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Child Refugees Forever? The History of the Kindertransport to Britain 1938/39

Andrea Hammel



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Abstract

This article gives an overview of the history of the Kindertransport, the rescue operation that brought nearly 10,000 unaccompanied Continental children, mainly Jewish or with a Jewish background, to the United Kingdom. It investigates the history of the rescue mission as well as its portrayal in the media, the public and among the academic community, both during 1938/39 when it was in operation and thereafter. This article argues for a critical analysis of the context of the Kindertransport as well as a thorough study of its memorialisation.

Keywords: Kindertransport, Jewish refugees, National Socialism, Anti-semitism, Memory

Flüchtlingskinder für immer? Die Geschichte des Kindertransports nach Großbritannien 1938/39

Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Artikel bietet einen Überblick über die Geschichte des Kindertransports, einer Rettungsmaßnahme, die an die 10.000 unbegleitete jüdische Kinder aus Kontinentaleuropa in das Vereinigte Königreich führte. Der Beitrag untersucht die Geschichte dieser Hilfsmission, sowie deren Diskussion und Darstellung in den Medien, der britischen Gesellschaft, sowie der Geschichtswissenschaft, sowohl während der Durchführung der Maßnahmen 1938/39 als auch in der Zeit danach. Der Beitrag tritt für eine kritische Analyse der Kindertransporte, sowie ihrer zeitgeschichtlichen Einbettung als auch für eine tiefgehende Analyse ihrer erinnerungskulturellen Bedeutung in der britischen Gesellschaft ein.

Stichworte: Kindertransport, Jüdische Flüchtlinge, Nationalsozialismus, Antisemitismus, Erinnerung

1 Introduction

The term Kindertransport is usually applied to the rescue of nearly 10.000 unaccompanied minors with Jewish backgrounds from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and the border area between Germany and Poland to Britain between December 1938 and the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939. Employing socio-historical methods as well as cultural criticism, this article will give an overview of the experiences of these refugees from the time they came on a Kindertransport to Britain to the present day. Examining existing historical studies, autobiographical testimonies and the Kindersurvey published online in 2009, a number of specific questions will be the focus: How was the Kinder-

transport movement organised? What was the attitude of the British government and the British public towards these child refugees? How is the Kindertransport viewed today in British history and British public consciousness? Are the Kindertransport refugees seen as an example of innocent victims? What are the consequences of such a perception? How has the memorial culture surrounding the Kindertransport developed?

2 Jewish Children under National Socialism

As is widely known, children with a Jewish background suffered discrimination and persecution during the National Socialist regime in Germany from 1933 and in Austria after 1938. It is difficult to analyse what effect the National Socialist anti-semitic policies had on children as compared to adults. *Marion Kaplan* (2001) outlines the growing exclusion of Jewish children from mainstream schools in Germany following the implementation of the law euphemistically called “Gesetz gegen die Überfüllung der deutschen Schulen und Hochschulen” in April 1933. A quota for the admission of Jewish children to German schools was set, many Jewish children were explicitly asked to leave their schools, others left after becoming more and more ostracized. Even for those who were still enrolled in mainstream German schools, everyday life was affected by exclusion from school trips and other extra-curricular activities. These changes must have been difficult to understand, especially for younger children, and even more so for those who had not been aware of their Jewish background before the National Socialist rise to power. Consequently more and more children were sent to Jewish schools. This did not completely cushion the children from discrimination and persecution, as public life in general, and the public sphere of children in particular, – for example on their journeys to and from school – was littered with discriminatory incidents or even violent situations (cf. *Kaplan* 2001). Thus it could be argued that children were even more prone to experience everyday violence because of their Jewish backgrounds than adults. Many former members of the Kindertransport recount such an event of violence or acute terror in their memoirs (cf. *Milton* 2005) and some explicitly state their fear: “I no longer wanted to be out of doors, life seemed too unsafe” (*David* 2003, p. 16). Thus most children understood their parents’ efforts to find a way for them to emigrate, even if they were scared to leave their families. *Martha Blend* (1995) remembers: “When my parents broke this news to me, I was devastated and burst into hysterical sobs at the mere thought. [...] I felt as though some force stronger than myself was dragging me into an abyss and I had no power to prevent it. Although I was still very young, I had seen and understood the build-up of terror in the last two years, so I knew very well that my parents were doing this out of sheer necessity” (p. 32).

