

Aberystwyth University

Narrating the Margins and the Center

Hammel, Andrea

Published in:
Shofar

DOI:
[10.5703/shofar.37.3.0203](https://doi.org/10.5703/shofar.37.3.0203)

Publication date:
2019

Citation for published version (APA):

Hammel, A. (2019). Narrating the Margins and the Center: Kindertransportees' stories of national and religious belonging. *Shofar*, 37(3), 203-228. <https://doi.org/10.5703/shofar.37.3.0203>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Aberystwyth Research Portal (the Institutional Repository) are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Aberystwyth Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Aberystwyth Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

tel: +44 1970 62 2400
email: is@aber.ac.uk

Narrating the Margins and the Centre: Kindertransportees' Stories of National and Religious Belonging

The impossibility of telling a definite story

Kindertransport research seems to be suffering from a desire to find a definitive story of an experience that was an important part of over 10,000 individual child refugees' lives, as well as countless others who assisted them or were otherwise affected by the scheme. The Kindertransport 1938/39 to Britain was a visa-waiver scheme introduced by the British government that allowed unaccompanied child refugees to enter the UK between December 1938 and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. This is, however, almost where the consensus ends. There is intense debate as to how many children were part of the scheme and where all the children originated from. According to the First Annual Report of the Movement for the Care of Children from Germany by 30 August 1939 9,354 child refugees from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia entered the UK through this scheme.¹ But there might have been some smaller groups that were not included in this number. Geographical origin and consequently the children's nationalities are difficult to define, as borders were shifting in the late 1930s: for example, in March 1938 the German Reich annexed Austria and Austria became a subsidiary state in the eyes of the National Socialist German government.

This tension between being able to tell a defining narrative and the acknowledgement that different Kindertransportees had very different experiences is nothing new. In 2003 Birgit Aschmann, a reviewer of the German broadsheet *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, pointed to this dilemma in her review of an academic collection of essays edited by Wolfgang Benz, Claudia Curio and myself:

The editors also face the structural dilemma that all studies on the persecution of the Jews face: that is, the studies either develop into a cold analysis of institutional history that ignores the victims because it ignores the individual suffering or the story fragments into a recounting of many individual lives.²

The only way out is a dual approach: investigating the structural and institutional background while also citing from contemporary letters and diaries when available and oral history interviews and autobiographical narratives. This was also the approach in 2003: 'The collection of essays tries to bridge the tension between the two approaches by featuring

analyses of organisational and institutional aspects as well as the accounts of three eyewitnesses.’³ But the review also states that different circumstances of flight and resettlement mean that the experience and the outcome was different: ‘It becomes more and more transparent that different individuals coped with the trauma in a very different ways according to age, stage of development, personality, family, social and political previous experiences and experiences in the society of resettlement.’⁴ Here we will use different source material such as archival sources, autobiographical narratives, oral history interviews and a number of academic studies that exist on the Kindertransport. My aim is to discuss issues of the national and religious belonging of former Kindertransportees to add further nuanced discussion to what is often portrayed as a simplistic narrative.

While on the one hand it is understandable that a unified story has the most impact when trying to garner public and media attention, adhering to such a narrative also excludes many who do not feel their experience is adequately reflected. The search for a definitive story of the Kindertransport is reflected in the academic discussion as well. In 2018, the year of the eightieth commemoration of the first transport arriving from Berlin in the UK, there is intense debate on the exact numbers of children fleeing Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and the border area between the German Reich and Poland on an organised Kindertransport. There is discussion regarding the percentage of Kindertransportees who were reunited with one or both their parents after the war. There is general disagreement among scholars when it comes to evaluating the aims and objectives of the British government of the time. Most of these debates hinge on the question of whether the Kindertransport should be seen as a positive rescue mission having saved 10,000 lives or a cynical way of only admitting child refugees thus separating many from their parents forever. Louise London argued in 2000 that ‘The organisers of this exodus knew they were separating families in circumstances where parents abandoned to Nazi persecution had little prospect of survival.’⁵ Others would of course dispute that this could be known with any certainty at the time.

These differences in opinion are even more intensified by fact that the Kindertransport has become a popular reference point in the British media over the last few years, for several reasons. Because of their young age in the 1930s, former Kindertransportees outnumber other Holocaust survivors still living in Britain today. Therefore, they are often found talking to school groups and in museums to young audiences and their memoirs receive public attention.

Additionally, the focus on the Kindertransport has intensified, especially since summer 2015, when more and more refugees from Northern Africa tried to flee to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea. Compared to other Northern European countries such as Germany and Sweden who have given refuge to hundreds of thousands of people, the British government has only decided to admit very few refugees. In debates on the topic in the British media the Kindertransport has been mentioned as an example of Britain's humanitarian and generous attitude in the past as opposed to its restrictive present-day policies. However, as researchers we have to point out that the Kindertransport scheme was also not as generous as it is often perceived to be and that this is a flawed comparison.⁶ The fact that one of the British politicians, who is campaigning for Britain to take in additional unaccompanied child refugees, is Lord Alf Dubs, a Labour politician sitting in the House of Lords and a former Kindertransportee from Czechoslovakia, has added to this increasing public awareness.⁷

In this way the Kindertransport phenomenon has become more central to British national history and public debate. However, the common public story of the Kindertransport often contains numerous inaccuracies, such as incorrect premises that describe the Kindertransportees as orphans (which the overwhelming majority were not). Parents suffering persecution decided to part with their children in order to get them to safety while they themselves often found it impossible to gain permission to enter countries of refuge. Furthermore, many media reports neglect the fact that the British government was very reluctant in 1938/39 to give financial support to the Kindertransport and in fact required each child to have a £50 guarantee to indemnify the state against any costs the child refugee might incur. The lack of financial support was certainly one of the factors restricting the number of children admitted to Britain at the time.

