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**The Kindertransport: Journeys of Trauma
1938-1939**

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The Kindertransport: Journeys of Trauma 1938-1939



Figure 1. Left, 'Jewish children arrive in London from Nazi Germany 1939', photo courtesy of The Jewish Chronicle. Right, 'Parents wave goodbye to a Kindertransport', photo courtesy of Yad Vashem, The World Holocaust Remembrance Center.

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Introduction

In British political and media discourse surrounding the current 'refugee crisis' in Europe, increasing attention has been drawn to the 'Kindertransport' programme of 1938 and 1939, through which 10,000 predominantly Jewish children were brought unaccompanied from Nazi Germany to the United Kingdom. Newspapers have reported widely that Lord Alfred Dubs, the Labour Party peer who has drawn up a proposal for Britain to accept 3,000 unaccompanied child refugees, was himself a beneficiary of the Kindertransport programme.¹ Another beneficiary, Aryeh Neier, has called on Prime Minister David Cameron to 'live up to tradition' by accepting more than the 20,000 Syrian refugees he has pledged to.² Yvette Cooper, the shadow home secretary, has invoked the Kindertransport to argue the same case, saying, in celebratory language, 'In 1938 Britain made the decision to provide safe sanctuary and the light of hope to children fleeing a darkening continent. Thousands of children were taken in and saved from the horrors of the Nazis'.³ One media commentator has asked, 'Why don't we launch a Kindertransport programme for Syrians?'⁴ In this discourse, the Kindertransport has been reified as an ideal to which those now responsible for government policy towards refugees should aspire. Yet while the gratitude of those saved by the programme such as Dubs and Neier should not be ignored, the Kindertransport must be treated as more than material with which today's political arguments are strengthened. It must be understood on its own terms,

¹ H. Stewart, 'Ministers urged to let in 3,000 unaccompanied child refugees', *Guardian*, 25 April 2016.

² W. Worley, 'Kindertransport survivor calls for British government to do more to help refugees', *Independent*, 23 April 2016.

³ N. Watt, 'UK government turning its back on Syrian refugees, says Yvette Cooper', *Guardian*, 7 June 2015.

⁴ E. West, 'Why don't we launch a Kindertransport scheme for Syrians?', *Spectator*, 1 September 2015.

in its own historical circumstances and with its own complexities. 10,000 children were saved from the 'horrors of the Nazis', but that saviour should not deny them the intricacy of their individual stories. Journeys are in fact emotional and transformational experiences. Before we suggest the same means of rescue for child refugees today, we must understand these experiences, and the implications they have had on the lives of those who travelled.

Kristallnacht or 'The Night of Broken Glass' was the impetus behind the Kindertransport programme. The term refers to the violent anti-Jewish pogroms which took place at the order of Adolf Hitler on the 9th and 10th November 1938. The attacks occurred throughout Germany, annexed Austria, and in Czechoslovakia, recently occupied by German troops. As a result, 30,000 Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps, leaving an estimated 60,000 to 70,000 children either orphaned or endangered.⁵ In response to this humanitarian emergency, a multitude of refugee aid committees, most notably the British Committee for the Jews of Germany and the Movement for the Care of Children from Germany, appealed to the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and requested that the government permit the temporary admission of unaccompanied Jewish children. Spurred on by their persistence as well as by public opinion, the government allowed for an unspecified number of children under the age of 17 to enter Great Britain from Germany and German-annexed territories. The exodus of Jewish children was very much in line with Hitler's aim to rid German territory of its Jewish population and the Nazi

⁵ V. K. Fast, *Children's Exodus: A History of the Kindertransport* (London, 2011), 18.

authorities therefore agreed to the proposed scheme.⁶ They ensured, however, that the conditions were closely regulated. Children travelled mainly by rail; they were allowed only a small suitcase and ten Reichsmarks each; and any valuables were forbidden. Only a small number of adults were allowed to supervise the transports, which the German authorities called 'Kindertransporte' (children's transports) – a term the British also adopted. The children were supposed to find temporary refuge in England whilst they waited for their parents. The majority did so in vain.⁷ The first transport arrived in England on the 2 December 1938 and the last arrived on the 2 September 1939, the day before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Their movement away from National Socialism has led historians to underestimate the trauma that the children suffered. In the first decades after the war the Kindertransport received little scholarly attention. Historians studying the National Socialist era originally treated Jewish exile and rescue as peripheral areas of interest. Wolfgang Benz and Andrea Hammel have explained that 'the fact that flight and expulsion from Germany as well as survival in concentration camps were traumatic experiences only became public knowledge very much later'.⁸ Moreover, in the face of the horror of the death camps and the perishing of millions on German soil, those who spent the duration of the war in the relative safety of England were not so willing to openly grieve. Consequently, the 'Kinder' themselves were shrouded in silence

⁶ On Nazi ideology see I. Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London 1985); H. Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz* (Oxford 1991).

⁷ W. Benz and A. Hammel, 'Emigration as Rescue and Trauma: The Historical Context of the Kindertransport', *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* (hereafter *Shofar*), 23 (2004), 4.

⁸ Benz and Hammel, 'Emigration', 4.

until the end of the 1980s when the first Kindertransport reunions took place.⁹ It is no coincidence that these reunions occurred once the majority of the camp survivors were already dead. One can see here a coming out from under the shadow of the Auschwitz survivors that gave rise to a shared awareness of the Kindertransport itself and the ways in which migration tainted their lives.¹⁰ Thus until the end of the 1980s there had been scant historical, public or even personal awareness of the Kindertransport programme, let alone its traumatic impact.

The historical literature that has emerged from the 1980s onwards is notably limited in scope. First, it has tended to offer a one-dimensional approach, celebrating the rescue of the children as a humanitarian triumph over evil. This obscures and often ignores the historical realities of their diverse and traumatic experiences. The romanticised image of Great Britain as the saviour of 10,000 children can be found in the celebratory titles of collected memoirs. Important examples are Barry Turner's *...And the Policeman Smiled: 10,000 Children Escape from Nazi Europe* and the volume *Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport*, a book which accompanied an award-winning documentary film with the subtitle *The British Scheme that Saved 10,000 Children from the Nazi Regime*.¹¹ The content of the documentary itself confirms the heroic and benevolent status of Britain. It tells the story of Lory Cahn, whose father decided against sending her to England and removed her from a moving train. Cahn subsequently experienced a ghetto, six

⁹ As most of those rescued by the Kindertransports still call themselves *Kind* (plural *Kinder*), I have also used this term for the children who are now aged between 77 and 92.