Relatively soon after 1933 it had become clear to the Reichsvertretung der deutschen Juden (Council of German Jews) that leaving Germany was the only way to save the lives and livelihoods of many German Jews, thus facilitating emigration became the main task of the organisation. Mostly families tried to stay together when attempting to emigrate, but often this was not possible. Sending children abroad unaccompanied, however, was not a popular option until the November Pogroms in 1938 (cf. *Curio* 2006).

Although the courage of the parents who sent their children abroad to save them is generally acknowledged, post-war researchers have sometimes argued that not enough

was known about the effects of parent-child separation (cf. *Benz* 2002), which might have made such a course of action easier to follow for the parents. Publications of the Jüdischer Frauenbund make it clear that this was not the case and that a discussion about the negative sides of children emigrating without their parents was in the public domain in the 1930s (cf. *Edinger* 1933).

3 The British Response

The eruption of violence towards the Jewish population in Germany during the November pogroms of 1938 was not only a turning point for German Jewish organisations and individuals. It also showed the international community that the German Jews were in an absolutely desperate situation. The government of Great Britain reacted with a public avowal of assistance for the German Jews. The Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain told the House of Commons that his government would be considering “any possible way by which we can assist these people” (*London* 2000, p. 99). At a Cabinet Committee Meeting discussion on Foreign Policy on 14 November 1938 various possible reactions to the events were discussed, and Chamberlain again stated that “something effective should be done to alleviate the terrible fate of the Jews in Germany” (*ibid.*). He alluded to the public consciousness which shows that the British population and media were aware of the situation and that there was a certain pressure on the government to be seen to be doing something. However, although various suggestions for helping the German Jews leave Germany were discussed, none was decided on during this particular meeting. The next day a group of Anglo-Jewish leaders met with Prime Minister Chamberlain, and at this meeting the idea of temporarily admitting a number of unaccompanied children for the purpose of training and education seems to have been discussed. Just a week later the Home Secretary Sir Samuel Hoare announced the government’s new refugee policy, which included the directive that all children whose maintenance could be guaranteed by private individuals or charitable organisations were allowed to be admitted to Britain “without the individual checks used for older refugees” (*London* 2000, p. 104). This was the official go-ahead for the Kindertransport.

4 Organising the Kindertransport

The speed of organisation and the magnitude of this immigration movement are two of the reasons why the Kindertransport is often mentioned with admiration. The Kindertransport is most likely “the single biggest rescue operation aimed at a specific group of people by British official bodies” (*Hammel* 2004, p. 125). But this statement needs qualification: although the government gave permission to admit the refugee children, almost all the financial support came from charitable bodies and private individuals. Neither swiftly organised emigration of large numbers of people nor child immigration to Britain was without precedent: during the Spanish Civil War, after battles in Eastern Guizpuzcoa in mid-August 1936, 5.000 women, children and elderly people were evacuated to France in three days and overall about 4.000 unaccompanied Basque

children found refuge in the UK during this time. Within the history of immigration to Britain we also find the admission of Belgian child refugees to the UK during the First World War. Nevertheless the extremely short space of time of two weeks between the decision to admit unaccompanied child refugees in late November 1938 and the arrival of the first ferry on 2 December 1938 at Harwich with around 200 child refugees on board shows the determination and excellent organisational skills of all involved.