The current dominant public narrative also often portrays the Kindertransport as a purely celebratory narrative. Scholars have been attempting to provide a more nuanced picture since the later 1990s. This includes a realisation that the Kindertransport story cannot be summed up as a London-centric Jewish experience. Accordingly, we will focus on narratives outlining different national and religious identities in Britain. The question of national identity ranges from whether the children saw their birth countries and/or Britain as their home, as well as whether they identified as English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish. This sense of belonging is, of course, intrinsically linked with being a refugee and originating in a different, in this case continental European, country. Secondly, we will focus on religious

identity and affiliation. We will discuss the fact that a significant number of children who found refuge in Britain via a Kindertransport did not come from families who defined themselves as Jewish while the Kindertransport is mainly seen as a scheme to rescue Jewish children. In their first annual report the Movement for the Care of Children, later renamed Refugee Children's Movement, found that by the end of August 9,354 children had come under their care of which 7,482 were considered Jewish, 1,123 Christians and 749 'denominational'.⁸ This figure does not include a few smaller groups of children.

Here we will show the complex national identities of the Kindertransportees in respect of their originating countries but even more in respect of their country of settlement within the UK. We will show the interrelationship between the former Kindertransportees' narratives of belonging and changes in narratives surrounding the four countries that make up the UK. We will discuss the fact that the religious backgrounds of the children were not sufficiently taken into account when placing the children with foster parents and that many Jewish Kindertransportees were fostered by non-Jewish foster parents, which had consequences for the child refugees' identities.

National Identities and the Kindertransport

In 1999 Rebekka Göpfert published the first academic monograph on the Kindertransport. Written in German, it was based on her DPhil thesis submitted at the University of Münster in Germany in 1997. The work is based on archival research and 28 oral history interviews with former Kindertransportees. Göpfert argues that the way the former Kindertransportees deal with their life narratives is dependent on the country they eventually settled in after the Second World War. As far as can be estimated at the moment, the majority of former Kindertransportees stayed in the UK after 1945 and many became naturalised British citizens as soon as they reached the age of majority. A sizeable number migrated further, for example to the US, either to join family or to take up other opportunities relating to careers and economic advancement. Some Kindertransportees migrated to Israel and only a very small number 'returned' to their countries of origin in Central Europe. Göpfert argues that those who settled in Britain have British passports but do not feel 'British'. Göpfert further outlines that these feelings of national belonging are different in the US: immigration is part of the founding narrative of the country and thus immigrants are the norm and refugees are subsumed within this category. She argues that the situation is yet again different for those

who migrated to Israel after their Kindertransport experience: in Israel the Holocaust experience is part of the legitimization narrative of the state and thus the former Kindertransportees can feel part of the national story.⁹

Göpfert's monograph gives many interesting insights but it also shows views of Britishness prominent in the 20th century and it can be argued these have since changed. She argues that:

Kindertransportees who remained in Britain are generally even until today only British subjects, i.e. although they hold a British passport, they neither self-identify nor are seen as British by those around them, they remain – even if it is never said explicitly – refugees.¹⁰

To investigate these feelings of belonging and self-identification we have to look at ego documents, be they written autobiographies or oral narratives given in interviews. There is no shortage of such documents, in fact Tony Kushner claims that the former Kindertransportees have recorded their experiences more than any other group of refugees that settled in Britain.¹¹

One of the earliest publications of this kind was published in 1966: Karen Gershon, a former Kindertransportee herself, published 'a collective autobiography of refugees' in book form, entitled *We Came As Children*. This text is based on contributions from 234 former Kindertransportees who either sent their complete autobiographical narratives to Gershon or responded to Gershon's directives and questions in writing. Gershon eventually selected extracts and created thematical clusters in the book. They are not attributed to individual authors but give a collective impression. *We Came as Children* gives sophisticated insights into the Kindertransport experience. It is also interesting as it was published before the memoir writing boom of former Kindertransportees that occurred after the first Kindertransport Reunion in 1988. These later memoirs clearly cross-fertilized each other and certain hegemonic narratives emerged. However, the fact that we cannot see all the responses and have to rely on the selection Gershon made, is also something that has to be taken into consideration.

