that it was ‘a true paradise of scholars’. ‘Ark’, ‘island’, ‘paradise’: these metaphors in their different ways catch the sense of needing a refuge from the world, a place where imperilled scholars would not merely be saved from extermination but could cultivate and transmit the learning that defined their identities. Oxford could, no doubt, have done more; Britain could, of course, have done more. But much was done, and this book documents stories of individuals and institutions showing imagination as well as sympathy. Above all, they did not stand by and do nothing: they acted, and acted decisively, even when it meant flouting their own rules or bilking their own interests. We may wonder whether the historical record will contain a comparably positive balance-sheet about our contemporary response to the plight of, for example, scholars displaced from Iraq and Syria, countries with exceptionally rich traditions of scholarship in certain fields. At a time when the British government seems disgracefully bent both on reducing co-operation with the European scholarly world and on shutting out migrants more generally, it is good to be reminded of more enlightened and more generous impulses. The words of a later academic refugee, writing to thank the SPSL for assistance in the 1970s, point to the simple yet massive truth about such responses, in the past and the present: ‘Besides its material value this grant represents an expression of human solidarity that we will not forget.’

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Rabbits Addressed by a Stoat

Stefan Collini’s essay on scholars displaced by the Second World War mentions that Eduard Fraenkel’s seminar on Aeschylus’ Agamemnon was described in one account as ‘a circle of rabbits addressed by a stoat’ (LRB, 13 July). I was one of Professor Fraenkel’s ‘rabbits’ from my first week in Oxford. Unusually for Oxford in the 1950s, Fraenkel treated young women as equals, and savaged us equally, which was refreshing at a time when lectures often started with ‘Good morning, gentlemen.’ We progressed at a rate of between ten and twenty lines in two hours. Each session was the responsibility of a single student, who would establish each word of text from a variety of manuscripts and then its meaning with the help of any and every tool known to literature, history, art and scholarship. The bit one ‘did’ was engraved on the brain for months. When I joined, Fraenkel had finished Agamemnon and was working on the Cena Trimalchionis.
Collini asks whether ‘the historical record will contain a comparably positive balance-sheet about our contemporary response to the plight of, for example, scholars displaced from Iraq and Syria.’ In my current role as chair of the Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara), the successor to the Academic Assistance Council/Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (active from 1933), I think it only fair to pay tribute to the very generous response of many universities, including Oxford, and that of many individual academics, to the plight of their colleagues from Iraq, Syria and elsewhere who have been forced into exile, or have tried to carry on at home despite the obvious dangers.

Working with our 117 partner universities in the UK and others abroad, Cara’s fellowship programme acts as a lifeline to academics globally, helping them to escape from immediate danger and to reach a place of sanctuary where they can continue their research and teaching. Most plan to return home when the situation allows, but they need support in the meantime to develop their skills and build the networks to help them when that day comes. Cara helps them to identify a host institution, agrees all the funding issues, and assists with immigration formalities and the many travel and arrival arrangements. As of July 2017, Cara is working with some 260 fellows, and has another 350 or so dependants; the host university waives any fees, and covers some or, increasingly, all of the other costs as well – a substantial commitment. From 2006 to 2012 Cara also ran an Iraq Programme, to help academics still in Iraq or the surrounding region, to which many universities and individual UK academics contributed pro bono. In 2016 Cara launched a regional programme for Syrian academics, again with the support of many universities and individual academics.

There is always much more we could do, given more resources. Anyone who would like to donate can visit our website at www.cara.ngo.

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