On the German side, a department for child emigration (Abteilung Kinderauswanderung der Reichsvertretung der deutschen Juden) had already been established by the Council of German Jews in 1933. This meant that there were people with experience available, who could deal with the formalities and organisation of a large group of Jewish children to be sent to the UK. In Austria the situation was different, as there had been no initiative to send unaccompanied children abroad before the Annexation in March 1938. In Germany the department for child emigration, which had its offices in Berlin, collected all the applications from Berlin and from provincial Jewish organisations and community offices. The department pre-selected the applications and send them on to London, where they were received by the Movement for the Care of Children from Germany which was renamed Refugee Children's Movement (RCM) in 1939 and located in Bloomsbury House in London. There the children who were deemed to be suitable for emigration were chosen and this was then communicated back to the department for child emigration of the Council for German Jews. The children and their parents were subsequently informed of the decision and were notified of their likely departure. They were allowed to take a small amount of luggage, which had to be labelled. No valuables and only a small amount of money were to be taken out of Germany. The children themselves often wore labels with identification numbers.

Trains left from Berlin or Frankfurt/Main and the children were either asked to board the trains there or picked up at stations en route. The most likely route from Germany to the UK was via Bentheim and the Dutch Hoek of Holland, where the parties boarded the ferry to Harwich. There were also transports that took the train route to Hamburg or Bremen and from there a boat to Southampton. Upon arrival in the UK the children were either put in holding camps – a number of empty holiday camps had been put at the RCM's disposal, the largest being Dovercourt – or transferred straight onto trains to London, either arriving at London Liverpool Street Station or Victoria Station. Eventually children were either accommodated in hostels or with foster families. The first call for foster parents put out by public appeal in Britain elicited 500 immediate responses from those willing to accommodate children.

In the beginning of the Kindertransport movement a sizeable number of children were selected according to the urgency of them having to leave Germany, i.e. boys between 15 and 17 years old were seen as particular urgent cases as they were at danger of arrest. Also children who were living in children's homes were perceived to be urgent cases as were others living without one or both of their parents and those in particularly straightened circumstances. As mentioned above, all children had to be "guaranteed", i.e. someone had to indemnify the UK government from financial responsibility for the child. Some of the money came from the so-called Baldwin fund, a national appeal by the former Prime Minister Lord Baldwin, which was launched in December 1939 and eventually managed to collect £500,000. Half of this money was used to finance the immigration of Jewish child refugees (cf. *London* 2000). Other guarantors were private individuals who were either identical with the child's prospective foster carers or people who just guaranteed the upkeep

of the child refugee while they were placed elsewhere. Until about March 1939 an unspecified number of children who were sent to Britain did not have an individual guarantor, but were supported by a pool of guarantees to be distributed by the RCM as they saw fit. In spring 1939 this pool of guarantees from general funds was restricted to 200 cases, which meant that only if one of the 200 individuals was not in need of a guarantee any more, could another child refugee come to Britain in his or her stead. From March 1939 onwards, in the majority of cases, only children who had an individual guarantor could enter Britain. This led to a complicated relationship between the German department for child emigration and the RCM. Potential guarantors and foster parents in the UK were most keen to foster girls between seven and ten, which was not the largest group of child refugees waiting to leave Germany. The RCM forcefully rejected the German and Austrian child refugee departments' attempts to ask for further children without individual guarantees to be allowed entry into the UK: "The Movement for the Transport of Children [sic], again, cannot bring over more unguaranteed children, until those already here have been placed. I regret that it is no use to continue to ask for more help than we are giving, because it is not in our power to grant it" (Göpfert 1999, p. 92).

Not all children who came to Britain on a Kindertransport were Jewish. About 20 percent of the Kindertransport child refugees were so-called 'non-Aryans', children with a combination of Christian and Jewish parents or grandparents who either had no religious affiliation or were in fact Christians. The Quakers, also known as the Society of Friends, had offices in Berlin and Vienna and there were also specific organisations connected to the Protestant and Catholic Church (cf. Curio 2006). The RCM in Britain was an inter-denominational organisation and took care of all the different groups of children. Not unsurprisingly a certain amount of wrangling is reported between the representatives of the different groups about the numbers of places allocated to each group.

669 children were admitted to Britain from Czechoslovakia and came on transports largely organised by the British stockbroker Nicholas Winton. 100 children came on a transport from the Sbazyn camp, located in an area between the borders of Germany and Poland where many so-called stateless Jews had fled to when expelled from the German Reich. The Orthodox British Rabbi Solomon Schoenfeld also organised a transport with Orthodox Jewish children to the UK who were to stay together in a hostel and receive an Orthodox Jewish education.