The penultimate section of Gershon's book is called 'Summing Up' and it starts with contributors' definition of refugees as someone uprooted by force: 'A refugee is someone fleeing from political, religious or racial persecution' or 'a refugee is someone who is obliged to flee for his safety'.¹² The way the statements are listed and the shared opening term 'a

refugee' strengthen the impact on the reader and somehow give the impression of a unified response. However, after a page, contributions are listed that volunteer more information, such as the development that makes a person stop being a refugee. 'He ceases to be a refugee when the circumstances which forced him to flee no longer exist',¹³ for example, also focuses on the initial temporariness of their situation. The next sub-chapter focuses on the contributors' definition of home, with most defining home through early childhood experience: 'Home is the first place one knows' and 'Home is where you were a child'.¹⁴ Not all contributors agree, some focus more on a sense of belonging they created themselves: 'Home is where your nearest and dearest are.'¹⁵ However, this section culminates in a discussion of national belonging; 'I do not feel at home in England and doubt that one can feel at home anywhere except in its surroundings of one's early youth.'¹⁶ Several contributors state their difference and foreignness:

Although I am married to an Englishwoman and have two very English daughters, I have never cherished any illusion about becoming fully assimilated into an English background. I regard myself as a German half-Jew, and have never tried to pretend to be anything else. I have travelled quite a bit and when all is said and done, I regard the English people as the kindest on earth, but I know I can never be one of them. I am, and always shall be a foreigner.¹⁷

It is very interesting that this statement contains the term 'very English' daughters which seems to express something of a surprise felt by the contributor that his children could be like that. The section also contains the very idiomatic phrase 'when all is said and done' reflecting the contributor's belonging on the linguistic front. It is also noteworthy that only Englishness is focused on in Gershon's book, either because no one who settled in the other parts of the UK contributed or because Englishness is seen as synonymous for Britishness. In many ways, Gershon's work also reflects the time of its creation and although the many individual contributions add variation and substance to the Kindertransport as a whole, it reflects certain dominant ideas of the time such as a sense of belonging that has to be all-encompassing to be of value. Other slightly older German-speaking Jewish refugees also reflect this sense that a feeling of complete belonging is the only desirable outcome and must be achieved or else integration has somehow failed. The work of exile writer Hilde Spiel (1911-1990) who lived in Austria and Britain before, during and after the Second World War also portrays this notion of a homogenic national identity to which one can either belong fully or not at all. There is no room for a hybrid or qualified identity. In her two autobiographical

texts *Die hellen und die finsternen Zeiten* and *Welche Welt ist meine Welt?*, Spiel outlines many instances of feeling rejected by British society and the British literary establishment. However, as I have argued elsewhere, Spiel actually lived a complex identity by embracing British and Austrian culture in her life and work. Until she left the UK for Austria in 1961 she published articles focusing on Continental culture in British broadsheet newspapers. After moving the focal point of her life to Austria again, she continued to write for the *Guardian* from 1963 to 1970 and spent 1983, aged 72, in London as correspondent for the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. To the 21st century eye it is clear that she was a successful intercultural communicator.¹⁸ However, she at times did not see this as a strength, but as a weakness and evidence of non-belonging. It can be argued that this lack of recognition is common among former refugees of this generation. This conclusion plays out in many autobiographical narratives of former Kindertransportees in *We Came As Children* as well.

There are many instances in which Kindertransportees have reiterated this feeling of insecurity. Michael Handler, who fled to the UK on a Kindertransport, stated in an interview:

And when you live here for 30, 40 years and you are still seen as a ‘Foreigner’, then this is somewhat depressing. [...] You imagine yourself to be many things, child and father or mother or – and I am not English, and I haven’t been German for a long time. In any case, I have the difficulty of having an Austrian father. Therefore, I am a terrible mixture and not a Jew either.¹⁹

This quote clearly shows the dilemma and the search for belonging, but at the same time it also shows that there is an impossible desire for a stable straightforward identity that does not exist. The statement ‘I have the difficulty of having an Austrian father’ proves the impossibility of finding a non-complicated national identity. Clearly in most families there are members that are not part of a straightforward and uniform narrative. In most situations, for someone living in Germany having an Austrian father might not even be worth mentioning or at least not be seen as problematic. In the case of a refugee child who had to flee his birth country and leave his birth family because perceived racial difference led to discrimination and persecution, any difference from a perceived ‘pure’ ethnicity or identity is noteworthy. Handler describes himself as ‘a terrible mixture’, using an extreme adjective (‘terrible’) as well as a noun that more commonly refers to objects rather than people (‘mixture’). He thus reflects the objectification he experienced under the National Socialist

persecution in his narrative. The former Kindertransportees find it hard to claim an identity such as 'English', despite having lived in England for 30 or 40 years.

As discussed above, in Gershon's collective autobiography the contributions focus on the concept of home rather than belonging to a nation and religion. Statements such as 'Home is where one feels one belongs and where people are nice to one' and 'Home is where one feels settled, together with one's family, where one finds one's livelihood, where one belongs to some sort of community, however small' are typical of this section. This shows an early challenge to a narrative of nationhood and nationality that lasted until the end of the 20th century.

The originating country of the child refugees might have also made a difference to their perception of identity. The child refugees from Czechoslovakia entered the UK under the same visa waiver scheme as the children from Germany and Austria, but their journey obviously differed from those coming on trains from these countries. There were some other particularities about their situation including organisational differences but also a different sense of identity. As I have discussed elsewhere, it was easier for the child refugees from Czechoslovakia to feel oppositional and inhabiting an identity that had fewer links to National Socialist Germany. Especially after the outbreak of the Second World War, Kindertransportees living in the UK often had difficulties explaining their situation to those influenced by the anti-German war propaganda. For the German and Austrian children, it was often painful to explain to British people that, although they spoke German, their families had been persecuted by the Nazis and thus were not part of the National Socialist Germany Britain was at war with. The British public knew that Czechoslovakia had been invaded by Germany and thus its citizens were clearly victims of the National Socialists. Additionally, due to the fact that there was a Czech Government in Exile, initially established in Paris, which then moved to London, more organised support for Czech refugee children existed. A Czechoslovak School in Britain was founded after the fall of France, initially for the children of said government and others that had to flee for a second time after the German invasion of France. However, a number of Kindertransportees joined the school. Vera Gissing was one of these Kindertransportees from Prague who, in her memoir *Pearls of Childhood: A unique childhood memoir of the life in wartime Britain in the shadow of the Holocaust*, describes her time at the school in a positive light. The school was initially located at Hinton Hall in England, but in 1943 it was decided that the building was too small and too dilapidated. The primary school section moved to Maesfen Hall near Nantwich and the secondary school

section moved to a vacant hotel in Llanwrtyd Wells in Powys in Mid-Wales. Gissing describes the arrival of the children thus:

I shall never forget our arrival in the village of Llanwrtyd Wells, a small community which lies at the very heart of central Wales. We spilled out of the steam train at the tiny station and marched with our bags and cases along an unmade road. [...] Needless to say, the arrival of so many Czech youngsters (there were about 130 of us by then) caused quite a stir in the village and at first we were viewed with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. Then one of our teachers had a brainwave; we organised a concert to which all the people of Llanwrtyd Wells were invited, and most of them came! The audience loved our national songs and dances, and when at the end all pupils of the school stood up and sang the Welsh national anthem *in Welsh* there was not a dry eye in the house.²⁰

Gissing certainly emphasises the idyllic aspect of this part of Britain and the affinity between the strong national identity of Czechoslovakia and Wales, as well as the fact that both were small countries with a history of being dominated from outside. The above paragraph is immediately followed by the portrayal of their new English teacher, Miss Mackenzie: young, inexperienced but warm with her ‘vibrant Scottish voice’.²¹ Gissing’s narrative clearly portrays non-English identities in Britain as the ‘other’, even marginal, despite the positive attitude. This is part of a situating process in her refugee narrative, a process that is seen as necessary for incomers such as refugees more than for those that were born in a country.

The larger picture points us towards the fact that refugees are even less part of a central national narrative in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland than they are in England and that this has only been changing in the last 25 years, and especially since devolution. The Kindertransport is often seen as an English story. Of course, most of the child refugees first arrived in England. Most of them arrived by boat at Harwich and then took a train to London Liverpool Street, where a memorial marks their arrival today. Others arrived by ship in Southampton or landed at Biggin Hill airport in South London. However, there is no country in the United Kingdom that did not accommodate any Kindertransportees.

For example, the coastal town of Millisle in County Down was the destination of many of the Kindertransportees who were sent to Northern Ireland. Here they were accommodated on a farm together with some older refugees and under the arrangement of the

Belfast Refugee Committee.²² This aspect of the Kindertransport has as yet not been the focus of a comprehensive academic study.

Frances Williams' research on the Kindertransportees who resettled in Scotland is summed up in her monograph entitled *The Forgotten Kindertransportees: The Scottish Experience*, hinting at the fact that most emphasis in Kindertransport research has been on those that were resettled in England. Numerically speaking this was, of course, by far the largest group, but Williams' research gives some useful insight for our questions about identity and belonging. Williams uncovers that there were some distinct differences between those Kindertransportees who ended up in England and those who were sent to Scotland. In Scotland the majority of Kindertransportees who lived in foster homes were fostered by Jewish families; in England this was the minority.²³ There was more emphasis on communal hostels as a way to accommodate and raise the children in Scotland. Although older Kindertransportees were placed in hostels in England as well, a greater percentage of those who resettled in Scotland were placed in a communal setting. Williams explains this difference between the two nations through different attitudes towards placing children in communal settings. As well as archival material, Williams's research is based on oral history interviews. She interviewed 24 former Kindertransportees who had lived in Scotland. This give us qualitative insights about their identity. Most claim that they do not feel comfortable calling themselves Scottish.

When people ask me what I am I say 'I am British', there is no question about it, but I cannot say that 'I am Scottish', I find that for one reason difficult. I feel secure being British. Scottish have got a ... they are really quite clannish. So I don't say that I am Scottish.²⁴

The majority of Kindertransportees that were initially placed in Scotland left after the end of the Second World War, either to migrate further to join family, or, in the majority of cases, to find better economic opportunities elsewhere. They mainly moved to England, and especially London, but also to the US and Israel. Williams states that their Scottish identity remained important to them even though they did not live in Scotland any more.²⁵ Williams explains that many emphasize a clichéd Scottishness: 'This suggests that ideas about "Highlandism" form the basis of their construction of the imagined community of Scotland. Highlandism is based on invented traditions and relies heavily on "retrospective cultural apparatus", most notably drawn from distorted perceptions of Highland culture.'²⁶ This stands in contrast to

the way some of the Kindertransportees define their national identity, i.e. that they feel this clichéd national identity of Highland clans is perhaps what keeps them from identifying as Scottish.

I can't say that I am Scottish because I don't belong to the McDonalds, the McClouds, the McCandels ... I always felt an outsider. I always felt that I had to be very careful, and I never felt part of it. I knew I was a refugee and I knew there were limitations to what I could expect and what I could demand.²⁷

On the other hand, this interviewee makes it quite clear that the insecure status of being a refugee is at the heart of the problem.

