

Confine

art

EXHIBITION:
Julia Weiner
 views images
 born of
 internment

German and Austrian refugees from Nazism must have thought their troubles were over when they successfully reached British shores. They were wrong, as an exhibition at the London Jewish Cultural Centre reminds us.

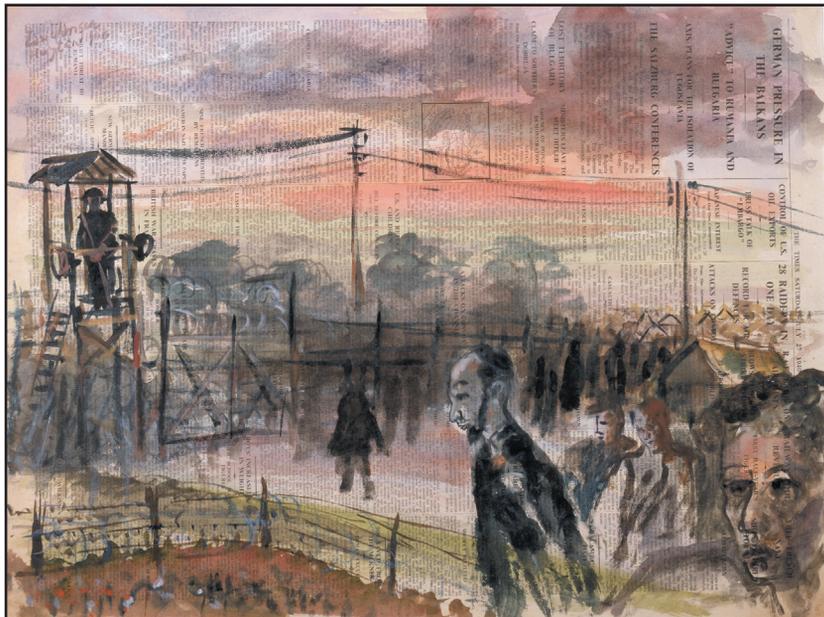
In 1940, the British government decided to intern the majority of German and Austrian male refugees, even those who had been classified as posing no risk to national security.

“Art Behind Barbed Wire” brings together 50 works made by these refugees during their internment. The artists include Jews who had fled as a result of religious persecution, and also non-Jews who had been forced to leave Germany after their work had been branded “degenerate” by the Nazis.

The exhibition reveals the different reactions to internment. While some of the artists were obviously deeply traumatised, and produced nightmarish scenes, others recorded their surroundings more objectively.

The core of the display is a collection of works on paper on loan from the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, which were exhibited to great acclaim in 2004. They include pictures by Walter Nessler, who spent most of his internment drawing, apparently to relieve the “desperate boredom.”

The drawings, showing a community dominated by watch towers and guards, were made using good quality materials that Nessler may have brought with him when he



Empty days: Hugo Dachinger portrays the boredom of camp life

was arrested. He was lucky — most of the other artists had to improvise with what was available in the camps.

Also from the Walker are a series of works by Hugo Dachinger, several of which were made on newspapers. Again images of watchtowers and barbed wire dominate. The inmates stand around in huddles with little idea of what to do and where to go. Titles such as “Dead End” or “Empty Days” give an insight into their mood.

Also on display are two prints by Erich Kahn, a German-born artist who had been in a Nazi prison camp. This new period of captivity caused him to create images full of wide-eyed, emaciated figures looking out at the viewer in terror.

Hermann Fechenbach found internment intolerable and went on hunger strike. His small linocut focuses in particular on the barbed wire that surrounded the camps.

The yearnings of the prisoners are represented in Martin Bloch’s powerful “Miracle in an Internment Camp,” where the inmates’ herring ration turns into their loved ones.

Finally, the avant-garde artist Kurt Schwitters made portraits of his fellow internees... out of left-over porridge. Needless to say, these works did not survive the war.

“Art Behind Barbed Wire” is at the London Jewish Cultural Centre, The Old House, Kidderpore Avenue, NW3, until March 17.