¹⁰ R. Gopfert and A. Hammel, 'Kindertransport: History and Memory', *Shofar*, 23 (2004), 25.

¹¹ B. Turner, *...And the Policeman Smiled: 10,000 Children Escape from Nazi Europe* (London, 1991); M. J. Harris and D. Oppenheimer, *Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport* (London, 2000).

concentration camps, and a forced march.¹² While the story highlights the differing experience of camp survivors and Kindertransport children, it also downplays the trauma that they suffered. The trauma of camp survivors was undoubtedly harsher, but the trauma of the evacuees should not be disregarded. Second, where historians have been critical, they have been deeply selective, focusing only on British government policy and the limited number of Jews who were saved by the Kindertransport. Louise London argues that although admission into Britain saved the children's lives, the 'exclusion' of their parents guaranteed their deaths.¹³ Whilst it is true that 90 per cent of these parents perished, they were no more 'excluded' than other Jewish adults, and their deaths should not be attributed to the British government's action.¹⁴ Tony Kushner has also directed his criticism at government policy, arguing that the existing celebratory narrative reflects 'a failure to confront the full horror of the past and, more specifically, Britain's past record of refused entry and exclusion'.¹⁵ Although Kushner rightfully recognises that the history of the Kindertransport has only been partially uncovered, if we are to 'confront the full horror of the past' we must shift our analysis beyond a purely political focus.

How the children got to Britain and the meanings of their journeys have been overlooked. Despite the surfeit of references to their journeys, scholars have made no effort, figuratively speaking, to enter the train station where families said their final goodbyes, the train carriages in which the children travelled, or the waiting room

¹² Harris and Oppenheimer, *Into the Arms*, 235.

¹³ L. London, *Whitehall and the Jews: 1933-1948: British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 2000), 118.

¹⁴ A. Grenville, 'The Kindertransports: An Introduction' in A. Hammel and B. Lewkowicz (eds.), *The Kindertransport to Britain 1938/39: New Perspectives* (Amsterdam and New York, 2012), 4.

¹⁵ T. Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now* (Manchester, 2006), 142, 145.

where they sat upon arrival in England. Consequently, there has been no attempt to find a place for these journeys in the lifelong suffering of the Kinder. This dissertation seeks to correct this oversight. I argue that the process of migration reveals the ways in which these Jewish children were afflicted by the cruelties associated with forced displacement and the Holocaust. Indeed, characteristics of childhood trauma such as separation, loss, abandonment, and isolation were evident as early as the children's departure from their families and their journeys across Europe.

A number of theories and methodological approaches to the Holocaust inform my analysis. Most useful in assessing the psychological impact of the Kindertransport on the children is child psychologist Hans Keilson's concept of 'sequential traumatisation'. Keilson has explored the repeated trauma suffered by Jewish war orphans in the Netherlands. He has shown that separations for hidden Jewish children were associated with successive traumatic experiences.¹⁶ Although the situation for the children in Holland differed in many ways to those who were part of the Kindertransport, Keilson's study crucially demonstrates that when dealing with trauma we are dealing with a continuum of problems in connection with National Socialism that are not defined by time or place. I suggest that the concept of sequential traumatisation is applicable across the children's journeys and that the actual movement of 10,000 children itself induced significant trauma. Related to this and equally important to me are studies of the geographies of the Holocaust. 'Holocaust studies' has become a distinct field in itself, but the works which concern

¹⁶ H. Keilson, *Sequential Traumatisation in Children: A Clinical and Statistical Follow-up Study on the Fate of the Jewish War Orphans in the Netherlands* (Jerusalem, 1992).

me are those that treat the Holocaust as a profoundly spatial event.¹⁷ Tim Cole, for example, has examined the spatiality of the ghettos and Robert Jan Van Pelt the architecture at Auschwitz.¹⁸ Simone Gigliotti has taken this further by recognising that spatial histories have so far been focused solely on fixed sites. She is the first to have acknowledged the significance of Holocaust journeys. In *The Train Journey: Transit, Captivity, and Witnessing in the Holocaust*, Gigliotti has analysed transit testimonies in order to argue that deportation in cattle cars was an experience every bit as traumatic as life – and death – in concentration camps.¹⁹ Although the Kindertransport is clearly defined by movement, there has so far been no such attempt to utilise survivors' testimonies of transit and journey.

I employ the structure of Gigliotti's *The Train Journey* to analyse the three stages of transportation: departure, transit, and arrival. These make up my chapters. Broadly, Chapter One is an analysis of the harrowing process of familial separation, exacerbated by Nazi jurisdiction at the train station; Chapter Two reveals the metamorphic transit experiences; and Chapter Three outlines the separation of siblings and fear of abandonment upon arrival in England. Taken together they tell the multiple stories of traumatic journeys of displacement. Although my structure is inspired by Gigliotti's work, it is necessary at this point to consider the glaring differences between deportation to concentration camps and transportation to England. The two sets of journeys should not be equated. Nevertheless, it is

¹⁷ For a historiography of the Holocaust see D. Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (Basingstoke, 2004); On the spatiality of the Holocaust see A. Charlesworth, 'The Topography of Genocide' in D. Stone, (ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (Basingstoke, 2004).

¹⁸ T. Cole, *Holocaust City. The Making of a Jewish Ghetto* (New York, 2003); D. Dwork and R. J. V. Pelt, *Auschwitz 1270-1995* (London, 1996).

¹⁹ S. Gigliotti, *The Train Journey: Transit, Captivity, and Witnessing in the Holocaust* (New York and Oxford, 2009).

important to recognise that both existed within the context of a multifarious Holocaust experienced as a series of forced separations and dislocations. Just six years after the children boarded the Kindertransport, trains carried their very families in the opposite direction, to Hitler's slaughterhouses.

