In December 1939, Jews from various European countries, fleeing Nazi anti-Semitism, arrived in Slovakia. From there, they were to enter Palestine clandestinely. However, they had to wait till 28 August 1940 to start their journey with only two small suitcases each. After many hardships, they embarked on the Atlantic, the Milos and the Pacific, which stopped at Haifa, Palestine. In Haifa, they were refused entrance by the British Colonial government, and many were transferred instead to the Patria, a ship which was bombed in the port by the Haganah leaders to prevent it from leaving Palestine. The survivors of the Patria were admitted to Palestine, but most passengers of the Atlantic were transferred on other ships and, once again, were forced to take to the sea, unaware of their destination. On 26 December 1940, 1581 passengers of the Johann de Witt and the Nieuw Zeeland arrived on the island of Mauritius.

The Second World War was one of the deadliest conflicts in history; and in order to survive persecution and mass murder, the only solution for European Jewish populations was exile. During their flight for freedom, some 1600 Jews were forced to live in Mauritius, a small island in the Indian Ocean. This past, locked in silence for a long time, has been narrated in the non-fictional work of Geneviève Pitot, Le Shekel Mauricien – l’histoire des détenus juifs à l’île Maurice. In her ‘Preface’ to Le Shekel Mauricien, Pitot explains her reasons for writing the story of the Jews in Mauritius. She was a ten year old student, living on Mauritius, when the refugees were deported to the island in 1940. Eighteen months later, she took art classes with a Jewish woman named Mrs. Anna Frank. However, one year later, the teacher stopped coming, since the refugees were once more not allowed to leave the camp to which they had been assigned. Fifty years later, in an exposition on Jews in Berlin, Pitot saw Anna Frank’s picture. She decided to look for someone who knew her, and

1 I am grateful to: Limina Conference 2018 for having accepted my paper; Université des Mascareignes for funding my research; Mr Griffiths Owen and the staff of the Jewish Detainees Museum for their welcoming attitudes; Bridget Blankley for her support and time in looking for some information on Jews for me and putting me in contact with the Archivists of Hartley Library, Archives & Manuscripts Section of the University of Southampton.


met her son, Vincent. Her research took her to Israel, and Pitot also contacted the ex-detainees from around the world in order to present a collage of untold stories in a chronological way.4

*Le Shekel Mauricien*—which is Pitot’s interpretation of Jewish diasporic history—spans a chronology beginning before the onset of war and Hitler’s reign in 1933, and culminating with their departure from Mauritius in 1945. In this paper, I will be focusing on Pitot’s narration of the Jewish refugee experience aboard the ships in transit to Mauritius and in the prison camps following their arrival. From 26 December 1940 until 10-11 August 1945, innocent Jews, including old people, women, children, and adolescents were detained at the prison of Beau-Bassin on the island of Mauritius. Despite the hardships incurred during their voyage, the tensions within the exiled group, the lack of consideration of the British colonial government, an unfamiliar environment, and the cultural differences between them, many Jews tried to integrate into the insular Mauritian society. After the war, all of the survivors left Mauritius in quest of a new homeland, in Palestine or elsewhere. The question is to what extent the prison—which symbolises restrictions and crushed rights—could be called or made into a home.

Home is indeed a complex and abstract term. Helen Taylor outlines four key conceptions of home—spatial (landscapes, environment), temporal (memories, lived experience and dreams), material (related to all the embodied and sensory experiences) and relational (social networks and ties)—which might help understand the effects of exile on refugees.5 Using a narrative approach, closely linked to the historical context, this study will therefore analyse the notion of ‘home’, through the emotional, psychological, and socio-economic effects of banishment and exile on the Jews in Mauritius as documented in Pitot’s *Le Shekel Mauricien*.

**Towards a Definition of Home**

The term ‘home’ automatically raises some questions: What is home? What is the difference between a house and a home? What does it mean to own a home? And, more importantly, what does home mean to those who have lost a home, and who are forced to carry their home in one or two suitcases? In this study, I will analyse whether the concept of home can help understand the plight of refugees. For Helen Taylor, home is a complex ‘construction’, which is ‘in continual process’ of being made.6 More than just a physical dwelling, home is also loaded with emotional, social and cultural meanings, and is a place where we are supposed to feel secure and safe and develop a sense of belonging. It is indeed in periods of crisis that we realise that people belong to a physical location, and that space is linked to one’s identity. Research on place-attachment and place-identity reveals how people create ‘an affective bond’ and a sense of belonging by interacting with places.7 The ‘spatial

---

4 Pitot, p. 13-17.
6 Taylor, p. 3.
home’ is not only the physical structure in which we live. It is ‘made up of landscapes, cityscapes and the built environment’, and consists of ‘the surrounding houses, shops, places of worship and streets which make up the village or town, within the physically boundary of the nation’.

