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Immigration and asylum

## **We've been here before - "Current bigotry against asylum seekers closely mimics prewar anti-Jewish sentiments and British immigration policy"**

Wednesday 22 February 2017, by [KARPF Anne](#) (Date first published: 8 June 2002).

**Recent press reaction to asylum seekers arriving in Britain seems uniquely virulent. Surely this country gave a warm welcome in the past to refugees - such as those escaping the Nazis? Not so. Anne Karpf finds unpleasant parallels, then and now, and discovers how it feels to be the target of such hostility.**

There's a doleful little game that staff at the Refugee Council sometimes play. They show visitors press cuttings about refugees and asylum seekers from the 1900s, 1930s and today, and ask them to guess when they were published. Most people get it wrong. They assume that Jewish refugees were welcomed, at least in the 1930s, with a tolerance that has traditionally been seen as a beacon of Britishness. They're shocked to discover that rabid intolerance - among both press and government - has a strong British pedigree. As Tony Kushner, professor of history at the University of Southampton, says, *"The Daily Mail has been an anti-alien newspaper since the 1900s. There's great continuity."*

Yet Holocaust refugees and survivors have been sanctified and idealised after the event, on occasion by the very same publications that at the time demonised them and sought to impugn their authenticity. In their book *Refugees In An Age Of Genocide*, Kushner and Katharine Knox observe that, "Of all the groups in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, refugees from Nazism are now widely and popularly perceived as 'genuine', but at the time German, Austrian and Czechoslovakian Jews were treated with ambivalence and outright hostility as well as sympathy." Adds Kushner, "People feel that the country should maintain asylum for genuine asylum seekers, but they're always in the past, never today."

Current bigotry against asylum seekers, it's chilling to discover, closely mimics prewar anti-Jewish sentiments, and in both instances has been legitimised by British immigration policy. Rather than relaxing entry requirements for Austrian Jews after the Anschluss - Germany's annexation of Austria in March 1938 - the British government tightened them, introducing new, strictly controlled visas precisely to restrict their numbers. More than 65,000 Austrian Jews were murdered in the Holocaust.

According to *Whitehall And The Jews, 1933-1948* (Cambridge University Press), Louise London's definitive account of British immigration policy and the Holocaust, "The process...was designed to keep out large numbers of European Jews - perhaps 10 times as many as it let in." Around 70,000

had been admitted by the outbreak of the war, but British Jewish associations had some half a million more case files of those who had not.

Although British immigration policy was liberalised after *Kristallnacht* - the pogrom launched by Goebbels in November 1939, in which dozens of Jews were killed and more than 1,000 synagogues burned down - London challenges the idea that prewar Britain was a haven for those fleeing Nazi brutality. "The myth was born that Britain did all it could for the Jews between 1933 and 1945. This comfortable view has proved remarkably durable, and is still adduced to support claims that Britain has always admitted genuine refugees, and that the latest harsh measures against asylum seekers are merely designed to exclude bogus applicants. . . We remember the touching photographs and newsreel footage of unaccompanied Jewish children arriving on the *Kindertransports* [by July 1939, 7,700 had arrived, compared with 1,850 admitted into Holland, 800 into France, 700 into Belgium, and 250 into Sweden]. There are no such photographs of the Jewish parents left behind in Nazi Europe. . . The Jews excluded from entry to the United Kingdom are not part of the British experience, because Britain never saw them. . . Memories of the unsuccessful public campaign to persuade the government to rescue Jews from mass murder faded quickly."

What's more, those that were granted entry were admitted only because the Jewish community guaranteed that it would bear all the expenses of accommodation and maintenance, with no burden placed on the public purse. Elsewhere, Canada accommodated only 5,000 European Jews between 1933 and 1945, Australia 10,000, South Africa some 6,000. And the US's unyielding quota system meant that, between 1933 and 1937, only 33,000 German Jews were admitted (and only 124,000 between 1938 and 1941).

