

Leave to Land: The Kitchener Camp Rescue, 1939



Kitchener camp 1939, Erich Peritz

The Kitchener Camp has been largely forgotten today, but in 1939, this derelict army base on the Kent coast in southeastern England became the scene of an extraordinary rescue in which 4,000 men were saved from the Holocaust.

The persecution of German Jews began as soon as Hitler took power in January 1933. Jews were stripped of their civil and human rights, their homes, and their means to earn a living. Attacks on synagogues, Jewish shops and homes, and Jewish people increased in the lead up to the second world war, culminating in Kristallnacht in late 1938.

Many Jews left Germany during the 1930s, but their capacity to do so was restricted by other countries' strict immigration quotas and the need to demonstrate that they could support themselves in a new country. Others were arrested and sent to concentration camps.

Between February 1939 and the outbreak of World War Two, the British Government was persuaded to allow four thousand Jewish men to travel to Sandwich in East Kent, where they were accommodated in an old First World War base known as Kitchener camp. Most had had to leave behind their families in the Third Reich and they were killed during the Holocaust. After the fall of France in May/June 1940, it was thought too risky to keep a group of German-speaking refugees so close to the English Channel. The Kitchener camp was closed down.

This rescue of mostly Jewish men from Germany to Britain was to involve many mixed emotions: joy at survival, guilt at the loss of loved ones, and a wish to forget a time of such fear, anxiety, and enforced migration.

This exhibition commemorates, documents, and shares this little-known Jewish refugee history.



*Werner Weissenberg, Refugees at Kitchener Camp – also known as Richborough transit camp, 1939
Recognised in the photograph by family, Jakob Lengel, back row, far left*

Reference Resources:

<https://kitchenercamp.co.uk/>

<https://wienerholocaustlibrary.org/exhibition/the-kitchener-camp/>

<https://www.avenuesforchange.com/>