George E. Bisharat argues that ‘it is precisely under conditions of threat to connections between peoples and places that identities are most vehemently, even lethally, spatialized’.

In Le Shekel Mauricien, Pitot describes how the group of Zionist refugees - who lost their homes following the outbreak of war in continental Europe - were on a quest for a Jewish identity, full of zeal to join Palestine, which represented ‘the promised land’ and a ‘sanctuary’ for them. However, the refugees found themselves instead prisoners on the Mauritius Island, an environment represented by Pitot as largely incompatible with the opportunities for creating home, as put forth by Taylor and Bisharat. Indeed, the control and the rules of the prison made placemaking, that is, ‘the reshaping of neighbourhoods’, difficult for the Jews in Mauritius. Placemaking is supposed to ensure that people feel comfortable in the place where they are staying. This could not be said of a prison, which functions as a carceral and punitive space. The cells, the high walls, the barbed wires, the lack of flooring in the ladies’ prisons, and the lack of hot water and hygiene are only a few examples of the insalubrious environment of the Beau-Bassin prison in which the Jewish refugees were forced to live.

Additionally, adjusting to the climate on the tropical island was arduous for the Jewish refugees according to Pitot, as it represented a stark contrast to the weather they were accustomed to in Europe. As well as mosquitoes, the living conditions in the prison brought them into contact with diseases such as typhoid and dysentery exacerbated by their malnutrition and treatment as prisoners. There were around thirty deaths in the first few weeks of their arrival, including two children and many more young adults and adolescents. On 30 January, the governor forwarded the request of the Jews to go to a more temperate country or a healthier part of the island, but nothing was done for them. These physical conditions presented many challenges to placemaking and creating a sense of security and home on the island.

---

8 Taylor, p. 6.
10 Pitot, p. 11, p. 133, p. 263.
11 Pitot, p. 30.
14 Pitot, p. 147-148.
Home Space: A Result of ‘Throwntogetherness’

A key component which transforms ‘space’ into ‘home’ is interpersonal and social interactions between occupants within it, as well as the relationship with the spatial environment itself. Citing Doreen Massey, Taylor posits that space acquires meanings when people interact with one another, as, ‘space does not have any inherent characteristics, but is a result of ‘throwntogetherness’, where the ‘human and the non-human elements of place’ meet. Massey likewise writes that space is ‘the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions’.

The chaotic flight of the Jewish refugees and their ad hoc living arrangements in the Mauritian prison made interactions and communication with their spouses and the outside world nearly impossible: all relationships inside the prison were controlled, and families were forcibly separated. Treated as unwanted creatures, the Jewish refugees knew corruption, violence, split family life, segregation between husbands and wives and between parents and children. In prison, the children and adolescents found themselves especially isolated, since their parents were either dead or not travelling with them. Pitot narrates the story of thirty-one year old Anita Hirschmann, accompanied by her eleven-year old son Heinz, who was on her way to meet her husband who was legally working in Palestine. Anita was refused entry in Palestine and later died of typhoid in Mauritius, and as a result her son found himself all alone in the island’s camp. Thus, the interpersonal and social relationships, which might have established a sense of home in these spaces, were severely compromised and fractured. In one example from Le Shekel Mauritian, Pitot writes that during the ocean voyage, the parents of Heinrich Wellisch embarked on the Schönbrunn while their son was on the Uranus. The secure space of home was non-existent: on board one of the ships to Mauritius, the captain tried to rape a woman, whose husband was on the other ship.

The Jewish refugees’ communication with the outer world was also controlled, and their letters censured. Gideon Arad (also called George Ardo), in an Israeli journal written in German, narrated on 26 August 1955 that his new home was cell no 227: ‘four walls, a hammock, barred windows – that’s all’.

