The distinguished professor of Roman law, Fritz Robert Pringsheim (1882–1967), was formally dismissed from his position at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau on 1 April 1936. Of wealthy non-Aryan descent and of protestant faith, Pringsheim had served as a lieutenant with the Imperial German forces in World War I, receiving both the first and second class Iron Cross for his efforts as a Frontkämpfer in battles ranging from La Bassée and Arras to Narew-Bobr, Verdun and the Somme. Under the new Nuremberg laws, however, none of this did him any good. With his dismissal looming, Pringsheim, a father of six, contacted the Academic Assistance Council in London in late 1935, in order to explore the possibilities of finding an academic position in the United Kingdom or the United States of America. The procedures tended to be lengthy and potentially unsuccessful, however, so in the meantime Pringsheim decided to move to Berlin with his wife and youngest son, aged four, the others having already been sent abroad, in order to work on a new edition of the Greek Basilica supported by the Prussian Academy. When proceedings turned from bad to worse in 1938, Pringsheim accepted an offer from Merton College, Oxford, to continue his efforts on the Basilica there. Events caught up with him, though, and following the Reichskristallnacht in November, he was one of the many rich male Jews that Reinhard Heydrich had ordered to be placed in “protective custody”. Apparently thanks to the influence of one of his former students, Pringsheim was detained for only about three weeks, before finally managing
to escape to England in February 1939, “bringing with him a substantial part of his magnificent library and some furniture”. He and his family settled into 24 Chalfont Road, Oxford.

During the Easter vacation of 1940, his 16 year-old son Girri decided it was time to improve their radio reception, as he had been unable to get through to his much-beloved American jazz. Together with a school friend, they drilled a hole in the roof at 24 Chalfont Road and set up an outside aerial. Neighbours alerted the police, and it was discovered that Pringsheim had failed to register the radio. Although the annual licence fee of ten shillings was immediately paid, the matter was reported to the Home Office. On 27 May Pringsheim was arrested and subsequently interned at Camp Douglas on the Isle of Man, together with two of his sons and the son of his sister, “by the special instructions of the Home Secretary”. Three of his sons were eventually deported to Canada.

Despite interventions on his behalf from a variety of prominent people, Pringsheim remained interned for almost seven months. A certain James Brierly (1881–1955), the reputed professor of public international law, was on the Home Office Committee that advised on the release of detainees, and he was not easily convinced. Pringsheim’s strong German nationalism bothered him. The fact that the family had also been reported to have sung German songs “in unison with the windows open” in Oxford, did not help Pringsheim’s cause either. When he finally did manage to return to Oxford, however, Merton College resolved to pay him for the period of detention, as he had been leader of the camp university that had been set up on the Isle of Man for the benefit of the inmates.

The volume edited by Jack Beatson and Reinhard Zimmermann on émigré legal scholars in Britain contributes a vivid picture of a process that would have a profound influence on Anglo-Saxon academia of all disciplines: the arrival of thousands of mostly Jewish scholars fleeing the persecution of the Third Reich. As Pringsheim’s story illustrates, emigration was not without its pathologies and paradoxes. The situation was complex, for both those seeking aid as well as for those trying to provide it. The outcome was not always ideal. Supported by the Thyssen Foundation and the British Academy, the book pays tribute to what was effectively only a handful of male émigré academics – women were almost non-existent in German-speaking legal circles – and their families. The work is an important chapter in British legal