Astonishingly, Britain's postwar record isn't much better. Although the immediate aftermath of the second world war saw the arrival of a large number of refugees, very few were Jewish Holocaust survivors. British postwar immigration policy deliberately excluded Jews (and non-white immigrants) because it didn't consider them assimilable. Today, asylum seekers are routinely accused of fomenting the racism that they encounter. Similarly, cabinet minutes of 1945 claimed that "the admission of a further batch of refugees, many of whom would be Jews, might provoke strong reactions from certain sections of public opinion. There was a real risk of a wave of anti-semitic feeling in this country." Yet they had no compunction in admitting the entire Ukrainian membership of the Galician division of the Waffen-SS.

The parallels between past and present are striking. Just as the majority of Jewish refugees were admitted less for compassionate reasons than to meet the shortage of domestic servants, so today's refugees tend to do the low-paid catering and cleaning jobs spurned by the native British. And just as in spring 1940, when German Jews were interned on the Isle of Man, British newspapers blurred the distinctions between refugee, alien and enemy, so today, according to Alasdair Mackenzie, coordinator of Asylum Aid, "There's general confusion in many newspapers between an asylum seeker and someone from abroad - everyone gets tarred with the same brush."

Recession then, recession now - in both cases, a harsh economic climate is used to justify exclusion. In the 1930s, many trades unions, such as the shoe and bootmakers', cited the unemployment of their own members as the reason they opposed a loosening of immigration controls. Yet other unions, such as the National Union of Agricultural Workers, with similar numbers of unemployed union members, argued for an increase in the number of work permits.

The catch-22 in operation today also has historical resonance. In the 1930s, it was widely believed that if refugees found work, they were taking jobs from the British-born. If they didn't, they were living off the state - a formulation that has barely changed in more than 60 years. And just as David Blunkett has proposed that the children of 3,000 new asylum seekers should attend special schools

in new pilot accommodation centres to prevent them “swamping” local schools, so legislation was enacted in the 1930s limiting the intake of Jewish pupils into state schools to less than 5% of the total.

Today, the government wants immigrants to be obliged to learn English and undergo citizenship courses. In the 1930s, German Jewish refugees were urged to learn English and refrain from speaking German. Daniel Snowman, in his book about refugees from Nazi Germany, *The Hitler Emigrés* (Chatto & Windus), describes a typical north London refugee salon, dripping with music and art: “A ghetto? Yes, in a way. But those who formed it would have disavowed the name and simply regarded themselves as reproducing the style and quality of life they had been forced to abandon.” The Kosovan Albanians, Afghans and Sri Lankans living in Britain would doubtless say the same. The Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig distinguished between assimilating into someone else’s culture, causing the extinction of one’s own distinct identity and history, and assimilating into one’s own culture the most valuable and enriching aspects of someone else’s. It’s a distinction the British have yet to appreciate.

Of course, there are significant differences between the 1930s and today. For one thing, the terminology has changed - from refugee to asylum seeker. “Refugee” reminds us that they’re seeking refuge from persecution; today’s “asylum seeker” focuses on the place to which they want to come. Refugee doctors are treated differently, too. The British Medical Association ensured that very few refugee doctors were allowed to practise in Britain before the second world war. After the Anschluss, it vetoed a Home Office scheme to bring 500 Austrian Jewish doctors to Britain. Today, there are at least 2,000 refugee doctors in Britain, most of whom are not working as doctors. But the BMA is working together with the Refugee Council to help them requalify.

Professor Kushner also sees a difference in the intensity of press reporting: “In the 1930s, except in the first few months of internment when you did get daily coverage, you didn’t get these reports every day. But the *Daily Express* in the last couple of years has had a front-page headline about asylum seekers at least once a week.”

Though the virulence of recent press coverage seemed temporarily to abate, it has been reignited by the Eurotunnel affair and the plan to establish rural “accommodation centres”. The tabloid press uses the language of “invasion”, as if by an enemy. But, of course, there’s nothing intrinsically illegal about most asylum seekers. Their illegality has been created by the asylum system. And often they’re “sans papiers” because the regimes from which they’re fleeing aren’t considerate enough to give documentation to those whom they are persecuting.

The overall picture that emerges from the recent press coverage, says Edie Friedman, director of the Jewish Council for Racial Equality, is that asylum seekers are here to cheat us and take away from society. Yet Home Office figures show that foreigners put 10% more into the economy than they take out.

