1. Establishing the RSM Committee

In May 1940 invasion fears prompted haphazard but mass internment of “enemy aliens”, which included refugees from Nazi Germany, German occupied Austria, some German-speaking Czechoslovaks, and Fascist Italy. About 10% of refugee/ at-risk physicians were interned.

So-called “enemy aliens” were arrested in the post-Dunkirk invasion panic of May 1940. By August 1940 the Home Office set in place procedures for release on a person by person basis. A Royal Society Committee advised on scientific distinction and the potential contribution to the war effort. The physiologist and Nobel-laureate A.V. Hill (a founder of the Academic Assistance Committee as precursor to the Society for Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL), MP for Cambridge University and Secretary of the Royal Society) took the lead in securing release from internment. The Royal Society encouraged the British Academy and the Vice-Chancellors to establish their own advisory committees. The Royal Society approached the RSM in August 1940, and found a ready response in terms of establishing the Royal Society of Medicine Committee on Release of Aliens from Internment. Once established by late August 1940 the RSM directly advised the Home Office on the merits of interned doctors and medically qualified dental surgeons.
2. The RSM Committee liaises with the Royal Society

Under the direction of Geoffrey R Edwards, Secretary of the RSM, detailed profiles were compiled, covering medical competence and loyalty to the British war effort. The RSM committee functioned in the midst of the “nightly unpleasantness” of the Blitz. The Home Office Aliens Department was initially slow to respond, but by October 1940 releases could come in 10 days of a case being mounted.
3. Collaborating with the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning

Esther Simpson was tireless in her efforts to secure release of the interned refugees. She supported the work of the RSM. She was assisted by Gisela Perutz, newly married to the distinguished molecular biologist Max Perutz who had been interned in Canada.
4. Casework

Internees were shipped to Australia and Canada. The crossings were dangerous in terms of enemy action, and the Dunera passage to Australia saw appalling mistreatment by the guards and crew. Many biographical profiles show imprisonment in German concentration camps. Some like Max Meier Glatt were to have outstanding careers. Others experienced tragedy. Dr Arthur Kassel had originally been on the St Louis turned back from Cuba and refused entry to the United States; he was transported to Australia. Although released, he committed suicide on learning that his wife and child had not survived deportation.
The Royal Society of Medicine Committee for the Release of Aliens from Internment, 1940 – ca. 1944

With grateful thanks to Robert Greenwood
RSM Heritage Officer

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