As mentioned above, the situation in Austria was less organised, but the department of child emigration of the Jewish community in Vienna nevertheless managed to put together the first transport to the UK in December 1938, which included 500 child refugees and remained the largest single transport. The procedures were very similar to that of the German counterparts. Curio (2006) describes that a medical exam was necessary and a sworn declaration that no money nor goods were being taken out of the Reich was to be submitted and that luggage had to be checked in two days before departure, most likely to make sure that no valuables were smuggled into the bags at the last minute. As most Jewish families lived in Vienna, there was less coordination with provincial agencies. Curio's research (2006) shows that there were constant debates between the parents of potential child refugees and the RCM in the UK, with the department for child emigration of the Viennese Jewish community positioned in the middle. Parents were clearly eager to place their children on a transport and stressed their individual plight. The RCM was eager that only those children who had no special needs and were well-behaved should come to the UK, thus making their placement easier and

creating a positive precedent which might encourage more people to come forward in aid of future child refugees. The Viennese department was dependent on the good will of the RCM, but also most immediately aware of the needs of the Austrian children. It seems that in the beginning the social workers in the department gave an honest account of a child's needs to aid the preparation of a foster placement in the manner of modern social work professionalism. When it became known to the RCM that a child had special needs, it often meant that they excluded the child from the transports. Sometimes even those who had an individual guarantor were excluded. The consequence of this was 'less thorough' medical examinations, which in turn made the RCM suspicious and lead to accusations that the Viennese department was not working as well as required. To conclude one can only emphasize the difficult circumstances all agencies were working under and that tensions were structural rather than based on failures on one side or the other. Behavioural problems were clearly an understandable reaction from the children placed under stress, but they were seen as a problem that might jeopardise the whole operation. For the British public, the media and the government, refugee children had to be portrayed as helpless victims grateful to Britain for their rescue.

5 The Myth of Britain as Rescuer

The fact that Britain chose to admit unaccompanied children rather than families has received criticism from many sides. *London* (2000) puts it succinctly: "Admission saved the children's lives. Exclusion sealed the fate of their parents" (p. 118). Children were seen as less of a threat to the British society and the British way of life. They were dispersed throughout Britain and accommodated in foster families and hostels thus less visible in public. They were not perceived as an immediate threat to the labour market in Britain. They also embodied innocence. *Tony Kushner* (2006) points to the dangerous side of this image of innocent children, i.e. if Jewish children are seen as more innocent than, for example, Jewish men, do the latter 'deserve' to be persecuted?

It should also be noted that the visas granted to the child refugees on the Kindertransport were temporary visas and that their potential for further migration was emphasized in public debate. Also children were seen as easier to acculturate than adults. Parallels were drawn to the successful integration of the Belgian refugee children who had come to Britain during the First World War. The Kindertransport children were seen as a "generation kept safe" (*Kushner* 2006, p. 147).

In recent years the discussion as to whether it was generosity and humanitarianism on the part of Britain that lead to the admission of the Kindertransport children has sparked intense debate. The number of child refugees admitted to Britain was undoubtedly larger than for any other country. However, the UK's motives are a subject of discussion. *Kushner* (2006) feels that "the open-ended Kindertransport scheme has to be seen alongside the failure to protest meaningfully at a diplomatic level [...] and also the closing of doors of Jewish entry to Palestine" (p. 148). *London* (2000) even sees the admission of Jewish children as part of a demographic plan for Britain: "Adding good white stock to the population was seen as demographically advantageous at a time of worry at the declining birth rate. The children would be Anglicized, growing up speaking English, and thus less likely than adults arouse xenophobia" (p. 121). This interpretation goes in part

against the view of the child refugees as temporary migrants. It is also doubtful that there was general agreement that the admission of nearly 10,000 mostly Jewish children would qualify as 'adding good white stock' because British society had suffered from a latent Anti-semitism for centuries.¹

