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Kindertransport Refugees: Discovering our parents’ fate

Kerry Jones
“Then there was the trauma of re-establishing some infrastructure of normality in a strange land, with new families, however sympathetic and kind, with the child enjoying dubious status, neither a temporary guest, nor adopted, a sort of twilight world of not knowing where he or she belonged, which was a state of being that was to last, for some, all their lives.

Historical questions

• Jewish immigration < 10,000 1933 - 1938 (Grenville, 2012: 5).
• British historian, Tony Kushner, November (9/10) 1938 Kristallnacht (the night of the Broken Glass)
• Repulsion (Hoare) - expedite the immigration process
• New refugee policy, all children whose maintenance could be guaranteed and eventual re-emigration secured without being subject to individual checks as older refugees had been. (London, 2000: 104).
The Arrival
Frank Meisler and Arie Oviada at Liverpool Street Railway Station in central London
Temporary separateness

• Far from being a long term or permanent separation, testimonies by Kindertransport suggest that parents’ considered children’s emigration as part of an effort to ‘keep the family together’

• Familial effort to leave Nazi-occupied territories

• This then was a temporary measure

• Hold onto the possibility of reunification of their family even without parents present – siblings

• First person accounts – Kindertransport, USHMM
Esther Starobin, (Rosenfeld) Fate of family that remained in Germany

A few months later, in June 1939, Edith was sent to England on the Kindertransport. She arrived in London and was met by a woman from the Quaker Society who escorted her from London to Thorpe, Norwich, about 100 miles away from London.

Edith recalls her mother writing to her oldest sibling, Bertl who had earlier arrived in Britain:

“Make sure your sisters are good, that they say thank you to the people who are taking care of them, they do well in school, they clean behind their ears” – you know, all the things that mothers say.”

Separation and rupture
(Freud and Birdlingham, 1943, )

“The parting was terrible, that’s the one thing I’ve not forgotten in all my life. Mother had been so controlled. And suddenly at the station, she showed her feelings. It was terrifying, really terrifying. I was quite shocked... I would have liked a happier image of my mother. That’s the only image, this contorted face, full of agony. It’s very sad.”

(Ursula Rosenfeld, quoted in Harris,M.J., & Oppenheimer,D.  2000 Into the Arms : Stories of the Kindertransport p. 109.)
‘Choiceless choice’

(Langer, 1980: 228)

• Conceptualised such choices - ethical dilemmas – mother death camp
• Different but the ‘choiceless choice’ – survival or significant risk to life?
• Guilt and anguish in recollecting the decision placed on parents by children in adulthood
• ‘Tales of reunification’ convince children to get on the train (Harry and Oppenheimer, 2000: 103)
• Ambivalence – provoked guilt on learning of parent's fate and brutal deaths (Guske, 2009: 22)
“they either have a memory gap over the parting or it is painfully etched in the minds in horrific detail.... If an experience can neither be dealt with or understood at the time, nor locked away, it is burnt into the mind. Then it is very difficult to keep out of the mind and it even becomes nightmares at night.”
(Barnett, 2010 : 17)

• Language and cultural sensitivities
• Understanding children’s needs
• Expectations to be happy and grateful
• Suppression of emotions
• ‘Wanting to cry’ (Barnett, 2012; 160)
• Resentment – ‘not real parents’
• Masking true feelings to protect vulnerable self
Assimilating

• Try hard, work at chores within the foster home and in school
• Entitlement learning of fate of over a million children who had been murdered in Europe (Barnett, 2013: 160).
• ’Not a bed of roses’ - trauma of being uprooted and cut off from an former roots
• ‘Double disorientation’ of evacuation, fostered and re-fostered
• Not being able to help their parents who had promised to follow them
• Learning that parents and their relatives’ had been murdered by the Nazi regime (Barnett, 2012: 161).
• Impact - manifest in various ways for these children in later life
Esther – gradually knowing but never quite really knowing….

“And then as the letters went on, the writing got smaller, less punctuation. I think as my parents realized they were really not going to be able to come and meet us, there was a definite change. Now Bertl said she had more letters but they had gotten lost over the years, but the one thing she said to Bertle was that, “You must keep the family together.” Esther Starobin, 2017)
• Esther’s parents and brother were deported in October 1942 to the Gurs camp in France.
• While her brother was rescued in 1941 and went to the United States (1,000 children transport)
• On his arrival in the US, he would hide food all over the house
• As long as he lived, always a lot of food around him
• A legacy of hunger and starvation in the camp
• Trauma of the pre-war years and war manifested in suppression of emotions
• Esther’s visit to early childhood home in Germany from US
• Brother could not contemplate such a journey
As Esther recalls:

‘I needed to know where I came from. I felt like I’d been born in a black hole. I knew nothing about it. And I sent a postcard from Adelsheim, and his wife told me he wouldn’t look at the postcard, he just would not talk about it or anything to do with it.’ (Esther Starobin, 2017).
On finding out...

“There’s a French book that lists all the transports from the French camps, which somehow Bertl knew about, and she got it. And it lists--they were on transport 19--it lists their name, their age, where they were from, and what day they got to Auschwitz, so that’s how I know.” (Edith Starobin, 2017).
Discovering fate and connecting to the dead

Although Esther learnt many years later through her sister what had happened to her parents’, other Kinder learnt through letters from relatives or via the Red Cross in the form of short messages of their parents’ fate. Scant detail contained within these letters and messages, meant that many Kinder were unable to process the horrific details of their parents’ murders. Exacerbated by the physical absence of a site of mourning, some Kinder actively sought out sites several decades later in sites such as Treblinka even if their parents had died in another camp. A way of memorialising and connecting to their deceased parent, and is a way of continuing a bond. Physical items from the camps as ‘proxy objects’ to remember deceased loved ones (McDonald, 2018: 403-4).
‘Ruth’s father returning from Shanghai to Germany to her mother who had been in hiding expected to: ‘reunite with their sweet little four year old and they were shocked to find a stroppy adolescent.”

“It was not possible to resume a relationship with a teenager that had broken off six or more years earlier…”

Describes her parents’ inability to understand that due to British propaganda she had become terrified of Germany and the Germans

Angered by disruption

Settled with a family who wanted to adopt after residing with three foster families, the latter of which wanted to adopt her (2012: 162).
A lasting impact

‘The Kindertransport children knew they were lucky to be alive, but the emotional cost was high and many were haunted as adults, by thoughts that one of the children murdered by the Nazis might have made better use of the chance to escape on the kindertransport.” (Barnett, 2012: 163).

• The lasting impact - postwar accounts of survivors
• Some kinder not well received and were ill treated
• Kindertransportees recall adjusting to new circumstances, missing loved ones and remaining rootless
• Feelings learnt to be buried and blocked
Testimonies: Into the Collective Consciousness

• 1970’S and 1980’s - TV dramas about the Holocaust

• Prompted curiosity by second generation and others as well as grandchildren

• Kindertransport recorded events with their children in a way historical accounts so far had not

• National Holocaust Memorial Day not declared until 2001.

• A growing number of commemorative events are organised in which the Kindertransportees have played a substantial role, particularly in educating future generations – Union of Jewish students
Lessons from the Kindertransport

• Understanding the consequences of war and contemporary conflicts and the needs of children who are currently caught up in them.

• Europe and Britain issue of how to handle children who are unaccompanied or who are fleeing persecution, enslavement or as a result of being orphaned.

• Children need protection - in the absence of such care, children can become uprooted, disoriented and vulnerable as we have learnt from the Kindertransport.

• An aspiration of policy to ease the refugee crisis.

• Understood according to unique and complexities of how such events come about.
References