---

15 Taylor, p. 28.  
17 Pitot, p. 140.  
19 Nadia Murad, The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and My Fight against the Islamic State, Tim Duggan Books, 2017. This memoir retells the traumatic experiences of the author, a rape survivor, who watched the murder of her family and the Yazidi people of Kocho, a village in Iraq. Enslaved and sexually abused by groups of men, she ‘refused to be silenced’ (p.8).  
18 Pitot, p. 146.
tried to ask about his wife, he was threatened by a policeman. Even when the cells were not locked, there was still a limit to freedom. In fact, the refugees had to wait about 10 or 12 days from their arrival to find out about their spouses, from whom they had been separated during the voyage. But even then, there were restrictions on family life, particularly because no intimate relationships between couples was permitted. In the ‘Interim Report on the Detainment Camp for the period: 1st October, 1941, to 30th September, 1942’, the Commandant of the Detainment Camp, H.J. Armitage, reports that ‘the accommodation available does not allow of married couples and their families living together’.19

Frustration and psychological depression set in, and there were two cases of suicide in the prison. In one tragic case a man killed himself without knowing that his wife was expecting a child. The doctor told his wife that he could inform her husband about the good news but she refused, thinking that she would give him the news herself during their permitted time together, but he killed himself before she could speak to him. This tragic episode seems to put emphasis on the lack of control over one’s future experienced by refugees, a theme which is also developed by Christian Goeschel, who posits that being uprooted from their ‘normal life and its norms and its values’ tends to increase suicidal attitudes of refugees.20 This ‘collapse of hope in the possibility of a future’ adds to the feeling of alienation and despair, and death seems to be the only solution.21

There were other cases of depression and some of the Jews had to be temporarily interned in the psychiatric ward. In their analysis of refugees in Germany, Sabine C. Koch and Beatrix Weidinger-von der Recke argue that post-traumatic stress disorder is an occurrence in refugees:

The life of a refugee is subject to external control over many years. Refugees have very few opportunities to realize their plans for their future, because their future does not lie in their own hands. This accumulation of stressors and negative life events may generate a range of responses, including abnormal behavioural responses which lead to their own set of difficulties. The precarious situation of the refugee can also lead to chronic deviant reactions such as disease […] that need to be treated or otherwise addressed.22

After some time, the grievances of the refugees finally began to be heard by the Mauritian authorities. Jewish couples were allowed to meet: at first, they could see each other in the yard, then in tents, but many Jews refused this degrading situation. Finally, married women were allowed to go to the men’s section and a sort of family

---

22Goeschel, p. 117.
life began. After three years in the prison, the Governor decided to allow the civil marriage of refugees. The prison also segregated the Jewish population from Mauritian society and at first, the Jewish prisoners had no right to access the world outside. This policy was gradually relaxed and from the second year, every day two men and women could roam out of the prison for half a day, without being escorted. Afterwards, despite some control, more of them could go out. Some were even authorised to work out of the camp: they were teachers, engineers, experts in electricity and telecommunications. On 5 June 1943, there were outings organized to spend some days by the sea.

Building a Home in the Mauritian Prison

By this stage, a relational home was being set up in the prison, as the refugees were allowed to make tentative connections in their new surroundings at last. For Taylor, a relational home consists of social networks, social practices, and ‘people interact[ing] with the spaces around them, through the repetition of banal activities and the enactment of important life events’. For the Jewish refugees, the repetition of everyday activities helped to create connections and construct relationships. David Turton reminds us that place ‘is not a stage upon which social activity is carried out’ but is ‘a product of social activity – and a fragile one at that’. Citing Roger Zetter, Taylor states that ‘home is not just physically bounded space, but a living organism of relationships and traditions stretching back into the past’. Despite their plight, even in the ships, some refugees read and made the children read, and they set up a school in the prison. It is to be noted that once in the prison, the Jews used the skills they had acquired during their past in Europe in order to survive. Many of them were engaged in confectioning jam, sweets, dolls and wooden toys, children’s

