



(/home)

- Home (/home)
- SA (/sa)
- Israel (/israel)
- World (/world)
- Opinion (/opinion)
- Religion (/religion)
- Latest (/latest)
- Achievers (/achievers)
- Youth News (/youth-news)

## Acknowledging the suffering of the Jews in Mauritius



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*The suffering of Jewish detainees who were deported to the island of Mauritius in 1940 by the British government has been officially acknowledged by the United Kingdom (UK) for the first time in almost 80 years.*

by JORDAN MOSHE | Sep 10, 2020

The historic occasion was marked on 31 July with the issuing of a letter written by Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for South Asia and the Commonwealth and the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict.

It was issued ahead of the online commemorative ceremony held on 12 August to mark the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the detainees from Mauritius and delivered to Owen Griffiths, president of the Island Hebrew Congregation and chairperson of the Beau Bassin Jewish Detainees Memorial and Information Centre.

Beyond recognising the suffering of European Jews who fled persecution in Nazi-occupied Europe, the letter also affirmed the British government's commitment to honouring the victims of Nazi persecution.

"The story of the 1 580 Jewish men, women, and children who fled Nazi-controlled Europe and were eventually deported to the British colony of Mauritius is the closest the events of the Holocaust came to South Africa," says director and founder of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC), Tali Nates.

"We were very encouraged to read the historic UK government's letter sent to the Detainees Memorial on the occasion of the commemoration."

She adds: "It was the first time in 80 years, since the deportation in 1940, where the government recognised the great importance of remembering the suffering endured by European Jews who fled persecution in Nazi-occupied Europe."

The JHGC has worked closely with the Beau Bassin Jewish Detainees Memorial and Information Centre since its opening in 2014, co-hosting last month the 75th commemoration of the liberation of the detainees from the island. Originally an old chapel, the memorial property was acquired through the efforts of the late Mervyn Smith, former president of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies and the African Jewish Congress; Griffiths, Rabbi Moshe Silberhaft, as well as partnerships and support from South Africa, Mauritius and beyond.

The memorial commemorates the 126 Jewish refugees who died in detention on the island and were buried there. Sadly, their story and those of their fellow detainees has been neglected for the past number of decades.

On 5 December 1940, 1 580 Jewish men, women and children who fled Europe for Palestine were forcefully taken from the Atlit detention centre near Haifa. They were deported to the colony of Mauritius by the British Mandatory Government of Palestine due to the 1939 British White Paper, a document that enforced a strict immigration quota for Jews entering Palestine.

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“The Mauritius deportation is neglected because the detainees’ experience does not form part of the master narrative of the European Holocaust,” explains Dr Roni Mikel Arieli, a research fellow of the JHGC whose extensive research into the Mauritius episode led her to become involved with the project in January last year. “The Holocaust is Eurocentric, and Mauritius is not part of the Auschwitz or Warsaw Ghetto discussion.

“We often forget that the Holocaust and the conditions of persecution preceding it created an influx of refugees who arrived in many places around the world, and after being forced to leave their homes and travel into the unknown.”

Arieli stresses that the actions of the British cannot be likened to those of the Nazis, and that while British internment was painful, it is wholly unlike the concentration camp experience.

“We need to understand the situation in British Palestine at the time,” she explains. “The British were dealing on the one hand with the Arab revolution, and on the other they were afraid that refugees from occupied countries in Europe were enemy agents. It was a time of war.

“It remains a troubling story, but we need to understand the circumstances that created the tragedy and the role played by the Nazis at the outset. Adolf Eichmann drove Jewish immigration out of Germany because the Nazis wanted the Reich clear of Jews, but by 1940, no one was able to leave.

“No matter the cause, we need to tell the human story of what happened to the refugees and study their testimonies to learn from them.”

Griffiths agrees with Arieli.

“There is no comparison whatsoever,” he says. “The Jewish detainees were prisoners and some of them did die, a tragic reality. However, those who perished were not victims of brutality or maltreatment but often died of broken hearts, depression, malaria, and typhus. They were given access to food, resources, and Jewish items like *sifrei torah*.

“This is in no way comparable to what happened in Europe.”

Griffiths explains that though some were initially disappointed by the UK government’s letter, it’s a major step towards addressing what occurred on the island.

“Some people were expecting an apology from the UK,” he says. “Nates and Arieli have put things into perspective by reminding people that we should never have expected one. Rather, this is an expression of regret, a suggestion that things could have been better handled by the British government in 1940.”

He adds: “This is a huge step towards proper recognition of suffering. The British High Commissioner to Mauritius mentioned the possibility of a letter to me earlier this year and he was true to his word. Such a thing has never been done and it’s something to celebrate.

“We hope that this letter will ensure that the history of what happened in Mauritius will make the story more widely known, and draw more people to come here to understand exactly what happened.”

Nates and Arieli agree.

“This is an excellent narrative that speaks of refugeeism, human rights and suffering,” says Arieli. “It shows that the Holocaust is not just about Majdanek or Auschwitz, but a complex story whose side effects included statelessness. It has tremendous teaching potential.

“We need to confront the pleasant and less pleasant parts of the past, even if this means casting some negative light on the British.”

Nates concludes: “We strongly believe in the need to remember and educate about this unknown historical episode in Mauritius, South Africa, the UK and beyond. For this reason, we include this story in our permanent exhibition in Johannesburg.”



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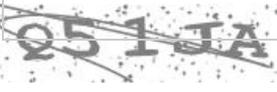
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