The press has persisted in peddling incorrect figures about immigration. The Observer’s assertion that, by the summer of 1938, there were more Jews in Britain than Germany ever had, was plain wrong. Similarly, the tabloids’ current depiction of Britain as an international magnet for asylum seekers is totally misleading. Most of the world’s refugees do what they’ve always done - move from one poor country to another. The majority remain in their region, either in their own country as internally displaced people, or in neighbouring countries. Only a tiny percentage make it to the richer countries: 5% to Europe, and less than 1% to Britain. A regular peruser of the tabloid press, with its loose talk of “swamping”, would be stunned to learn that, of 15 EU countries, Britain stands at number 10 in the number of asylum seekers per head of population.

Given a little more accurate information, those regular readers might also start making connections between news reports about violent and repressive regimes around the world and stories about asylum seekers, registering with a flash that the latter are the victims of the former. In 2001, for example, Afghanistan was the country of origin of most refugees to Britain (and it isn't over yet: Pushtuns are still fleeing from ethnic targeting and violence in northern Afghanistan).

In 2000, most refugees came either from Iraq or from Sri Lanka. In February, a Refugee Council report exposed the shocking experiences of those forcibly returned by the British government to a Sri Lanka racked by civil war, and who faced potential torture, arrest, detention and even death. Yet between 1990 and 2000, only 1.9% of Sri Lankan asylum seekers were granted refugee status, compared with 73.6% in France and 80.9% in Canada. As for Kosovans seeking sanctuary in the UK, the brutal repression they faced at home was ignored by the international community until the late 1990s, when evidence of the massacre of civilians became impossible to ignore and the campaign of ethnic cleansing intensified. I tried to talk to the editors of the Daily Mail, the Sun and the Daily Express about these matters, but in each case they were too busy to respond to me, and couldn't suggest anyone else on their papers who could, either.

What's the effect of such hostile reporting? The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) believes that "ill-informed, adverse media coverage has contributed to heightened local tensions and resentment of asylum seekers". Says Edie Friedman, "Things are repeated in such a way that they become the accepted wisdom. Once you start using a word like 'bogus', you can't take it back again. And there are repercussions on the children of asylum seekers. These kinds of headlines are what you see on the hoardings: what does that do to the child in your class? There has been an increase in racial attacks in school."

Kushner is working on a mass observation survey of attitudes to newcomers to Britain, conducted last summer. He's found "a very uncritical engagement with the press. You can tell what the insecurities of the day are from these stories - about refugees getting more money than pensioners and using up NHS resources. People wanted to believe these stories. On a very general level, it does show the influence of the press when you read something almost every day."

The most compelling proof is the Mori survey on public attitudes to refugees carried out for Reader's Digest in November 2000. This found that - after a year in which the Daily Mail had run more than 200 stories about asylum seekers and refugees - 80% of adults believed that refugees come to Britain because they regard it as a "soft touch", 66% thought there are too many immigrants in Britain, and 63% considered too much is being done to help immigrants. These opinions mirror those of the tabloids.

Reader's Digest also found that wildly exaggerated and inaccurate views about asylum seekers were rampant. Respondents believed that asylum seekers received £113 per week in benefits, as opposed to the real figure of £36.54. They thought that 20% of the population were immigrants, though only 4% really are. And they estimated that 26% of the population belonged to an ethnic minority, as against the actual figure of 7%. In the 1940s, there were similar wild overestimations of the numbers of Jews in Britain.

The asylum seeker has become an abstract, composite, almost mythical figure. Despite the allegedly vast numbers of them now in the country, most British people have never actually met one, making it all the easier to dehumanise them. This is what real asylum-seeking feels like. Thirty-one-year-old Arberore Riza arrived with her husband, Petrit, and their then two-year-old son Norik from Pristina, Kosovo, in 1995 as illegal asylum seekers. Petrit, a travel agent, had been questioned on many occasions by Serb police about his relationship with UN staff, while Arberore, an architecture student, could no longer attend the university because it was closed to Albanians. "We felt that we

were in danger," she says, "but it was a very difficult decision to leave because we were a very close-knit community."

They arrived in Britain on false papers. "It was very scary - it was the first time in my life that I lied like that. I felt terrible - as if I was committing some very bad thing. I still dream that I lied. Petrit's hand was shaking when he handed over the papers."