---

24 During the Second World War, the two Governors in Mauritius under British rule were: Sir Bede Edward Hugh Clifford (1937-1942) and Sir Donald Mackenzie-Kennedy (1942-1948). Mr Sydney Moody, the Colonial Secretary, also acted as Governor for a few months during the absences of the Governor. The Governors are mentioned only a few times in Le Shekel Mauricien. Lady Clifford, wife of the Governor, together with some women of the Red Cross, used to come and visit the sick detainees in the hospital during the first year of their detainment. However, she had a clash with the hospital doctor, Doctor Lavoipierre, who accused her of wasting and distributing unequally the materials and food and she stopped coming to the prison (Pitot, p. 161). The Governor Mackenzie-Kennedy also promised to visit the refugees. More than one year after he has settled in Mauritius, and after a long-awaited visit, the Governor met only Commander Armitage in the prison’s office and did not even visit the camp or the detainees (Pitot, p.223). All communication had to go through the prison’s Commander. Despite some complaints of the Jews against Commander Armitage (Pitot, p. 222), Pitot argues that the latter tried to make life easy for the Jews (Pitot, p. 221).

25 Pitot, p. 218. It must be noted that religious marriages were celebrated on the island (Pitot, p. 188), but civil marriages were not allowed before.

26 Taylor, p. 118.


29 Taylor, p. 118.
dresses, purses and leather belts, which were sold inside the camp and orders even came from South Africa. They also received a lot of support from the Association of Jews of South Africa. A Visiting Committee was constituted to bring the Jews some comfort and it also acted as a channel between the refugees and the public by sending messages in the press for donations of clothes and musical instruments. In fact, the prison camp was filled with educated and skilled people such as doctors, teachers, tailors, dressmakers, shoemakers, tinsmiths, quilters, and carpenters, which favoured a great exchange of technical knowledge between refugees; and techniques to prepare soaps, perfumes and cosmetics were shared with the locals. One of the Jews, Dr Alfred Heller, even tried to make paper. Another refugee, who did not follow all the Jewish beliefs, shared ham and sausage making with a local company, Maison Merven. The resumption of social rituals associated with skill sharing and learning in the Mauritian prison ensured that a sense of ‘relational home’ began to blossom amongst the Jewish refugees, despite their imprisonment.

Intellectual and cultural life became increasingly important for the Jewish refugees. Although Jewish prisoners who had been studying in Europe were not allowed to sit for the Cambridge exams, a library and a free, popular university were set up inside the prison compound. A cultural café was also opened in the prison canteen by the Jews, where they could meet, eat, sing, discuss and thus have a social life. Particularly popular among the locals were the Jewish musicians. Pitot writes that Papa Hans and his orchestra was in high demand and they even played La bohème de Puccini at the Plaza Theatre of the Municipality of Rose Hill on 1 July 1941. Furthermore, among the Jews there were poets, and therefore a scenic review in English was set up, and together with known Mauritian authors such as Marcel Cabon and André Legallant, a literary circle was created. There were painting exhibitions, and the artists were commissioned by locals. Seeing that one’s creativity and intellect are being recognised can indeed help to boost one’s self-confidence; and even if the island was not home for the Jewish refugees, at least, these moments of glory could make them forget for a short time their lost homes. Research indeed shows the importance of artistic and cultural life for refugees. As argued, artistic expression is an important tool, especially in ‘therapeutic settings since it promotes self-esteem, facilitates the expression of emotions as well as the processing of traumatic experiences’:

Creative and artistic tools in therapies offer the means for refugees to explore, express and reconstruct their emotions and experiences related to conflict, violence and exile. Both quantitative and qualitative studies indicate that art therapy can improve physical, mental, and emotional well-being of immigrants and refugees and promote their social inclusion.

30 Pitot, p. 199.
31 Pitot, p. 171.
32 Pitot, p. 200.
34 E. McGregor, & N. Ragab.
Furthermore, according to Sami Alanne, music therapy helps to ‘forge a connection to one’s emotions and imagination, thus re-establishing a basic trust in humanity’. Hence, we can say that the survival instincts of refugees must not be underestimated.

The Metaphysical Element Behind the Notion of Home

Despite the difficulties which Pitot outlined in *Le Shekel Mauricien*, what is important to note is that refugees still tried to reproduce their lost home, and struggled to create the feeling of being at home even in exile. As argued by Renos K. Papadopoulos, the need for home is so ingrained in the human nature, there is always a dire need to re-create a semblance of home:

It is as if the absence of home creates a gap in refugees which makes them feel uncontained and they then look around to fill the gap, to make up for that loss, to re-create the protective and containing membrane of home. Indeed, home provides such a protective and holding enwraption.

