This article argues that the origins of the Association of Jewish Refugees Information are illuminated by an awareness of the exile press in general, and of the debate regarding the ‘role’ of the emigrants in a future Europe rid of fascism. This discussion dominated the pages of many journals, in particular those published in Britain and the USA. I distinguish the stance adopted by members of the AJR and by Jewish exiles in general from that favoured by other exiles. Many insisted upon the special situation of the Jews, whose ‘German’ identity was not in doubt, but for whom there could be no ‘return to Germany’ and who consequently committed themselves to their new homeland.

Of the many hundreds of publications founded by exiles, emigrants and refugees from German-speaking Central Europe in the twelve years of Nazi rule in Germany, very few were able or even wished to continue after 1945. Only two are still published and read to this day. The first is Aufbau, founded in 1934 as the newsletter of the New York German-Jewish Club, and one of the most widely distributed and widely read German-language journals during the Second World War; the other is the journal established by the Association of Jewish Refugees, known for over fifty years as AJR Information, and now appearing monthly as the AJR Journal.

AJR Information differs from a publication such as Aufbau in one or two important respects. It was not formally established as a regular journal until 1946, though it had been appearing irregularly as a circular to the Association’s members since 1941, and it was published from the start predominantly in English rather than in German. Despite these differences, the origins of the vast majority of AJR Information’s readers, contributors and editors in the German-speaking areas of Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia justify a consideration of the journal in the broader context of the newspapers, journals and newsletters of the German-speaking ‘exile’ community. This is not, however, to say that I consider AJR Information to be an ‘exile journal’; as we shall see, this was not how the journal saw itself, and the discussions in the pages of the post-war editions make very clear that the Jewish refugee community in Britain no longer looked to mainland Europe and the German language as significant markers of cultural identity.
By the time of the foundation of the Association of Jewish Refugees in 1941, German-language publication beyond the reach of the oppression, censorship and threats of Hitler’s Germany already had an eight-year history, although the war had meant the closure of almost all the titles based in Europe. Only the Soviet Union could provide enough stability to enable publication through the War. It is nevertheless appropriate to acknowledge the importance of publishing in exile from the German Reich, given the close ties of many of the first members of the AJR to the broader anti-fascist exile community, many of whose members had been forced to leave Germany for political reasons as early as 1933.

First, I should attempt a definition of what is meant by an ‘exile’ publication. Of course, at a basic level, any publication established by individuals forced out of Germany by Hitler’s policies and actions is an ‘exile’ or ‘refugee’ journal of sorts. We can, however, be a little more specific. There were certain characteristics and functions that might be considered typical of German exile publications and which to some degree were common to all, despite a diversity of stated aims and political leanings. These include: the provision of a forum for exiled German-language writers, criticism of and agitation against Hitler and the National Socialists through comment or satire; warning of the threat of war, and from 1939 reporting the war; strengthening and supporting illegal, underground resistance in Germany; maintaining and continuing what was sometimes referred to as the ‘cultural inheritance’ (‘das kulturelle Erbe’) of what was perceived as the ‘true’ or ‘other’ Germany.

One might add to this list a more practical role, which became increasingly vital towards the end of the 1930s and during the war. This was to provide emigrants with information about the necessities of everyday life in foreign countries, such as residence permits, the acquisition of visas, and the payment of rent. For some, an engagement with the cultural and political life of the ‘host’ country was also a priority. These important functions could be fulfilled more quickly and cheaply in a newspaper, newsletter, or magazine than in books, which took time, large amounts of money and considerable effort to produce, and whose publishers were plagued by financial and distribution problems, as well as by a diminishing market.

However, although these characteristics were shared to a greater or lesser extent by all such publications, the variety displayed within this framework and the sheer number of different publications produced provide impressive testimony to the determination and spirit of those forced out of Germany in fear for their lives, as well as to a faith both optimistic and desperate in the power of the written word to make a difference. The exiled journalist and novelist Joseph Roth, in a 1937 article for a Polish newspaper, exemplifies this