Upon arrival, they went straight to the Home Office, to tell them that they'd entered with false papers. "They didn't threaten to deport us, because we had a child," says Arberore, "but we were scared. We spent the day waiting in the Home Office. I felt so happy that I wasn't any longer in Kosovo to be frightened, but I felt so low - like a beggar that day. We had to be fingerprinted. I thought I was going to prison, even though it was the right thing for them to do that."

It took them two years to get legal asylum. After one year, Petrit went to the Home Office to seek permission to go back to Kosovo for his brother's funeral. "They said, 'You can take your passport and go, but you won't be allowed back'." He never went.

I showed Arberore, now a student of media and cultural studies at Middlesex University, some press cuttings on asylum seekers. She was particularly shocked by the Daily Mail headline, A Door We Can't Close - "It makes me feel like vermin." And of the Daily Express's Get Them Out, she demanded, "Who wrote that? It makes me feel bad, as if I'm no one, which is untrue. I can give something to this country. On the other hand, we are very grateful that this country accepted us - they should know that. My sister and the others who stayed there have suffered a lot. My sister, who is 30, went grey during the war, as a result of the stress that she suffered." I want to say to the reporters who write that, we're all human beings and nobody knows what's going to happen in the future. No one could have predicted what happened in New York. Who knows when British people might need someone's help: it's not inconceivable that the people who wrote this could themselves be asylum seekers some day. We left everything there: we had a job, a huge house and a garden, we had a nice life. But the most important thing was our freedom. It wasn't easy for us to leave everything and come over here - we've been through a lot." What also gets omitted from most press coverage is any positive asylum seeker stories. The national media consistently links asylum seekers with crime, but when reported crime in Kent fell over a three-year period in which the number of asylum seekers rose, they failed to cover it. As Kushner and Knox point out, "The many success stories on a local level are proof that refugees have not been and need not be 'a problem'... Bringing energy and innovations, all refugee groups, when given the freedom to do so, have revitalised British society at a national and local level."

Snowman's book and the Jewish Museum in London's current exhibition, Continental Britons: Jewish Refugees From Nazi Europe (until October 20), illustrate the lasting contribution to British intellectual and cultural life made by central European refugees, many of them Jewish, who fled Nazism and found asylum in Britain. From the Amadeus Quartet, Nikolaus Pevsner and Hans Keller, to Karl Popper, Berthold Lubetkin and practically every single publisher of note, not to mention Andrew Sachs (the man who played Fawlty Towers' Manuel was born in Berlin, not Barcelona) - all were refugees. In the arts and culture, they brought a revitalising European modernism to a still traditional Britain. (Hitler, as Snowman tartly remarks, had hoped to extirpate cosmopolitan culture, but merely succeeded in disseminating it more widely.)

The Society for the Protection of Science and Learning, meanwhile, tried to find academic posts for elite scientists and researchers. It isn't fanciful to imagine current asylum seekers making similar contributions to those made by the Jewish prewar and postwar immigrants.

Yet it isn't only the media that has depicted asylum seekers as a problem. Says Edie Friedman, "The

government hasn't used its machinery of PR to talk up refugees, but to put fear, anxiety and suspicion in people's minds. It's part of the responsibility of central government to influence public opinion in a positive way." Indeed, so indistinguishable on asylum matters have government and tabloid press become, so totally shared their language and discourse, that, under a front page quote of "Most immigrants are not genuine asylum seekers. They are young, single men who have deserted their families for money," a newspaper can ask, "Who said this yesterday?" and then reply triumphantly, "Immigration minister Lord Rooker" (*Daily Express*, May 15, 2002). The same article went on to maintain that "the Home Office minister's explosive admission follows a successful campaign by the *Daily Express* to highlight the immigration issue and to call for government action to stop the flood of bogus asylum seekers."

In the face of this onslaught, most liberal-minded people resort to fatalism: they feel that the popular press and government thinking are behemoths beyond their control. Alasdair Mackenzie of Asylum Aid argues that more people need to express their concern: "If we write or call up, we're dismissed as a special interest group. It's much more effective if people do it as concerned individuals."

Yet the Press Complaints Commission's record of dealing with complaints about press reporting of asylum seekers is abysmal. The National Union of Journalists' ethics council complained about one *Daily Express* headline, "Asylum: Time To Pull Down The Shutters", claiming that it breached Clause 13 of the PCC Code of Practice, which stipulates that the press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative references to a person's race, colour or religion.