This material concept of home, according to Taylor, also refers to ‘the organic matter which is central to the embodied meaning of home’, including plants, trees, crops, soil and other aspects of the natural, rather than the built environment. We note in the work of Pitot, the wish of some Jews to plant and eat lettuce, which led them into trouble with the British prison administration. Tolia-Kelly posits that the sensory memory is linked with our notion of home:

Placing has been theorised by phenomenological and humanist geographers (Relph, 1976) to address the way that we live and be within an environment, including sensory engagements with the environment. Placing through the senses offers us a matrix of textures through how we situate ourselves and in turn are ourselves positioned. Sensory memory thickens these matrices of sensory engagement by the presence of other time-spaces that assist in our being, dwelling and identification with place, home, and landscape.

Pitot describes how two Austrian agronomists, Kurt Deutsch and Jacob Silbermann among the refugees, shared their know-how with Jews, who accepted an offer to work the land despite the unfamiliar landscape and climate. Some young Czechoslovakian detainees, who were thinking about their future agricultural activities in Palestine, considered this training as a good opportunity for them to


37 Taylor, p. 88.

38 Pitot, p. 165.


40 Pitot, p. 164.
learn some new techniques. In fact, many Jews were not acquainted with food such as sweet potatoes, breadfruits, and various types of dry peas available on the island and they could not adapt to the local cuisine. However, some refugees, both men and women, took charge of the kitchen. They were provided with the ingredients, and they could cook at their convenience. This act of taking control of the kitchen represents a degree of control and autonomy of the prisoners and likely helped in fostering a sense of belonging to the community, as well as a thickening of the sensory matrix which contributes to a sense of home and emplacement.

Research indeed shows that food is directly linked to identity and culture. The importance of planting was not only to respond to their needs but it also gave a context or more precisely a meaning to their life. It was a way to re-create a semblance of community life and a home. Planting of potatoes, which had not been successful before, became abundant under the Jewish expertise and the latter received recognition for it. Lissa Malkki analyses the question of roots and the concept of rootedness as representing identity and territorialisation. As she argues, ‘one dictionary definition for “land” is “the people of a country,” as in, “the land rose in rebellion’ thus giving to these terms a more human characteristic. Furthermore, the ‘botanical metaphors’ give a certain metaphysical element to places:

That is, people are often thought of, and think of themselves, as being rooted in place and as deriving their identity from that rootedness. The roots in question here are not just any kind of roots; very often they are specifically arborescent in form.

The concept of ‘roots’ seem to hold a very important meaning especially for refugees and displaced people. Uprooted, they have to preserve their culture and search for a link with a new place, and this connection with the land and gardening can bring back this communion and re-build a sense of community. In parenthesis, we can add that the term culture, as Malkki observed, is derived from Latin and stands for ‘cultivation’:

The idea of culture comes with it an expectation of roots, of a stable, territorialized existence (Clifford 1988:338). Here, culture and nation are kindred concepts: they are not only spatializing but territorializing; they both depend on a cultural essentialism that readily takes on arborescent forms.

---

41 Pitot, p. 165.
42 Pitot, p. 163.
44 Pitit, p. 150.
47 Malkki, p. 27.
48 Malkki, p. 29.
According to Pitot, about one hundred and fifty refugees of different nationalities decided to clear the undergrowth, thus creating a community garden. Even if there are not many details in Pitot’s work about the effects of gardening on the refugees, community gardens are elsewhere considered to play a crucial role in improving physical and emotional health since the refugees enjoy ‘outdoor recreation, increased social interactions, and sense of connection and community engagement’.

Material home is also linked to the soil, the dead and to burial. In the beginning, Jews were not even allowed to accompany their dead to the cemetery. The cemetery—as a locus of memory—bears a symbolic meaning to the social and cultural construction of home. Citing L. Mumford (1961), Egle Bazaraite and Teresa Heitor posit that at

the beginning of every city was the foundation of a burial ground that was a kind of landmark to be visited by the living “to commune with or placate ancestral spirits”

In fact, the cemetery is the ‘forerunner, almost a core of every living city’.