My evidence is derived from a combination of survivor interviews that I have personally conducted, testimonies catalogued in the British Library's online archive, and a selection of memoirs. Inevitably, each of these sources has its limitations. Perhaps most notably, all of my sources are post facto and thus share a double distance: chronological and geographical, as they tell of events that happened as they travelled to Britain.²⁰ Yet Alessandro Portelli has argued that oral sources might actually 'compensate chronological distance with a much closer personal involvement'.²¹ According to Portelli, it appears that memories are more stable than one would anticipate. One might also question the ability of adults to revive childhood events. Lawrence Langer has addressed this issue succinctly, arguing that there is 'no need to revive what has never died'.²² I have been overwhelmed by the number of survivors who have vividly recalled their journeys to Britain; it has given me the confidence to argue for their significance. The British Library interviews propose specific difficulties in that I was unable to ask explicit questions regarding their journeys. However, these limitations can also be a strength: testimonies often point to the trauma of transit without any specific prompting from the interviewer. My own

²⁰ On the difficulties associated with oral testimonies see H. Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History* (Westport CT, 1998), 9; L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven CT, 1991), 34–5.

²¹ A. Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different' in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (Oxford, 2016), 53.

²² Langer, *Holocaust*, 1.

interviews include different sexes and ages as well as those who travelled alone and with siblings in order to gain insight into as wide a range of experiences as possible. This has provided for a much more complex and multifaceted interpretation of the Kindertransport. The research process of carrying out my own interviews with survivors has been truly revelatory and has inspired me to portray their stories accurately and effectively. Their experiences deserve to be understood in their entirety and therefore we must not transpose our own meaning onto the children's diverse journeys to England. Historians can reach a more nuanced understanding of the history of the Kindertransport by acknowledging that although evacuation saved the children's lives, the very process scarred them in a multitude of ways.

1. Departure: The Trauma of Separation

'From behind the sealed windows I saw my parents, rigid and unsmiling like two statues, for the last time ever'.²³

For most of the Kinder, the moment before they boarded the train to England was the last time they ever saw their families. Child psychologist Anna Freud and her co-workers were the first who as early as 1940 had recognised the psychological problems of children who had been separated from their families as a result of the Second World War. They deduced that of the numerous aspects that should be considered in all kinds of loss, the aspects of separation from the person of reference are central.²⁴ Thus in order to understand the Kindertransport experience, it is important to analyse the exact moment of this rupture. Consequently, I begin my analysis where the Kinder began their life-changing journeys: at the train station.

The trauma of familial separation is strikingly evident in postwar narratives of departure, particularly in the way that survivors place themselves in relation to their parents when recounting the moment of separation. Edith Breskin, who was 14 at the time, recalled saying goodbye to her mother at Westbahnhof Station in Vienna on 29th July 1939: 'I got on the train, hoping to catch one last glimpse of my mother, but the windows were blacked out so we couldn't look out. I don't know why, but they were blacked out... It was a very bad thing'.²⁵ Naturally, the experiences of departure varied depending on which train a child was allocated to. In some cases the windows

²³ Anonymous quoted in K. Gershon (ed.), *We Came as Children: A Collective Autobiography* (London, 1989), 26.

²⁴ A. Freud and D. Burlingham, *War and Children* (New York, 1943).

²⁵ Author's interview with Edith Breskin, 16 February 2016.

were sealed once the children were on board; in others, the children travelled in ordinary passenger cars.²⁶ There is no testimonial evidence, however, that corroborates Edith's memory of blacked out windows. Nevertheless, oral historians have argued that 'the importance of oral testimony may not lie in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism and desire to emerge'.²⁷ Therefore this disparity does not render Edith's testimony unreliable, but rather reveals its true *meaning*. Indeed, Cole has suggested that where people place (and re-place) themselves and others in the past is significant and a way to uncover the meanings given to past events.²⁸ When Edith recalled the moment that she was separated from her mother, she emphasised the physical and visual barrier between them in the form of blacked out windows. In doing so, she portrayed herself as positively alone and in a sense abandoned, thereby illuminating the trauma of her loss and the significance of the moment of departure.

Reflecting on his own departure, Vernon Saunders remembered: '*it was the first time I can remember my father actually in tears. I think I felt the same way, though I could never show it as easily*'. Fifteen minutes later the scene is described differently: 'I was just chatting away with my father until the train moved out. He hadn't been an emotional man... I felt sort of tears of goodbye, *he didn't show anything any more than I did*'.²⁹ Ten years later the scene is changed again: 'the parting and the whole

²⁶ Fast, *Children's Exodus*, 32.

²⁷ Portelli, 'Oral History' in Perks and Thomson, *Oral History*, 5.

²⁸ T. Cole, '(Re) Placing the Past: Spatial Strategies of Retelling Difficult Stories', *The Oral History Review*, 42 (2015), 35.

²⁹ V. Saunders, interviewed by Ilse Sinclair, The British Library, London (hereafter BLL), C410/101, (4 of 11).

journey just floated over me... My father was with me... *There were no tears*'.³⁰ Oral historians have argued that one way of reading these kinds of testimonial inconsistencies is to see them as an attempt by individuals to assert control over their pasts.³¹ Mark Roseman has also suggested that changes made to Holocaust survivor testimonies can relate to 'moments of great trauma'.³² The inconsistencies in Vernon's testimony can thus be understood not only as an attempt to control in his narrative that which he could not control in reality, but also as an indicator of a deeply distressing moment. The trauma of departure is rooted in the way it rendered the Kinder powerless over their own destinies, forced to leave their families and undertake the fearful transition from the known into the unknown.

Clearly, familial separation was a harrowing and defining feature of the departure process but equally it was the co-location of family members and Nazi soldiers at the stations that 'reinforced the passivity and submission of the group to order'.³³ Indeed, the Nazi-imposed rules for managing the Kindertransport were characteristically restrictive. They decreed that 'public gatherings of Jews and displays of emotion would arouse the righteous wrath of the Aryan population'.³⁴ Consequently, trains often left in darkness, either early in the morning or very late at night and greater use was made of quieter platforms on the main stations. By 1939 the number of family members able to say goodbye was reduced to one parent per child and it was

³⁰ Saunders, quoted in I. Guske, *Trauma and Attachment in the Kindertransport Context: German-Jewish Child Refugees' Accounts of Displacement and Acculturation in Britain* (Newcastle, 2009), 261.