Vera Gissing's description of Welsh culture could also be described as a 'Leeks, Sheep and Land of my Fathers' clichéd Welsh national identity. However, it could be argued that this is all the child refugees felt was open to them. Williams writes that birth, blood and belonging have been stated to her by former Kindertransportees as the only way to authentic Scottish identity.²⁸ Constructing a narrative of identity and belonging is clearly dependent on the narrative models available to the former Kindertransportees. The dominant narrative of the Kindertransport is still an English one, so to deviate and carve out a marginal narrative is difficult. This is exacerbated by the fact that a refugee narrative is necessarily one of rejection and marginality. Clearly the Kindertransport can only be understood if it can be told and investigated in its complexity, and that encompasses resettlement outside the large cities and outside England as well.

Ellen Davis is a Kindertransportee who resettled in Swansea in Wales. Born into a large Jewish family living in rural Germany, she was put on a Kindertransport aged eleven. She describes her journey to her foster home in her memoir *Kerry's Children* as a bewildering experience:

WHAT WAS SWANSEA? As we entered the train in London, I heard a man, as he wandered up and down outside, shouting Swansea, Swansea. I had no idea what he was saying, but I was struck by the word and the funny voice he had. When our long journey ended, there was another man shouting Swansea. He sounded very different. So again, what was Swansea?²⁹

The remarkable aspect of this passage does not relate to the fact that this eleven-year-old Kindertransportee does not know what or where Swansea is. This is hardly surprising as

Davis' family had led a very closed domestic life in rural Germany, she received limited education and her life had focused on being in charge of looking after her five younger siblings. Before travelling on the actual Kindertransport train to Britain, Davis states that she had never even seen a station or a train before.³⁰

What is interesting is that she chooses to construct her narrative this way, supporting the idea that Wales is different and marginal. Davis published her memoir in 2004 with Seren Books, a Welsh publishing house, and still lives near Swansea. It is clear that constructing a narrative according to the hegemonic views about the margin and the centre in British life is one way to feel accepted by the dominant culture. This does of course limit the refugee's access to models that would allow for more complex identities rather than the hegemonic ones that demand 'birth, blood and belonging', as discussed in the memoirs and oral history interviews focussed on here. New discourses of identity and belonging are available to explore as the 21st century progresses. It is possibly not the generation of the refugees themselves who can explore these, however, the children and grandchildren of refugees are eager to use them when describing their identity. Peter Skyte, a member of the Second Generation Network, a UK organisation of children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors and refugees, many of whom are specifically the children and grandchildren of Kindertransportees, wrote in the organisation's newsletter *Second Generation Voices*:

In my early years, belonging to a minority rather than a majority was something I struggled to come to terms with [...] It is only with the maturity of adulthood, when that arrived that I began to see my roots as a strength rather than a weakness. Being 50% Prussian and 50% Bavarian and 100% Yorkshireman in my composition, adds up to more than a whole and that makes me unique.³¹

This is a telling statement and parallels can be drawn to the different levels of self-confidence of first generation refugees and survivors and their children and grandchildren: only when people feel that they have reached a position of relative security, can they admit to their backgrounds being different from the majority. Rather than adopting hegemonic narratives, they are able to construct new ones, even in a playful, somewhat performative manner, as we can see here with the humorous statement '50% Prussian, 50% Bavarian, 100% Yorkshireman'. Academic research has a role to play here too: By busting the myth of the Kindertransport as a straightforward phenomenon where German-speaking child refugees fled to the UK and resettled in England, and providing examples and analyses of different

experiences, we open up narrative models of national belonging for individuals and for the nations.

Jewish identity and the Kindertransport

Many former Kindertransportees also feel at the margins of Jewish life in the UK. As we have seen, Michael Handler (quoted above) feels that he is 'not a Jew either'. The religious identity of former Kindertransportees is an as yet under-researched topic. Again, there is no completely reliable statistical information but it can be assumed that over 80% of Kindertransportees originated from families that defined themselves as Jewish. We face numerous difficulties of definition here: traditionally Judaism defines those who have a Jewish mother as Jewish. However, the German National Socialist government defined as Jewish those who had one Jewish grandparent. This led, as is well known, to people being persecuted as Jewish who did not define themselves as such or had little knowledge of Jewish religion and customs. Jana Leichsenring gives a credible account of the organisational circumstances of those child refugees who were defined as 'non-Aryan Christians', i.e. the Kindertransportees who were Christians because either they themselves, or their families had converted to Christianity. The archive of the Hilfswerk beim Bischöflichen Ordinariat Berlin is one of the most comprehensive institutional archives of the German end of the Kindertransport. This is due to the fact that the Catholic Church was to a certain extent able to protect its records from destruction by the National Socialists. Details on individual children outline their plight in Germany: often not aware of their Jewish background they were nevertheless excluded from mainstream German schools and put in Jewish schools where they often felt alienated as they did not understand the Jewish tradition. Some came from families that were fragmenting due to the pressure on the non-Jewish partner to divorce the Jewish partner. At the same time, these families often felt that there was even less support for them than for Jewish families. Many of these children were supported by the Society of Friends in the UK. Some researchers such as Baumel-Schwartz have gathered a lot of evidence that British Jews who had promised the British government since 1933 to "care for their own," had managed within six years to alienate a substantial portion of the Jewish refugee children in Great Britain by their condescending and intolerant attitudes towards them.³² This statement rests on a number of premises that assume the desirability of

religious adherence and, for example, see intermarriage as a loss – views, of course, not shared by everyone.