But the PCC said that the clause related only to individuals, and that neither the headline nor the article contained prejudicial or pejorative references to named individuals. NUJ organiser John Toner, who submitted the complaint, says, "This is absurd. If you make pejorative references to a particular group or race, you are applying those remarks to every individual within that group or race." Similarly, when Toner complained over a *Scottish Daily Record* story about a named individual asylum seeker who was murdered, the PCC rejected the complaint on the grounds that he wasn't related to the individual in question. Toner argues that the code was designed to make it almost impossible to have a complaint upheld.

Tim Toulmin, the PCC's deputy director, acknowledges that press coverage of asylum seekers has used "extremely strong language, and is offensive to a lot of people as well", but argues that the PCC doesn't "go after newspapers, but reacts to complaints that have come in". Its only proactive stance is to try to generate more complaints, and to this end the PCC's external affairs consultant goes around the country telling groups how to complain - provided, of course, that a story is inaccurate, intrudes upon their privacy or discriminates against them personally. A princely total of four complaints have so far been upheld.

Toulmin dismisses the NUJ argument as "an old chestnut, affecting every group and not just asylum seekers. It's a problem that has been looked at so many times, and no consultant, editor or journalist has ever found a way of phrasing a new clause that would raise standards without stifling comment and allowing groups like the BNP to use them for their own ends."

In addition, the PCC doesn't have the resources, he maintains, "to take up general observations and complaints from anyone who chooses to write in to us in the whole country. If we did, no one with a genuine grievance would get any help from us." But the PCC sometimes does issue a statement on a particular subject, so why not on this? "We do if relevant groups approach us, but we'd want to consult widely to make sure we said something new. It's a serious matter, but there are all sorts of other matters: the list could be endless, so we have to respond to requests."

Another approach is the media myth-busting email network that the Refugee Council has set up

([www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)). When an inaccurate, inflammatory or discriminatory article appears, the council emails the 4,000-plus people in its network, who then log a complaint to the publication or regulatory authority (in most cases, the PCC), as a way of countering the newspapers' usual defence that they haven't received many objections. Last year, 250 people complained to the PCC about one Daily Star story.

It's chastening when one of the loudest, clearest voices urging positive reporting of asylum seekers comes from the police. ACPO, in its Policing Guide To Asylum Seekers And Refugees, published last year, reminds its media spokespeople that the numbers of asylum seekers in Britain are marginal, that they're "real people who need our urgent support and in time could make a valuable contribution", that "we have a history of absorbing other cultures...and being an asylum seeker is no fun", and that they should "encourage direct media involvement in the integration of asylum seekers, offering positive stories at every possible opportunity".

One such is the successful holiday friendship project set up in Dover to provide joint activities for local children and those from asylum seeker communities. The local press gave it front-page coverage, focusing in particular on two young girls - one from each community - who'd become best friends while attending the scheme. It may be coincidental that inter-ethnic tensions in the area have begun to abate.

Rabbi Hugo Gryn said: "How you are with the one to whom you owe nothing is a grave test." At the moment, Britain is failing that test, especially in its press coverage. As the daughter of Polish Jewish postwar asylum seekers, I'm stupefied by how the collective memory can be so short, bigotry so unabashed, and how, with all the recent interest in the Holocaust, basic connections can fail to be made. Are we doomed always to stigmatise the Other, or are these the last bleatings of the little Englander? Must compassion only ever be extended after the event?

This year, there has been a fevered European debate about the role played by the growing numbers of refugees in kindling a newly ignited far right. Post-September 11 Islamophobia has allowed many commentators to argue that Muslim asylum seekers bring a fundamentalism on issues such as women's rights and homosexuality that is at odds with liberal values. Curiously, many of those commentators now busily climbing over themselves to defend liberal values are the very same people who only a few years ago were leading the assault on liberal social policies.

Yet simply demonising those who demonise asylum seekers doesn't take us very far, and ignores the fact that the press never only foments prejudice - it also milks that which is already there. It has long been apparent that bigotry is seeded by the daily experience of want: unemployment, dilapidated estates and hard lives rarely breed an expansive embrace of foreigners. Migration raises real and profound issues. By refusing to engage with them for so long, liberal politicians and governments have left the field to the right, which has been able to mark the boundaries of the argument.