³¹ See for example Cole, '(Re) Placing', 46; M. Roseman, *A Past in Hiding: Memory and Survival in Nazi Germany* (London, 2001).

³² M. Roseman, 'Surviving Memory: Truth and Inaccuracy in Holocaust Testimony,' *The Journal of Holocaust Education*, 8 (1999), 12.

³³ Gigliotti, *The Train*, 64.

³⁴ Grenville, 'Kindertransports', 9.

forbidden to wait for the train on the platform or in unspecified waiting rooms.³⁵ These rules served to degrade Jewish families. Joe Schlesinger remembered how his family were forced to wait for the train in the toilet, 'next to a tar-coated urinal... because, as Jews, we weren't allowed in the waiting room'.³⁶ The rules were also self-defeating. The limit on the number of adults allowed near the train intensified the emotional pressure and caused more breakdowns. Vera Coppard described a 'terrible scene' at a Berlin station where one mother 'became hysterical'. Consequently, 'the guards hit her with clubs and knocked her to the ground. Then we were handed on to the platform. I just had time to say goodbye to my father'.³⁷ Just as Gigliotti has noted with reference to Jewish victims deported to concentration camps, Nazi jurisdiction over the departure process reduced the Kinder and their parents to a state of unease.³⁸ The Kindertransport is thus another example of the way in which the Nazis limited Jewish freedoms and exerted their control. This exacerbated the trauma of partition.

Lawrence Langer conceptualised the term 'choiceless choice' in relation to the ethical dilemmas that Holocaust victims faced in the death camps such as the mother who was told by the Nazis that she could only save one of her three children from execution.³⁹ Although the circumstances were distinctly different, we can apply this to the arduous decision that parents had to make: whether to send their children alone to a foreign country in the blind hope of survival, or keep them behind and risk their lives. With hindsight we realise this decision saved their children's lives, yet in the

³⁵ Turner, *...And the Policeman*, 81.

³⁶ J. Schlesinger, *Time Zones: A Journalist in the World* (Toronto, 1990), 1.

³⁷ V. Coppard quoted in Turner, *...And the Policeman*, 82.

³⁸ Gigliotti, *The Train*, 74.

³⁹ L. Langer, 'The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps', *Centerpoint* 4 (1980), 228, 231.

moment of separation, their 'choice' seemed more like a curse. One woman remembered when her mother was advised by the Jewish Committee to send her to England. Her father was already in a concentration camp and so 'this terrible decision fell on my mother's shoulders alone... she sent us not knowing what would become of us or if she would ever see us again'.⁴⁰ At Leipzig, Betty Israel saw a baby handed up through a carriage window, 'the thoughts and feelings of that poor mother, giving over that tiny tot to a complete stranger, still haunt me today', she lamented.⁴¹ But this decision was too burdensome for some. Lory Cahn's father, unable to let her go, dragged her out of a moving train: 'he took me by my hands and he pulled me out of the window... I got hurt and I was bleeding'.⁴² Their 'choiceless choice' contributed to the ordeal of leave-taking. Moreover, we see that the Kindertransport is not just about children; it is about their parents, whose terrible decisions are what many survivors recall with anguish today.

However, according to Fast, the majority of parents at the station had already accepted the necessity of separation.⁴³ This may have been the case, but at the exact moment of departure, they could not hide their pain. Vera Gissing solemnly described the disturbing revelation of this anguish: 'as the train started shunting out of the station, for the first time I noticed fear on our parents' faces. At that moment they could not mask it any longer'.⁴⁴ Ursula Rosenfeld also admitted that:

The parting was terrible. That's the one thing I've never 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

⁴⁰ Anonymous quoted in Gershon, *We Came*, 25.

⁴¹ B. Israel quoted in Turner, *...And the Policeman*, 100.

⁴² L. Cahn quoted in Harris and Oppenheimer, *Into the Arms*, 108.

⁴³ Fast, *Children's Transport*, 28.

⁴⁴ V. Gissing quoted in Harris and Oppenheimer, *Into the Arms*, 110.

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.⁴⁵

Paradoxically, the act of moving away from Nazism revealed its torturous effects in the form of the 'contorted' faces that the Kinder left behind. The maltreatment of parents imprinted on the children's minds and has stayed with them as a key aspect of separation.

Nevertheless, some children were excited about the journey. Railway historians Jeffrey Richards and John Mackenzie have pointed to the diverse nature of the train station as a place of 'motion and emotion, arrival and departure, joy and sorrow, parting and reunion'.⁴⁶ Thus the station prompted a multitude of reactions, some of which were markedly contented. This is unsurprising considering that 'every parent promised their child that they would soon come and follow. How otherwise did the parents get the little children on to the trains?'⁴⁷ Harry Bibring, eight years old, was told that his parents would join him in two months. Leaving therefore seemed 'more like going on an adventure'.⁴⁸ Yet the fact that a number of children felt ambivalent at the time, often provoked feelings of guilt when the overwhelming majority learnt of their parents' gruesome deaths.⁴⁹ Joe Wohlfarth, who was only seven, regretfully remembered: 'it was like an adventure... these things you don't realise until afterwards just what your parent must have thought waving goodbye, probably knowing they may never see you again... it's terrible'.⁵⁰ Unable to grasp its

⁴⁵ U. Rosenfeld quoted in Harris and Oppenheimer, *Into the Arms*, 109.

⁴⁶ J. Richards and J. M. MacKenzie, *The Railway Station: A Social History* (Oxford, 1986), 7.

⁴⁷ B. Leverton quoted in Harris and Oppenheimer, *Into the Arms*, 103.

⁴⁸ Author's interview with Harry Bibring, 20 January 2016.

⁴⁹ Guske, *Trauma*, 22.