As mentioned above, the placement of the Kindertransportees in foster families did not adhere to the standards of late 20th century foster placements: there was no close matching process between placement and child. This potentially affected any aspect of both the child refugee's or the foster family's background. Martha Blend describes a situation in her memoir where she is placed with a family in London with extremely limited education and literacy who consequently were not able to help her with school work at all. In Blend's case, it is obvious that the foster family nevertheless made huge efforts to accommodate their charge. But in other cases, this mismatch in background led to the breakdown of placements and many Kindertransportees were moved from one foster family to another several times. Additionally, some of the abusive situations Kindertransportees found themselves in could probably have been avoided if a more careful matching process had been in place.

Academic research has debated whether this was simply due to the fact that the focus of child welfare at the time was largely orientated towards providing adequate shelter, food and education rather than meeting emotional needs and nurturing identity development. However, archival research shows that the Refugee Children's Movement [RCM] were not unaware of these tensions, neither were they entirely unprepared: Dorothy Hardisty, the General Secretary of the RCM from 1940 onwards, is recorded, in a document entitled 'RCM: Evidence and Suggestions of Mrs Dorothy Hardisty', stating: 'The religious background of the home has been found of the utmost importance. [...] It is the Movement's policy to bring children up in the religion in which they came to this country with and to ensure that children are not brought up without a religious adherence.'³³ Nor was there a lack of vocal criticism from the Jewish community or even from the Kindertransportees themselves: a group of Jewish boys wrote an angry letter to the Chief Rabbi about the impossibility of observing the Jewish dietary laws in the holding camps in East Anglia where many Kindertransportees were initially placed during winter 1938/39.³⁴

The RCM was a non-denominational umbrella organisation which oversaw more than 170 local committees at its height and lists 65 regional committees just after the start of the Second World War. If those committees that can be researched in more detail – such as the Cambridge Refugee Committee or the Manchester Refugee Committee – are anything to go by, the majority of committee members were not Jewish, although there were prominent

Commented [PA1]: Is this quote correct? Feels awkward.

Commented [AH[2R1]]: It is correct. These reports are not very well written.

Jewish members as well. This is not surprising bearing in mind the fact that only ca. one percent of the 45 million inhabitants of the United Kingdom at the time were Jewish. It is also therefore to be expected that there were fewer Jewish foster placements available than placements in Christian families. The official line of the RCM as stated in January 1939 was therefore that the children could be accommodated in non-Jewish families but that alternate provision for their religious education should be made: 'arrangement should be made for those placed in such houses to be put in touch with the local Jewish communities.'³⁵

There is ample evidence in letters from former Jewish Kindertransportees describing their lives with non-Jewish families. The interactions between both are extremely varied. Some children found foster families that matched their birth families' background and expectations. Others did not. Some were not old enough to already have a solid footing in their religion, others did and therefore sought out members of the Jewish community themselves.

Even if there had been enough Jewish foster homes available and enough resources to vet potential foster parents, a number of researchers, such as Göpfert, Fast and Baumel-Schwarz, point out that there were differences between Britain and Central Europe in defining religious affiliation. Thus there might have been misunderstandings about the exact nature of the children's religious affiliations if an application form containing a single word definition such as 'Liberal' was all the RCM had to base its decisions on. But because the shortage of Jewish foster homes was known, in a lot of cases the parents were asked to sign a P form to agree that their children could be placed in non-Jewish families.³⁶ It is not known what happened if the parents refused to sign such a form, although it is likely that this would diminish the chances of a child being able to be put on a list for a Kindertransport.

The Kindertransport was organised in a structure in which there were always going to be more potential child refugees than would be admitted to the UK. The families had to supply extensive paperwork, the children were sometimes assessed and the necessary financial support had to be available when the child came to the top of the waiting list. Then a foster family or hostel placement had to be found. It is easy to imagine that while desirable, not all aspects of a child's background could be taken into account. The question of whether certain groups were given preference has been considered by a number of researchers and as there is a lack of statistical data, no definite conclusions can be drawn. Claudia Curio outlined a convincing argument in her monograph that for a variety of reasons certain children might

have had a greater chance – British foster parents, for example, preferred to foster girls between six and ten – but that there was no explicit bias. Jewish organisations on the Continent certainly tried to put children forward for emigration according to the urgency of their situation.³⁷ Citing extracts from the interviews she conducted, Göpfert shows that some Kindertransportees felt that some families took in children with the expressed intent to have them baptised but that others made a huge effort to urge the children to uphold their Jewish faith and traditions.³⁸ The RCM issued guidelines to the secretaries of the regional committees urging them to make sure that foster parents did not ask the children to attend religious services other than those of their own religion.³⁹ However, theories and practice were clearly worlds apart, as another extract from an interview that Göpfert conducted shows:

And they wrote to my parents and they asked for permission for me to go to church. And my parents had actually sent me with a Jewish prayer book in Hebrew and Czech, neither of which I could read after a time [...] and my parents wrote back and said that that was quite alright as long as no pressure was put on me to convert [...] And I must say my guardians kept this very honourably.⁴⁰

It can be assumed that in many cases actions happened with the best intentions for the welfare of the child refugee but it is also clear that children and young people are always naturally influenced by their environment, and there were cases where Jewish children asked to go to church as they wanted to join in with the rest of their foster family.