The reasons for the British decision to admit child refugees on the Kindertransport might arguably be very complex, and at times and with different parties all these reasons might have had an influence on the decision making process. The child refugees themselves were certainly told by all parties involved, such as their parents, the German or Austrian departments for child emigration and the RCM, to behave well at all times and show their gratitude to their hosts. The children did not always comply with these requests and were sometimes unruly or uncooperative. This was, after all, a highly understandable reaction to the unsettling experiences they had had. The memory literature contains examples of some extremely understanding foster families and of those with the opposite attitude. For example, after a brief period living with her foster parents in London, the nine-year old *Martha Immerdauer* refused to be uprooted yet again and refused to leave London with her fellow class mates when their evacuation was scheduled. She threw a temper tantrum and asked to stay with her foster parent in London. Her foster mother seems to understand the child's trauma and a few days later both foster parents left London with their charge. "Of the problems created by my refusal to be evacuated with the other children I had no notion. I had little concept of money. [...] Nor had I realised that this meant [my foster father] would not easily find work elsewhere" (*Blend* 1995, pp. 66f.). Thus it seems that many individual people and individual bodies did much to aid the rescue and resettlement of the Kindertransport children. Whether this was supported by official policy at all times, seems questionable.

6 The Kindertransport in the Media

In public the children were certainly portrayed positively, which meant that their innocence and victim status was emphasized. In the 1930s the British national newspapers in general had been cautious in reporting about the German atrocities perpetrated towards the Jews (cf. *Sharf* 1964). The national press had also pandered to public worries: "just now there is a big influx of foreign Jews into Britain. They are overrunning the country" (*Sunday Express*, 19 June 1938, quoted in *Sharf* 1964, p. 168). This attitude changed to a certain extent after the pogroms in November 1938 and it seems that the media were even criticising the government for not doing enough for the refugees. When the first Kindertransport arrived in Britain, the media reaction was almost unequivocally positive. The arriving children, often seen in pictures with their labels, luggage and sometimes even toys, evoked public sympathy and were repeatedly featured in national newspapers. In some of the photos, as well as the reports, we see kindly British officials who check the children's identity, but are certainly portrayed as humane and friendly, thus supporting the view of Britain as rescuer. The Kindertransport seems to have been a popular theme in the media, even resulting in the public perception that most Jewish refugees coming to Britain were children. A respondent to the directives of the British Social Research organisation Mass Observation stated in 1939: "I think I am right in saying that a great percentage of [the refugees] are children".²

The holding camp in Dovercourt where many children stayed after their arrival in Britain became a point of interest for a number of reporters, and even BBC radio reporters arrived to record a programme. The RCM forewarned the organisers at Dovercourt and advised them to cooperate and create a favourable impression (cf. *Turner* 1990). This the children duly did by performing songs and giving brief reports. One of the boys, who had undoubtedly been selected to appear on the programme for his linguistic ability, stated: “After tea we can go to the sea, which is wonderful, or we play English games of football” (quoted in *Turner* 1990, p. 58). It is clear that the RCM had much invested in a positive public portrayal of the Kindertransport and that to a certain extent only the child refugees themselves could re-enforce this positive picture. The organisation’s First Annual Report included extracts from a diary written by a fourteen-year-old boy. *Kushner* (2006) argues that this emphasis on the generosity of the British public stands in stark contrast to the refusal to admit the children’s parents and that the diary selected for publication shows a boy whose father had died before the war and whose mother had a visa to America, thus giving the boy’s story a “redemptive ending” (pp. 150f.).

It is clear that worrying about the parents left behind in Germany and Austria was one of the major ongoing traumas for the children. Almost all memoirs describe the moment when communication ceases between the child refugee and the parents. *Vera Gissing* (1995), for example, includes a translation of a letter from her father in her published memoirs and writes: “As I read the letter, I did not know that I would take it out and read it over and over again [...] It was the last letter I received from my father”. Often the portrayal of this moment seems to take the place of the far more devastating news of the child refugee’s parents’ death. Generally it seems that the worry about the fate of the parents does not take up as much space in the memoirs of former members of the Kindertransport as one might assume. This might be explained by the difficulties that are involved in writing about trauma. *Lottie Abraham-Levy* describes an unexpected feeling of relief among her feelings of sadness, when she finds out in 1948 that her parents perished in the Holocaust, probably in Minsk (cf. *Decke* 1998). Closure was preferable to the insecurity of not knowing.