⁵⁰ J. Wohlfarth, interviewed by Barbara Goodman, BLL, C830/074, (1 of 3).

significance, younger children were often less affected by departure. The pain unfortunately caught up with them later in life in the form of survivor guilt.⁵¹

This chapter has illustrated the poignancy of departure for the Kinder and their parents. It was at this point that the children lost vital resources such as control and familial support. This draws marked parallels with the departure experiences of Jewish deportees to concentration camps, namely the way in which Nazi jurisdiction created an uneasy atmosphere and reinforced the passivity and submission of the Kinder and their parents. The departure process is thus not only an intrinsic aspect of the trauma that the children endured, but also imperative to our understanding of the Kindertransport as very much part of the Holocaust in all its various and cruel dimensions. It might be suggested that the impact of this relatively short process is difficult to assess in relation to comparatively longer periods of torture in ghettos and camps, yet trauma cannot be timed or placed. The actions of the Nazis at departure stayed with these children in the same way that they stayed with other survivors of the Holocaust.

⁵¹ For a fuller discussion of survivor guilt in the Kindertransport context see Gopfert and Hammel, 'Kindertransport'.

2. Transit: A Transformative Process

Geographer Tim Cresswell contends that ‘movement is rarely just about getting from A to B. The line that connects them, despite its apparent immateriality, is both meaningful and laden with power’.⁵² This applies to the forced displacement of 10,000 children whose journeys were certainly imbued with both meaning and power. As they moved spatially away from not only their families and homelands but also Nazi domain they experienced a number of transformative effects such as the relief of tension once they transcended Nazi-controlled territory as well as the pressure of responsibility owing to the loss of parental guidance. The Nazis had ultimate control of the transports and had decreed that evacuations must not block German ports. Consequently, transports went by train to the Hook of Holland and then by cross-channel ferry to a British port, generally Harwich. From there a train took most of the children to London where they were met by their foster parents. Children without pre-arranged families were sheltered at temporary holding centres. Rail was the preferred means of transport as not only was it subtler than a refugee ship filled with children, but it meant that the time and place of departure could be more easily suited to the ‘nefarious’ purposes of the German authorities.⁵³ A limited number of adults from the sponsoring refugee associations accompanied the transports until they reached the designated British port. The chaperone was then required to return or else jeopardise future transportations.⁵⁴ The children travelled for up to three days with only a change

⁵² T. Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Western World* (New York and London, 2006), 8.

⁵³ Grenville, ‘Kindertransports’, 9.

⁵⁴ D. B. Whiteman, *The Uprooted: A Hitler Legacy* (New York and London, 1993), 163.

of clothes and a lovingly packed lunch. Their testimonies reveal that transit was a deeply emotional and thoroughly transformative experience that remains with them.

A number of social scientists have challenged what they perceive as notions of the history of modernity in which cultures and societies were attached to physical space. Doreen Massey, for example, has acknowledged that “cultures” and “societies” and “nations” were all imagined as having an integral relation to bounded spaces’ but that this particular form of ordering and organising space ignores its ‘multiplicities, its fractures and its dynamism’.⁵⁵ For the Kinder, however, Nazism was bound in space. Whilst travelling through Germany their experiences were often defined by a fear of being ‘sent back’ or of ‘something horrible’ being done to them.⁵⁶ One evacuee poignantly remembered that ‘there was a boy of three or four in our carriage who continually repeated a name and address. After we had left Germany he asked me to write it down. They were people in England who might help his parents’.⁵⁷ Clearly, Nazi demarcation of space imprinted itself on the children’s psychological states. But more than this, we see the horrendous burden of responsibility that such young children endured as a result of their families’ desperation.

In reference to the conditions inside the cattle cars that deported Jewish victims to death camps, Gigliotti has explained that the ‘relational dynamic between perpetrator and victim was bureaucratic and distant, yet thoroughly embodied and invasive’.⁵⁸

Although there were no ‘perpetrators’ or ‘victims’ in the context of the Kindertransport

⁵⁵ D. Massey, *For Space* (London, 2005) 64, 65.

⁵⁶ Author’s interview with Rene Inow, 24 March 2016.

⁵⁷ Anonymous quoted in Gershon, *We Came*, 49.

⁵⁸ Gigliotti, ‘Cattle Car Complexes: A Correspondence with Historical Captivity and Post-Holocaust Witnesses’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 20 (2006), 259.

necessarily, the Nazi SS guards were not distant, they were glaringly present and the fear that they inspired underpins transit testimonies. Norbert Wollheim, an escort of the first transport, remembered that when they reached the border at Bentheim, customs officers had been replaced by SS guards:

They got on the coaches and behaved like animals – actually, to say that is an insult to the animal world. They tore into the luggage looking for jewels and foreign currency... It was awful... There was no possibility to interfere because these were very nasty and vicious SS people.⁵⁹

During luggage raids and carriage inspections the children were ordered to remain in their seats, perfectly still and absolutely silent.⁶⁰ In a desperate attempt to remain static, Lore Segal felt herself ‘vibrating’ with nerves. ‘This is clearly imaginary’ she explained, ‘but my impression was that as the uniformed Nazis boarded, the train sank – the same feeling you have when somebody sits down on your bed and you feel as if the bed lowers’.⁶¹ The combination of the Nazi presence and the children’s fear becomes almost palpable, so intense that it felt like a physical weight. These small children were in the presence of large SS officers, without the comfort of their parents. The emotional effect of this should not be underestimated.

Edith Nissen who was only seven, has ‘never forgotten when the Germans came on the train with their dogs’. This experience permeated into her later life when she travelled from Germany to Holland to visit an aunt: ‘on that train I was petrified... I could see the Nazis coming on the train. And I was an adult by then’.⁶² This occurrence was so harrowing that trains trigger this vivid memory. The reverberation of terror is reminiscent of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, which

⁵⁹ N. Wollheim quoted in Harris and Oppenheimer, *Into the Arms*, 112.

⁶⁰ Fast, *Children’s Exodus*, 32.

⁶¹ L. Segal quoted in Harris and Oppenheimer, *Into the Arms*, 114.