The British policy to evacuate children from urban areas to the countryside posed an additional problem to the challenge of finding foster homes with a matching religious background as there were far fewer Jewish families living in rural areas. Things became simply too complicated for the RCM to manage. Supervising the placements is another area where the Kindertransport experience fell short of modern expectations. Some child refugees were visited from time to time, many were not, or certainly do not recall such visits.

The situation after evacuation opened the RCM up to criticism from religious leaders and organisations: H.A. Goodman from the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations made a speech in front of the Board of Deputies criticising the RCM for their lack of care relating to Jewish religious instruction, and demanding to know how many children had already been baptised.⁴¹ Another critic was Rabbi Dr Solomon Schonfeld, who was involved in the founding of the Chief Rabbi's Religious Emergency Council (CRREC) and assisted in the organisation of Kindertransports especially for Orthodox children and young people. There

were clear tensions between different factions within the RCM and between the RCM and the CRREC. Fast quotes one RCM organiser as saying that Schonfeld ‘gave us more trouble and occupied more precious time with petty fogging complaints than all of our other critics put together.’⁴² Schonfeld, for example, insisted that the departure of some trains should be delayed as to not contravene the ban on travel on the Sabbath. He did, however, manage to organise transports for 300 children, involving guarantees and hostel placements in an Orthodox setting. Researchers have placed different emphasis on this aspect of the rescue operation. Baumel-Schwarz is highly critical of the Anglo-Jewish community in her monograph *Never Look Back. The Jewish Refugee Children in Britain 1938 -1945*, which is an updated version of her research for an MA dissertation submitted in 1981. She argues that the Anglo-Jewish community fell short of their duty to help refugees with practical and spiritual support, stating that they donated money rather than visiting the children or offering themselves as foster parents. She locates one reason for this in the general attitude of some members to see the child refugees as ‘poor relations’.⁴³ Baumel-Schwartz argues that this attitude contributed to the child refugees’ sense of alienation and their lack of integration into the Jewish community, and possibly to them leaving the faith of their birth families.

It is thus not entirely surprising that the majority of autobiographical narratives in *We Came as Children* do not describe unqualified religious belonging:

Religion holds little place in my life and it has been many years since I have been to synagogue; owing to what happened to my family I can no longer believe. But I could never cease to be a Jew, or to be proud of being one.⁴⁴

Some converted when they were young:

‘As far as religion goes, I have none, despite a basically C of E education and an adolescent urge to be baptised. This I recognise as merely a wish to attach myself to a big organisation [...] I attended synagogue recently for the first time in years – very interesting. I was an outsider, yet not an outsider.’⁴⁵

In the end some of the comments mention a number of ‘hybrid’ identities or hyphenated identities such as in the following narrative about belonging:

A friend of mine and I recently agreed that since adulthood not only did we find that we were used to a different culture from English Christian people but that sometimes we felt nearer to them than to the bulk of the Anglo-Jewish community. On the other hand,

Commented [PA3]: Consider also indenting this quote?

Commented [AH[4R3]: yes please. Please indent.

we felt ourselves equally far removed, we agreed, from the German Jewish community.⁴⁶

This narrative shows an interesting combination of delineation and not belonging. However, by mentioning the three doubly defined identities – English Christian, Anglo-Jewish and German Jewish – so close together, the narrative displays a performative aspect. In the end the statement contains more distancing than belonging, but it does not adhere to a simplistic idea of a monolithic identity that can either be fully adopted or not. It allows for different identities that might be inhabited in different situations.

Conclusion

Research into narrative representations of the Kindertransport experience, both in written and oral form, has provided us with an in-depth insight into how centrality and marginality in relation to various identities is constructed. As we have to accept that some statistical information that we might like to use in our analyses is just not available, we need to look for alternative modes of understanding in order to register the varied nature of the Kindertransport experience. Here we have shown the complex picture of Kindertransportees' sense of identity and belonging in relation to national and religious identity. It is clear that a range of factors and issues makes it impossible to generalise and construct a grand narrative of the Kindertransport. The way Kindertransport narratives are constructed has changed over time and cannot be taken out of the context of the changing self-understanding of the four nations that make up the United Kingdom and the self-understanding of the country as a whole. Identifying as Jewish or not is an equally complex issue and again we should not underestimate the challenge of religious belonging and how this has changed during the last 80 years. The experience of persecution for a perceived difference remains central to most narratives, or as one former Kindertransportee put it: 'Owing to our experience in Germany. I do not think that we will integrate any further than we have done up to the present merely because we cannot believe that we can ever integrate completely into the community.'⁴⁷