Complex emotional relationships are formed with places, and a homeland without a cemetery becomes unthinkable since the dead are rooted to the community’s identity and it thus gives a sense to the abstract meanings of belonging, life and death. In other terms, the significance of rituals cannot be underestimated in the construction of home since the burial place constructs the group’s identity and evokes a ‘sense of community and communal continuity’. According to Julie Rugg, by adding details about the dead person, the burial place ‘carries the purpose of enshrining the identity of the deceased’. This also gives a certain sacredness to the concept of home. This sacredness is evident in Pitot’s work. When it was time to definitely depart from the island, the refugees, who had tended the cemetery on a voluntary basis for years, were anxious about leaving behind their buried loved ones. They asked the Anglican Archbishop, Otter-Barry, to look after their cemetery. The Government of Mauritius realised the importance of this plot of land for the Jews and decided to transfer the ownership of the land to the South African Jewish Board of Deputies.

49 Pitot, p. 164.
55 Pitot, p. 260.
Moreover, a metaphysical and spiritual sense of home was being set up in the 
prison. Forced to leave their homes in Europe, the Jews wanted to keep hold of what 
they perceived as the physical origin of their identity, and the only way was to stick 
to one’s religion. It is true that upon boarding, there were some frictions between the 
different groups of refugees who were suspicious of one another. According to 
Pitot, this was not surprising given the variety of backgrounds, ages, education, and 
political views of these men and women huddled together. Indeed, the notion of 
traditions and homeland is far from being a monolithic concept, since factions and 
tensions are an inherent part of any group. Jews of one faction had difficulties in 
适应 with other factions: liberal Jews, quite integrated and assimilated to 
European life, who had never been interested in traditions, had to rub shoulders with 
 orthodox people attached to the scrupulous respect of the Jewish law. Even on the 
island’s prison, there were two synagogues, one for the orthodox and another one for 
the liberals. Furthermore, a separate kitchen had been provided for the Orthodox 
group. However, despite some clashes among the Jews, there was a certain 
communion during religious ceremonies, even by those who had never been 
and Jin-Heon Jung argue for the importance of religion as ‘a sanctuary and space of 
relief’ in the lives of ‘vulnerable people’ and that religion ‘can be an integral part of 
refugees’ public space making’.

Taylor also stresses the notion of time as central to the meaning of home, and 
the events and seasons and years become important in determining home. The 
temporal aspect of home is not only defined in linear terms, ‘as the movement from 
past to present to future and the journey from childhood to old age’, but also as being 
‘cyclical, repetitive and sometimes chaotic’.

While past, present and future are often perceived as discrete, they can never 
be neatly separated. Daily routines, birthdays, religious festivals and political 
commemorations introduce a circular rhythm into home life, bringing the past 
into the present and allowing us to anticipate the future, while unexpected 
events such as war or illness destabilise the linear trajectory of our lives.

The act of observing religious and other cultural festivals, which the Jews had 
celebrated in their European homeland, suggests ‘the passing of time for refugees, as 
well as offering a connection with the past’. Some of the ceremonies included Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, celebrated on the ship on 3 and 4 October; it 
was observed that there were no fights that day and that the religious ceremony

---

56 Pitot, p. 52.
57 Pitot, p. 172.
58 Armitage, section 11, p. 2.
59 Pitot, p. 172. Most of them were Jews, but were not practising ardently the religion. There were three 
Catholics and one Protestant in the group of Jews.
60 A. Horstmann & J-H. Jung, Building Noah’s Ark for Migrants, Refugees, and Religious Communities, USA, 
61 Taylor, p. 6, p. 56
62 Taylor, p. 54.
63 Taylor, p. 54.
64 Taylor, p. 67.
united all Jews.\textsuperscript{65} When the \textit{Atlantic} arrived at Istanbul, the Jewish community which was celebrating Yom Kippour, the Jewish festival of forgiveness, sent bread and some provisions aboard.\textsuperscript{66} On their way to Mauritius, the celebration of the festival of light, Hanukkah, was not permitted on the \textit{Nieuw Zeeland} ship, but the captain of the \textit{Johan de Witt} allowed it.\textsuperscript{67} On the island, the detainees were ‘autonomous’ in their ‘religious life’.\textsuperscript{68} However, Pitot does not linger on details of the ceremonies in Mauritius in her voluminous work.