⁶² Author’s interview with Edith Nissen, 12 February 2016.

underlines the trauma of her journey.⁶³ Rene Inow similarly described how ‘very frightened’ she was whilst still on the train in Germany, especially when an SS soldier demanded her ten Reichsmarks. ‘So I had nothing’ she elucidated, ‘not a penny to my name’.⁶⁴ A number of testimonies corroborate Rene’s account. Certainly, the children did not lament this confiscation for the monetary value, but rather for the way it rendered them utterly vulnerable, stripped of financial as well as familial support. Testimonies thus reveal that Nazi oppression was felt ubiquitously until the transports had evaded German borders.

The fear of Nazism undoubtedly transcended territorial borders, yet once the transports reached the Hook of Holland tension was replaced with jubilation. One survivor articulated that ‘fear was in all of us, until the moment the Nazis disembarked, the whistle blew and the train crossed the frontier into Holland’.⁶⁵ The relief was immediate: ‘I felt like a heavy, invisible weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I had not realised (especially after Kristallnacht) that I was subject to such pressure and anxiety which governed my life till I crossed over into Holland’, Curtis Mann explained.⁶⁶ Their fear as well as relief was heightened owing to the extent of violence these children had lived through. The contrast between the inimical Nazi guards and the welcoming Dutch refugee workers emphasised this disjuncture. Common to almost all accounts is the vivid memory of Dutch well-wishers waving as the trains drew in. ‘We were not only free, we were welcomed back to humanity, by humanity... Up to then we had been subdued children’, one man movingly

⁶³ R. Yehuda, ‘Post-traumatic stress disorder’, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 2 (2002), 108-114.

⁶⁴ Author’s interview with Rene Inow, 24 March 2016.

⁶⁵ Anonymous quoted in Gershon, *We Came*, 27.

⁶⁶ C. Mann quoted in Guske, *Trauma*, 238.

recounted.⁶⁷ The children had been reduced to the lowest category of citizen in Nazi society, assuming almost sub-human status. Moving outside of this control returned their dignity and humanity. Correspondingly, Ursula Rosenfeld described the Dutch ladies who brought them ‘cocoa and Dutch zwieback, which is sort of a dried bread which they eat. It was like manna from heaven. It was wonderful... We all started to smile. I don’t think any of us had smiled for a long time’.⁶⁸ The hegemony of Nazi rule had impressed itself so heavily on their psychological states that everything outside of that power tasted and felt not only foreign but positively celestial. The movement away from the Nazi sphere of influence removed the ‘cloak of iron’ that had hitherto clothed the children, giving rise to a ‘wonderful feeling of freedom’.⁶⁹



Figure 2. ‘Dutch women greet Kindertransport passengers at the border’, photo courtesy of the Institute of Contemporary History and The Wiener Library.

⁶⁷ Anonymous quoted in Gershon, *We Came*, 28.

⁶⁸ Rosenfeld quoted in Harris and Oppenheimer, *Into the Arms*, 114.

⁶⁹ Rosenfeld quoted in Harris and Oppenheimer, *Into the Arms*, 114.



Figure 3. 'Kindertransportees receiving Dutch treats in Holland', photo courtesy of Yad Vashem, The World Holocaust Remembrance Center.

Yet this was not the only transformation that occurred during transportation. Anthropologist Victor Turner has revived Arnold van Gennep's conception of 'liminal space', referring to liminality as serving a situation that is 'betwixt and between'.⁷⁰ I propose that whilst in transit, the Kinder were suspended in a liminal space. That is, the space established between leaving their previous homes and arriving in their new homes. This is not the first time that a liminal space has been applied to the study of the Holocaust, albeit in a different context. Suzanne Weber's exploration of how the forest transformed the cultural norms of Jewish fugitives used liminal space to explain the struggle for survival within the forests.⁷¹ Unlike Weber's use of liminality that was brought on by struggle, in this context liminality was brought on by a change in environment that led to the reconfiguration of familial rather than societal structures.

⁷⁰ B. Thomassen, 'The Uses and Meanings of Liminality', *International Political Anthropology*, 2 (2009), 15.

⁷¹ S. Weber, 'The Forest as a Liminal Space: A Transformation of Culture and Norms During the Holocaust', *Holocaust Studies*, 14 (2008).

There were too few adults to act as sufficient carers and so the role was assigned to older children, often without their consent. Kathe Fischel was one of the children recruited for nursery duties. 'The journey was unpleasant', she explained, 'I had never looked after small children and these were very distressed. They kept wetting themselves and being sick... I had no idea what to do with them'. Only now that Kathe has her own daughter can she understand 'what it must have meant to a five year old to be stuck on that train – no wonder many of them had breakdowns later on'.⁷² Through the testimonies of older children we gain insight into the experiences of younger children, which we would otherwise be unaware of. The fact that these little children were vomiting and crying is a sign that their journeys were traumatic. Emmy Mogilensky described how one mother pushed a laundry basket into the carriage as the train door was closing. When she found the courage to peer inside, she found it contained twin baby girls.⁷³ On another occasion, a despairing mother thrust her infant through the window of a moving train and into the arms of an unsuspecting teenage boy. He looked after the little girl throughout the journey and held on to his duty until he came off the boat at Harwich.⁷⁴ Older children were forced to adopt the parental role in order to cope with the chaos of transit. Consequently some were comforted, whilst others, also only children, were the comforters. Nevertheless, the children relinquished their responsibilities once their journeys came to an end. This underpins the essence of a liminal space as an impermanent state.

⁷² K. Fischel quoted in Turner, *...And the Policeman*, 97.

⁷³ Fast, *Children's Exodus*, 27.

⁷⁴ Fast, *Children's Exodus*, 80.

However, in some ways the concept of a liminal space is insufficient to address the atrocities of the Holocaust. Theorising the Holocaust carries the danger of masking its horrors. Weber's use of liminal space, for example, downplays the physical horrors in the forest such as the existence of sexual violence and the subordination of women.⁷⁵ This not only sanitises the conditions in the forests but also neglects survivors' deep and enduring ambivalence towards their experiences. When we apply the concept of a liminal space to the Holocaust we must be sensitive of its long-term implications. I am therefore anxious to emphasise that although the children were only temporarily morphed into parents, the psychological impact of seeing a mother abandoning her baby for example, travelled beyond the walls of the train carriage. Compelled to become adults, the teenagers were often denied childhood frivolity, something they could never get back.