Bibliography

- Birgit Aschmann, 'Hübsch und blond', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 06.11.2003, Nr. 258/p.8.
- Jennifer Craig-Norton, 'Contesting the Kindertransport as a 'Model' Refugee Response' in *European Judaism*, Vol. 50, Issue 2, September 2017, pp. 24-33.
- Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, *Never Look Back. The Jewish Refugee Children in Great Britain, 1938-1935*, West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press 2012.
- Claudia Curio, *Verfolgung, Flucht, Rettung. Die Kindertransporte 1938/39 nach Großbritannien*, Berlin: Metropol 2006.
- Ellen Davis, *Kerry's Children*, Bridgend: Seren Books 2004.
- Vera K. Fast, *Children's Exodus. A History of the Kindertransport*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris 2011.
- Karen Gershon, *We Came As Children. A Collective Autobiography of Refugees*, London: Papermac 1989.
- Vera Gissing, *Pearls of Childhood. A unique childhood memoir of life in wartime Britain in the shadow of the Holocaust*, London: Robson Books 1994.
- Rebekka Göpfert, *Der Jüdische Kindertransport. Von Deutschland nach England 1938/39*, Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag 1999.
- Andrea Hammel, 'Translating Cultures and Languages: Exile Writers between German and English', In *Translating Holocaust Lives*. London and New York: Bloomsbury 2017
- Andrea Hammel, "'I remember their labels round their necks'" Britain and the Kindertransport' in Tom Lawson and Andy Pearce (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook on Britain and the Holocaust*, Palgrave 2019.
- Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now*, Manchester University Press, 2006
- Jana Leichsenring, *Die Katholische Kirche und "ihre Juden". Das "Hilfswerk beim Bischöflichen Ordinariat Berlin" 1938-1945*, Berlin: Metropol 2007
- Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews 1933-1948. British Immigration Policy and the Holocaust*, Cambridge University Press 2000.
- Hilde Spiel, *Die Hellen und die finsternen Zeiten. Erinnerungen 1911-1946*, Munich: List 1989.
- Hilde Spiel, *Welche Welt ist meine Welt? Erinnerungen 1946-1998*, Munich: List 1990
- Frances Williams, *The Forgotten Kindertransportees. The Scottish Experience*. London: Bloomsbury 2014.

¹ Movement for the Care of Children from Germany Ltd, 'First Annual Report 1938-39', CBFWRJ/RCM Documents 153/14. Central British Fund for World Jewish Relief/Refugee Children's Movement Documents. Wiener Library, London. It can be assumed that the figure does include the 669 children from Czechoslovakia as this part of the operation is explicitly mentioned in the report.

² Birgit Aschmann, 'Hübsch und blond', p.8. All translation from the German original by the author of this article.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ London, *Whitehall*, p. 121.

⁶ See Jennifer Craig-Norton, 'Contesting the Kindertransport'. pp. 24-33.

⁷ See Andrea Hammel, 'Britain and the Kindertransport'.

⁸ Movement for the Care of Children from Germany, First Annual Report, 1938/39. Public Record Office, HO 213/302.

⁹ Göpfert, *Der jüdische Kindertransport*, p.186-194.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.14.

¹¹ Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now*, p.141.

¹² Gershon, *We Came As Children*, p.150.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 152

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 153

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 156

¹⁸ See Hammel, 'Translating Cultures and Languages'.

¹⁹ Göpfert, *Der Jüdische Kindertransport*, p.187

²⁰ Gissing, *Pearls*, p. 98/99.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²² See http://www.kindertransport.org/exhibits_kj05.htm [accessed 26/06/2018]

²³ Frances Williams worked closely with the Association of Jewish Refugees on their survey of former Kindertransportees published in 2008 (see <https://ajr.org.uk/kindertransport-survey/> [accessed 14/06/2018]). The survey is a useful tool and the resulting database gives useful information on background, migration journey, and consequent life developments of former Kindertransportees. The questionnaire sent out by the AJR to the address list they had for all Kindertransportees known to them had a very high response rate. However, the data cannot be seen as a reliable representation of the whole cohort of Kindertransportees as it naturally excludes those who were not alive any more at the time of the survey and those who never got in contact with the AJR or never even identified as a Kindertransportee. I therefore do not agree with Williams that it allows quantifiable conclusions to be drawn (Williams, *Forgotten Kindertransportees*, p.xv)

²⁴ Williams, *Forgotten Kindertransportees*, p.11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.188.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Quoted in Williams, *Forgotten Kindertransportees*, p.193.

²⁸ Williams, *Forgotten Kindertransportees*, p.11.

²⁹ Ellen Davis, *Kerry's Children*, p.55.

-
- ³⁰ Ellen Davis, *Kerry's Children*, p.46.
- ³¹ Peter Skyte, 'Who We Are', *Second Generation Voices*, January 2017, p.2.
- ³² Baumel-Schwartz, *Never Look Back*, p.240.
- ³³ RCM Evidence and Suggestion
- ³⁴ Fast, *Children's Exodus*, 100.
- ³⁵ Council for German Jewry, Meeting of the Executive, 5 January 1939, CBF, Reel 1, File 2, London Metropolitan Archive.
- ³⁶ Form 'Erlaubnis zur Unterbringung in einer nichtjüdischen Familie', Collection Israelitische Kutlsgemeinde Wien, XXII. Fuersorge-und Wohlfahrtswesen, F. Jugendfuersorge, 7. Kinderauswanderung, Korrespondenzen ueber bereits abgereiste Kinder, 1938-1939, A/W 1962, Box 560, Central Archive for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem.
- ³⁷ See Claudia Curio, *Verfolgung, Flucht, Rettung. Die Kindertransporte 1938/39 nach Großbritannien*, Berlin: Metropol, 2006.
- ³⁸ Göpfert, *Der Jüdische Kindertransport*, p.141
- ³⁹ RCM, Meeting of Regional Secretaries, 7 April 1942
- ⁴⁰ Quoted in Göpfert, *Der Jüdische Kindertransport* p.142
- ⁴¹ *Jewish Chronicle*, 30 May 1941
- ⁴² Elaine Blond quoted in Fast, *Children's Exodus*, p. 99.
- ⁴³ Baumel-Schwartz, *Never Look Back*, p. 213
- ⁴⁴ Gershon, *We Came As Children*, p. 157
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 156/7.