Re-creating a sense of home was never straightforward, and the Jewish refugees encountered many roadblocks and setbacks. As argued by Papadopoulos, it is not trauma but ‘loss of home [which] is the only condition that all refugees share’.\textsuperscript{69} Home is ‘one of the most fundamental notions of humanity’.\textsuperscript{70} Indeed, refugees, of any origin or ethnic group, will tenaciously try to adapt to their situations and their main objective will be to restore their loss and make a home with what they have. However, this makeshift home was not created easily, and before long was under threat again. With the threat of two years imprisonment if anyone contacted the detainees when they first landed on the island, nobody tried to approach them.\textsuperscript{71} As a consequence of this, the Mauritian population became increasingly indifferent and the refugees were forgotten behind the bars. Soon afterwards, the presence of the refugees started to disturb the Mauritian populace: there was a fear among some local producers that the refugees, engaged in selling the products and crafts they were making in prisons, would take over the market. The Mauritian press started showing distrust towards the foreigners. There were also rumours that some of them might be Nazi spies.\textsuperscript{72} According to Françoise Lionnet, many were influenced by a long tradition of British and French anti-Semitic discourses as transmitted through the literary, historical, and religious texts that formed part of the common educational and cultural experiences of educated Mauritians’.\textsuperscript{73}

This backlash was exacerbated by the severe economic crisis experienced in Mauritius during the war. Sebastian Rinken writes that ‘[e]mpirical and conceptual antecedents suggest that there is a risk of a backlash effect when immigration

\textsuperscript{65} Pitot, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{66} ‘Cette fête transforma l’ambiance à bord, le service religieux et les prières soudant en un bloc, au moins un soir, tous les réfugiés, unis dans la proclamation qui sortit de toutes les gorges : « la shanaha’baabeYeroushalaim… l’an prochain à Jérusalem ! »’
Translation: This festival transformed the atmosphere on board, the religious service and the prayers united, at least one evening, all the refugees, who proclaimed: “the shanaha’baa be Yeroushalaim ...next year in Jerusalem!”
\textsuperscript{67} Pitot, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{68} Pitot, p. 140.
\textsuperscript{70} R. K. Papadopoulos, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{71} ‘Le Cernéen’ (newspaper), 27 December 1940; Pitot, p. 154.
\textsuperscript{72} Pitot, p. 103, p.110, p. 113, p. 152, p. 154.
societies experience economic downturns’. The refugee population was regarded as pariahs, perceived as ‘threatening’ and accused of being dangerous for the community. Life in the prison became unbearable again, and refugees were again not allowed to roam out of the prison and engage with the hostile world outside.

Conclusion

The desire of the Jewish refugees to re-create a home on the island of Mauritius during the Second World War is seen in their attempt to re-adapt to their environment, by trying to reconstruct a material or physical home, as told through the histories and personal narratives collected by Geneviève Pitot. The physical concept of home relies on the presence of material objects as possessions, contributing to the environment within the space of the prisons which help establish a more settled and ordered life more redolent of ‘home’. During their forced journey, the Jews found themselves losing most of their material possessions and at various times, they were looted, the objects in their luggage were confiscated and their personal belongings were not returned to them, and were even thrown in the sea.

On their arrival to Mauritius, they had to start again, and ask for donations of shoes, clothes, books and musical instruments, which they received after a few weeks. Even when they faced many injustices, the refugees tried to make the prison a home: men’s cells were even decorated by the wives; cradles were manufactured and orders for furniture increased. But home is not only a physical or material space. Using Taylor’s definitions of home, I have tried to represent the attempts at building a spatial, relational, material and temporal home by the Jews who were exiled on the island. The narrative approach of this paper allows an insight into the storied reality of human experience. By referring to the stories told by the refugees or their descendants, Pitot has been able to write a sympathetic account of their forced exile in Mauritius, as well as the shifting attitudes of Mauritian society towards the refugees over time. The refugees tried to settle in the prison, but it was a relief to leave this space of restrictions, as they wanted to re-build a home somewhere else. Home is indeed a complex concept, especially for those who have lost one.

---

75 Pitot, p. 225-229.
76 Pitot, p. 133, p. 259.
77 Pitot, p. 190-191.
78 Pitot, p. 164.

« Les époux virent leurs cellules, jusque-là peu attrayantes, prendre un petit air coquet, grâce à la touche feminine » ; Translation: The spouses saw their cells, hitherto unattractive, take a pretty look, thanks to the feminine touch.