7 Research and sources on the Kindertransport

A lot of the research on the Kindertransport is reliant on memories of the events. Finding material that originates in the 1930s and 40s is more difficult. A large part of the archives of the department for child emigration of the Council of German Jews and the department for child emigration of the Jewish community in Vienna were either deliberately destroyed by the National Socialist authorities or damaged in the war. In Britain, archives were similarly destroyed during and after the war. Until recently, interviews, memoirs and autobiographical texts were the main source of information on the everyday life of the Kindertransport children once they settled in Britain. The year 2009, however, saw the publication of the ‘Making New Lives in Britain’ Kindertransport Survey, initiated and carried out by the Association of Jewish Refugees in the UK. This survey has recorded the family and religious background, migration to Britain, arrival, placement and experiences of 1.025 (some 11 percent) of the almost 10.000 children of the Kinder-

transport.³ 1,500 main questionnaires together with supplementary questionnaires (these supplementary questionnaires were designed to provide details of Kinder now deceased) were sent out to former members of the Kindertransport in the UK, USA, Israel and Continental Europe in 2007. 1,025 main forms and 343 supplementary forms were returned to the AJR in the UK which is an unusually successful response rate, especially bearing in mind the majority of former child refugees were in their 80s in 2008. This 70 percent response rate attest to the importance the individual former members of the Kindertransport still place on their childhood experience and the desire they clearly have to see their experience recorded in some way.

The survey cannot claim to be totally representative, even if the number of the sample is quite large, as the sample is necessarily restricted to those known as former members of the Kindertransport and those who were still alive in 2007/2008. However, there is an uncanny accuracy for some statistics, for example, 16.1 percent of all child refugees on a Kindertransport came from Berlin as deduced from a letter by a Nazi official, now the Osobij Collection at Yad Vashem, written in July 1939 (cf. *Curio* 2006). 16.5 percent of the respondents of the Kinder Survey came from Berlin. Regarding the gender distribution there is also a general correspondence between the figures available from 1938/39 and the Kinder Survey: according to the papers of the Councils of German Jews, 48.8 percent of those emigrating on a Kindertransport from Germany were male and 51.1 percent were female. Of the respondents of the Kinder Survey 43.6 percent were male and 56.4 percent female.

The Kinder Survey is still work in progress and more information, especially information resulting from the supplementary questionnaire, has yet to be added and a comprehensive academic analysis is still awaited. However, the survey is a new source for further research into the experiences of former members of the Kindertransport. One surprising outcome of the survey has been the realisation that maybe more children than previously thought were reunited with one or both of their parents. It had previously been assumed that over 90 percent of Kindertransport children had suffered the loss of both their parents. According to the survey 54 percent of the children's parents were believed to have been murdered and 41 percent of the respondents never saw both their parents again. The authors of the survey now believe that 60 percent of all Kindertransport refugees lost both their parents.⁴ It is interesting that the Kinder Survey is able to rectify some of these long-held assumptions and questions arise how these assumption were created in the first place. The loss of both parents is clearly one of the most horrific events that can happen to a child. It can be argued that this specific trauma has repeatedly been mentioned by historians and in autobiographical testimonies by the former Kindertransport children to emphasize the pain the child refugees experienced. The Kinder Survey will give researchers the opportunity to be more specific about certain issues, and less reliant on generalisations.