Gigliotti has justly noted that 'traumatic journeys of displacement underpin the events of the Holocaust'.⁷⁶ Indeed, Jews were moved from their homes to ghettos, from ghettos to concentration camps and at the end of the war survivors were evacuated from camps by forced marches. What is not so readily recognised is that the Kindertransport was itself a traumatic journey of displacement and thus to understand it fully we must unpack and analyse its transit testimonies just as Gigliotti has done for deportees to concentration camps. These testimonies have revealed that journeys to Britain were not simply passive experiences; they were, as Cresswell contended 'both meaningful and laden with power'.

⁷⁵ Weber, 'The Forest', 37.

⁷⁶ Gigliotti, *The Train*, 17.

3. Arrival: The Fear of Abandonment



Figure 4. ‘Kindertransportees assembled upon arrival in England’, photo courtesy of Yad Vashem, The World Holocaust Remembrance Center.

It is important to provide a brief explanation of the process of arrival in England so as to contextualise my analysis. There were both guaranteed and non-guaranteed children. A guarantor would be responsible for the maintenance and education of the child up to the age of 18. Children with guarantors went straight to various train stations and awaited collection in central distribution points.⁷⁷ Adults were to wait for their names to be called from a loud speaker until they could claim their child. Children without guarantors were placed in holiday camps or hostels until a sponsor could be found. Some were allocated to families after a few days whilst others waited for several months. Guaranteed or non-guaranteed, upon arrival the majority of children found themselves alone on foreign soil with an unsettling lack of language

⁷⁷ Turner, ...*And the Policeman*, 85.

skills and cultural knowledge. The children's arrival affected them in a multitude of ways. First, the allocation process provoked insecurities that damaged their self-identities. Second, many children experienced a distinct fear of abandonment whilst they awaited collection. And lastly, having been wrenched from their parents just days earlier, many children were now separated from their siblings as well. Notably, testimonial references to foreignness, separation, isolation and abandonment corroborate with those who arrived at concentration camps, thus implying that these cruelties are part of a hallmark of Nazi treatment of Jews.⁷⁸ I argue therefore that not only are the children's immediate experiences upon arrival central to our understanding of the Kindertransport itself, but also that the Kindertransport is part of a diverse Holocaust experienced as a series of forced resettlements.

The children were plagued with anxieties and worries during the allocation process. By the time of arrival, the trauma of departure and transit had taken its toll. They had travelled for three days, fuelled only by a packed lunch. Drinks were not allowed because with such crowded conditions organisers were afraid that toilet facilities would be disastrously deficient.⁷⁹ The children were therefore internally and externally distressed. One evacuee recalled this affliction: 'I was seven and my sister exactly a year older on the day we arrived in England, tired, under-nourished, and frightened. The labels round our necks did little to help us look appealing'.⁸⁰ The labels made the children distinguishable by number but they also made the children insecure of their appearances. The behaviour of the adults provoked these

⁷⁸ Gigliotti, *The Train*, 69, 179.

⁷⁹ Fast, *Children's Exodus*, 30.

⁸⁰ Anonymous quoted in Gershon, *We Came*, 47.

insecurities. An organiser revealed that 'it was the adults more than the children who were likely to misbehave, for they might snatch a child without informing the organisers or show their terrible disappointment on seeing the youngster whom they were to foster'.⁸¹ From that moment onwards, many children felt unwanted and burdensome. 'That feeling really stayed with me throughout my entire youth' one evacuee explained.⁸² Scrutiny upon arrival created a traumatic allocation process that resonated throughout their lives, shaping their self-identities.



Figure 5. 'Jewish child refugees on arrival at Liverpool Street Station, London', July 14 1939, photo courtesy of Getty Images.

⁸¹ E. Blond quoted in Fast, *Children's Exodus*, 39.

⁸² Anonymous, interviewed by Gaby Glassman, BLL, C410/007, (1 of 9).

Other children were concerned with the prospect of not being collected at all. A testimonial motif that has become apparent is having been the last to be collected from the station. Margot Sreberny explained:

'What was traumatic was our arrival in London. It was sunny when we started and by the time five of us were sitting on the bleachers there were no grownups left, the light had gone down and it was gloomy. When I think of that water comes to my eyes. That was one of the nastiest memories... running out of grownups... I felt abandoned.'⁸³

Unprompted, Margot identified her arrival in England as 'traumatic'. Edith Breskin had a similar experience. She remembered being 'herded into a huge big hall' upon arrival. 'I was just sitting there. I was the very last one there. Nobody even came near me. I was just sitting there like a lost sheep'.⁸⁴ Another evacuee remembered being 'herded into a customs shed... I had this feeling that I was the last', she relived.⁸⁵ Their use of language that one would use to describe animals reinforces the helplessness and anonymity with which they viewed themselves. As outlined in chapter one, 'the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that "wrong" statements are still psychologically "true" and that the truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts'.⁸⁶ Thus, whether or not these children were left until last is of little consequence, the importance is rather that they *believed* they were which points to a commonly felt fear of abandonment and isolation, a clear result of their traumatic journeys.

The trauma of allocation was often compounded by the separation of siblings. Having been removed from their parents, they now endured a second separation.

⁸³ M. Sreberny, interviewed by Barbara Goodman, BLL, C830/018, (1 of 2).

⁸⁴ Author's interview with Edith Breskin, 16 February 2016.

⁸⁵ E. Jochim, interviewed by Hannah Lewis, BLL, C830/023, (1 of 2).

⁸⁶ Portelli, 'Oral History' in Perks and Thomson, *Oral History*, 53.