Some newspapers see the recent victories of the far right as a vindication of their coverage of asylum seekers; they hadn't simply been bigots, but prescient soothsayers all along. Yet, paradoxically, those same media organs that lambast the globalisation of labour celebrate the globalisation of capital. They're quite happy to see goods and services freely crossing borders - it's just people to whom they take exception.

This is a debate riddled with contradictions and polarisations. For decades, refugees from religious or political persecution were seen as good and economic migrants as bad. Now, as shortages of highly skilled labour become pressing, there are signs of that being reversed. It's a false opposition, anyway - it always was. In the 1930s, they tried to distinguish between those Jews who wanted to leave Germany because they were in genuine fear for their lives and those applying for entry to

Britain because their businesses had been boycotted, orders cancelled and bills unpaid. It was a distinction that became impossible to police.

The reporting of prewar Jewish asylum seekers is shocking because we know how that story ended. But instead of using hindsight to idealise, we can use it to illuminate. This much at least - that the hostile reporting of asylum seekers dispossesses them yet again. Refugees seek asylum from hate or destitution, and then run into it once more. They're lynched by prejudice. The press articulates a zero sum philosophy, as if asylum seekers' gain must necessarily be native citizens' loss. Sixty years hence, will it still be so?

**Anne Karpf**

Refugee Week runs from June 17. For details: [www.refugeeweek.org.uk](http://www.refugeeweek.org.uk)

## **WHAT THE PAPERS KEEP ON SAYING**

"There landed yesterday at Southampton from the transport Cheshire over 600 so-called refugees, their passages having been paid out of the Lord Mayor's Fund. . . There was scarce a hundred of them that had, by right, deserved such help, and these were the Englishmen of the party. The rest were Jews. . . They fought and jostled for the foremost places at the gangways. . . When the Relief Committee passed by they hid their gold and fawned and whined, and, in broken English, asked for money for their train fare."

*Daily Mail*, February 3, 1900

"It was 8.10pm on Christmas Day when the first mob struck. There were around 150 of them, howling and yelling as they made their way to the French mouth of the Channel Tunnel."

*Daily Mail*, December 27, 2001

"The way stateless Jews from Germany are pouring in from every port of this country is becoming an outrage . . . ' In these words, Mr Herbert Metcalfe, the Old Street magistrate, yesterday referred to the number of aliens entering the country through the 'back door' - a problem to which the *Daily Mail* has repeatedly pointed."

*Daily Mail*, August 20, 1938

"Swamped immigration officials are kicking out just TWELVE new bogus asylum seekers a month - out of 3,200 who should be sent packing."

*The Sun*, February 14, 2001

"A typically baffling illustration of the difficulty is the fact that Britain now has more Jews than Germany ever had. If a further accretion of, say, 100,000 of them come into the country, how could the danger be averted of an anti-Jewish feeling here?"

*The Observer*, July 31, 1938

"As fears of violence increased, it was revealed yesterday that the Government was repeatedly warned about the dangers of hostility between asylum seekers and communities ill-prepared to receive them."

*Daily Express*, August 10, 2001

"The fact has to be recognised that Christians generally do not take kindly to the Jewish race . . . Not a few Englishmen regard Jews with a vague unfriendly toleration not far removed from dislike. . . and share. . . the wonder expressed in the lines 'How Odd of God to Choose The Jews'."

*East Anglian Daily Times*, March 2, 1934



"Many of the bogus asylum seekers flooding into Britain are cheats and criminals. . . Look at the Nistor family. These Romanian gypsies have been given a four-bedroom detached house free, plus £230 a month. . . The decent English family next door are moving because the Nistors are too noisy and filthy to endure any longer."

*The Sunday People*, March 5, 2000

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**P.S.**

\* The Guardian. Saturday 8 June 2002 15.48 BST First published on Saturday 8 June 2002 15.48 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/jun/08/immigration.immigrationandpublicservices>

\* The following correction was printed in the Guardian's Corrections and Clarifications column, Tuesday June 11 2002

The Kristallnacht pogroms were in November 1938, not 1939 as we, not the author of the piece, wrongly suggested.