The Kindertransport memorialisation process has often focused on the loneliness of the child refugees. However, the Kinder Survey found that 31 percent of the respondents arrived with one or more siblings. The relationship between siblings and what it meant to be separated from them after arrival in Britain (as 36 percent of the respondents were) has never been systematically investigated. The survey also makes clear that the former members of the Kindertransport shared the war-time experience with the rest of the British populations and other refugees. 38 percent of the respondents were evacuated, 10 percent were interned in 1940 and 29 percent were members of the uniformed services. This is

significant when looking at the acculturation process of the former members of the Kindertransport, but also shows the possibility of a comparative analysis. A comparative study of Kindertransport child refugees and British children who were evacuated is under way.⁵

The loss of their parents is, of course, not the only traumatic experience the Kindertransport children might have experienced. The success of their placement in foster families or hostels, and the support and educational opportunities awarded to them varied and in some cases totally unsuitable placements and lack of support made the child refugees' lives very miserable. *Hedy Epstein* reports how she was kept on a diet of bread and tea and sent out of the house when her foster family had proper meals (cf. *Harris/Oppenheimer* 2001). Another former Kindertransport child refugee *Hannele Zurndörfer* (1983) reports how she and her sister were placed with an irrational woman who made the girls pray in the corner of their room with a sack over their heads during air raids. On the other side of the spectrum they were families who went to great lengths to understand and help the child refugees. *Vera Gissing* (1995), who came to Britain on one of the Winton transports from Czechoslovakia, writes about her foster mother: "Poor Auntie Margery even had to do her weekly bake with a Czech-English dictionary propped up in front of her, so that she could carry on a conversation with me. I used to get very irritated with her if she failed to understand what I was saying and I would tell her accusingly, 'My mummy would have understood!' In this respect Auntie Margery had endless patience with me" (pp. 55f.). In a video interview, *Hana Eardly* describes how her foster parents and the foster parents of her twin brother Hans arranged frequent meetings for the benefit of the children.⁶ There was also the problem with religious observance: the RCM had not been able to match children and foster placements according to these criteria. Some very assimilated Continental children were placed in Orthodox Jewish homes and surprised their foster families with their complete lack of knowledge about Jewish traditions. On the other hand, many Jewish children were placed in non-Jewish families. Some families tried very hard to keep their charges in touch with the Jewish religion, while others tried to convert them to Christianity.

Between the worst and the ideal case scenarios, there is a broad spectrum in the middle where difficulties arose from lack of support for both the child refugees and the foster parents. On numerous occasions former members of the Kindertransport report frequent changes in foster placement. Although undoubtedly traumatic for the child, these might not all have been caused by mean-spirited British adults, but also by circumstances and the fact that many foster families in Britain were totally unprepared for the reality of caring for traumatised young refugees for years and years during the war. The RCM was so overworked that children were only checked up on infrequently; there was certainly no time or money to actively support the foster parents in their upbringing of the child refugees as we would expect nowadays. As the war went on, different stages of development, such as puberty, posed new challenges (cf. see *Blend* 1995). For those who already arrived as adolescents, it often seems to have been preferable to have been placed in hostels or boarding schools, such as New Herrlingen, together with other young child refugees (cf. *Feidel-Merz* 2004). In those communal settings the young refugees were able to support each other and to learn to live independently. Lack of financial support for education beyond compulsory school age was one other problem for those who arrived in Britain during their teenage years. Many memoirs are, however, told as success stories relating to education and achievement (cf. *Hammel* 2004) and the Kinder Survey also shows that respondents' education was above average.

Tony Kushner (2006) argues that as many as 10 percent of all former members of the Kindertransport have recorded their experience in one way or another. He calls the Kindertransport refugees “now the most famous and commemorated group of refugees coming to Britain” (p. 10). He outlines three phases of engagement with the Kindertransport refugees: firstly, during 1938/39 there was intense public and media interest in the young refugees who embodied the innocent victims and allowed Britain to be portrayed as a country of humanity and rescue. This was followed by a period of forgetting during the last years of the Second World War and in the immediate decades thereafter. In the memory culture of Britain, the country’s role in the war victory remained the prime focus for many years; some argue that this only changed as late as 1995 (cf. *Karpf* 1996). Internationally the fate of the Kindertransport children was lost amidst the events that lead to the murder of one and a half million children in the Holocaust. It almost seems as though a hierarchy of suffering was established, and for a long time the former members of the Kindertransport were considered “those to whom nothing happened at all” (*Whiteman* quoted in *Barnett* 2004, p. 104). A group identity was discovered through reunion events first organised in the late 1980s. Some publicity in the media followed, and more and more former refugees acknowledged or talked about their past, resulting in books, films or interviews. Some individuals who arrived as very young children and were not re-united with any of their family had no active memories of events. Some members of this very specific group of child refugees spent years piecing together the story of their past.