Psychoanalyst John Bowlby, the first attachment theorist, identified the anxiety and distress that children experience when separated from their primary caregivers. He explained that the attachment relationship acts as a prototype for all future social relationships and therefore disruption has severe consequences.⁸⁷ Unfortunately, attachment theories had not yet been developed when the Kinder arrived in England between 1938 and 1939. The main priority was thus to allocate children to foster families rather than to maintain familial connections. Consequently, siblings were sent to different homes, with subsequent loss of contact.⁸⁸ Johanna Verstandig criticised the Jewish Refugee Committee for the way in which they sent her to a family in Leeds whilst her sister remained in London. She was nine years old and her sister just one year older.⁸⁹ Harry Bibring also lamented the separation from his sister Gertie who had acted as his guardian through transit.⁹⁰ Those who had been accompanied by their siblings throughout the journey were suddenly deprived of their only remaining comfort upon arrival. Sibling bonds are incredible strong. Just what it must have felt like to have familial connections torn apart, again, is almost unfathomable. Having suffered the trauma of parental separation at departure, many children thus suffered further losses once in England. This consecutive deprivation truly embodies Keilson's theory of 'sequential traumatising'.

Yet as well as from people, we must acknowledge that the Kinder were divorced from place, the impact of which held equal significance. On arrival every child was medically examined and their documents validated by customs officials. One boy

⁸⁷ J. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss* (Harmondsworth, 1971).

⁸⁸ R. Barnett, 'The Acculturation of the Kindertransport Children: Intergenerational Dialogue on the Kindertransport Experience', *Shofar*, 23 (2004), 103.

⁸⁹ Author's interview with Johanna Verstandig, 15 February 2016.

⁹⁰ Author's interview with Harry Bibring, 20 January 2016.

refused to open his suitcase for customs. When he was eventually persuaded to do so it was found to contain 'some earth taken from the boy's home'.⁹¹ Place is bound to family and memories and for a young child represents stability. These children were uprooted and transported away from their homes, which essentially severed them from everything they had ever known. We can see the importance of physical place in the way that this boy chose to take with him soil from his home rather than something from his house. Moreover, the children's testimonies point to an awareness of being out of place. The majority could not understand the English announcements that matched them with foster families, they felt isolated by their inability to speak or comprehend this 'strange language'.⁹² Renate Collins remembered desperately needing the toilet, but not speaking any English meant that this five year old refugee was confined to her seat, her most basic need uncared for.⁹³

Upon arrival the children were subjected to further separations and control of their lives ceded to complete strangers. This constituted the third stage of sequential traumatisation experienced as part of their forced migration. Correspondingly, Gigliotti has noted of arrival at concentration camps that it represented 'separation and powerlessness to reverse an uncertain destiny'.⁹⁴ These parallels encourage us to equate the Kindertransport with the cruelties of the Holocaust more generally, where Jewish victims were uprooted from familiarity and separated from family members as part of a series of forced relocations.

⁹¹ Fast, *Children's Exodus*, 21

⁹² Author's interview with Vera Schaufeld, 23 March 2016.

⁹³ R. Collins, interviewed by Ilse Sinclair, BLL, C410/024, (1 of 3).

⁹⁴ Gigliotti, *The Train*, 28.

Conclusion

Reflecting on his own experience of the Kindertransport, Ralph Mollerick explained: 'It can be viewed as an act of kindness by the British government in saving 10,000 children, or it can be viewed as an act of cruelty by the Nazis for sending children unescorted to another land'.⁹⁵ Mollerick's comment underlines the complexities of the migration scheme. These children's movement undoubtedly saved them from the physical atrocities to which many of their parents were later subjected, but it also engendered other traumas associated with forced relocation. By drawing attention to the losses and other distressing incidents that these children incurred at each stage of their journeys to Britain, from departure to arrival, this dissertation has both nuanced our understanding of the Kindertransport and placed it amongst the broader history of the Holocaust. As a traumatic journey of displacement it is comparable to the cattle car journeys between ghettos and concentration camps to which Gigliotti has paid attention, and reinforces Gigliotti's assertion that the Holocaust must be thought of as mobile as much as stationary. It also reminds us that the Holocaust took place not only in spaces such as camps and ghettos which were shaped by the Nazis for the purposes of persecution, but also in the everyday spaces of modern Europe such as stations and carriages. Moreover, one can align the Kindertransport with the Nazis' conscious decision to establish the ideological notion of 'lebensraum' (living space). The Kindertransport contributed to Adolf Hitler's objective to ensure that the territory of the Reich was 'Judenfrei' (free of Jews).⁹⁶ Most importantly, and

⁹⁵ R. Mollerick quoted in L. Greschler (ed.), *The 10,000 Children That Hitler Missed: Stories From The Kindertransport* (New York, 2009), 5.

⁹⁶ T. Cole and G. Smith, 'Ghettoization and the Holocaust: Budapest 1944', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 21 (1995), 301.

as we have seen, the Kinder bore the scars of this ideology and those who are still alive continue to be affected today. Their journeys to Britain displayed the trauma associated with the loss of parents, siblings, homes, countries, language, and all that had been familiar. Historians must acknowledge the significance of this torturous ordeal. The uprooting of thousands of unaccompanied minors should be considered as an act of both kindness *and* cruelty.

This episode forces us to recognise the far-reaching impact of physical journeys on refugees. The Kindertransport created a small population of people who define themselves through their journeys to Britain. For them the transportation did not just happen; it shaped their identities and became part of their fundamental psyches. Their stories tell us about the psychological damage that forced journeys can have, especially on children. On 25 April Parliament voted against Lord Dubs' proposal to accept 3,000 unaccompanied Syrian child refugees into Britain. Arguably politicians have become desensitised to the fact that migrant journeys are laced with emotion, transformation and struggle.⁹⁷ The current Syrian child refugees have not only witnessed terrible civil war but many have endured arduous journeys in order to reach relative safety. They have already been uprooted, are already in transit, and are already on their own. Recognising the trauma that Jewish children suffered en route to Britain through individual testimony should highlight that each forced migration, whether through an organised programme such as the Kindertransport, or as one of many treacherous journeys taken by refugees attempting to reach Europe today, is a seminal part of an individual's emotional and psychological life.

⁹⁷ See for example R. Mason, 'Labour says "fight will go on" after Tories vote down child refugee plan', *Guardian*, 26 April 2016.

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