8 British historiography

For the researcher this wealth of autobiographical material has both positive and negative sides. Although interesting, the volume and the disparate nature can make analysis and drawing conclusions difficult. The relative lack of archival material is also problematic as traditional historical study has always been reliant on these sort of sources. Both might account for the relative lack of research within British historiography. For example, questions about adaptation and acculturation are certainly frequently discussed in the memorial literature written by former members of the Kindertransport and these need to be investigated further. *Göpfert* (1999) came to the conclusion that the Kindertransport child refugees remained ‘immigrants’ in the UK for the rest of their lives, which she sees as problematic compared to the smoother acculturation process of child refugees who settled in the United States.

It can be questioned whether this specific status of “the other” in the UK is always such an uncomfortable place to be, as the former members of the Kindertransport have been acknowledged by the public and even received official recognition and regal honours. In 1999 a plaque was unveiled in the Palace of Westminster to commemorate the Kindertransport and in 2006 a sculpture was unveiled at Liverpool Street Station. In 2008 *Lord Richard Attenborough* spoke at a reunion meeting of former members of the Kindertransport and in the 2010 New Year’s Honours list, the chairman of the AJR’s Kindertransport Section, *Erich Reich*, received a knighthood.

Secondly, it should be discussed whether the fact that former members of the Kindertransport feel different is related to the image of Britishness both researchers and

the former child refugees try to compare themselves to (cf. *Milton* 2005). Contemporary critical models of hybridity might be more appropriate to their life stories than some monolithic notion of national culture (cf. *Hammel* 2009).

Tony Kushner (2006) has pointed out that there has been an entrenchment about what is considered an appropriate memory of the Kindertransport. He argues that the acceptable memorialisation includes too much emphasis on the generosity of the British state and the British people. He also finds a lack of comparative analysis with more recent groups of refugees, an opinion that is widespread (cf. *Kröger* 2004). Thus it becomes clear that, although a lot more is known about the Kindertransport to Britain in 1938/39, a lot of areas still require further research.

This paper has given an overview of the processes involved in Germany and Austria and in Britain regarding the organisation of the Kindertransport and how this specific group of child refugees sees itself and is perceived by the British public. The paper has shown the need for further research, especially in the light of new sources. The sum of these discussions should place the Kindertransport at the heart of contemporary debates surrounding British identity, immigration and memorialisation, especially since the Kindertransport is an ideal case for longitudinal research. This will hopefully also bring about new comparative studies with more recent child refugees.

Footnotes

- 1 Anthony Grenville emphasized this point in his introductory paper at the ‘The Kindertransport 1938/9 Sixty Years On: New Developments in Research’ workshop, which took place 17 September 2009 at the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies, University of London.
- 2 Respondent 1108, Feb. 1939, Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex.
- 3 For more information on the “Making New Lives in Britain” survey, see the website <http://www.ajr.org.uk/kindersurvey>, accessed 20/1/2010.
- 4 See <http://www.ajr.org.uk/kindersurvey>, accessed 20/1/2010.
- 5 Edward Timms, ‘Evacuees and ‘Kinder’, 1938-1945. A Comparative Study of Dislocation, Adaptation and Trauma’ in *Hammel, A./Bewkowitz, B.* (eds): *The Kindertransport 1938/39: New Developments in Research*, Yearbook for German and Austrian Exile Studies, Vol. 13, Rodopi, forthcoming 2011.
- 6 RV Transcripts: Eardley, Hana (48), interview conducted on 8 February 2004, ‘Refugee Voices: The AJR Audio-Visual Testimony Archive’ created by Anthony Grenville and Bea Lewkowicz. Accessible at the Wiener Library, London.

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