

Memories of the Kindertransport: Journeys

Hedy Epstein, Kippenheim, Germany

My parents were trying to paint a wonderful picture for me of England: I'm going to a big city, I'm going to school, 'You'll be learning a new language, you'll make new friends, and we'll all be together again soon...' I wanted to believe this but I had all these mixed feelings about it and then I got the notion into my head that my parents wanted to get rid of me. I told them that, and it must have been very painful for them...

My parents, who had this almost artificial smile on their faces, started to move with the train as it moved out of the station, and as it moved faster and faster, they ran faster and faster, tears streaming down their faces, waving goodbye with their handkerchiefs. Then I knew: they really *did* love me, this was a great act of love.



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John Richards, Vienna, Austria

Father tried to shout something, but with all the commotion, we couldn't hear. The younger children started to cry then. I had a sense of relief; I felt a sense of sadness; I felt a sense of anger. I thought: was I such a bad lad to be torn away from my father and mother? Will I ever be lucky enough to see them again? The emotions that were going through me! Tears. For some reason, I don't know what, my sister didn't cry. Later on in life, she told me that from the day we left the North Station in Vienna, she cut the past out of her life.

Alexander Gordon, Hamburg, Germany

When we got to the border in northern Germany, suddenly the train stopped... Before we knew it, the border Gestapo came on to the train and... took us to a hall where the luggage would be examined. While they searched the train in case somebody was hiding something, in the hall they took their time unpacking everything on to tables, looking for new things... They gave the children a tough time. The children kept crying and crying.

John Silberman, Berlin, Germany

We travelled from Berlin for several hours until we came to the Dutch border. It made a huge impression on me: ... accompanying the Dutch officials came a load of ladies in grey uniforms and I think it was the first time in years that non-Jewish people said something kind to us. They brought chocolate, soft drinks; they gave us postcards to mail home to our parents that we had crossed the border. Somebody had gone to a lot of trouble there to understand what kids would need.



Memories of the Kindertransport: Arriving in Britain

Steven Mendelsson, Breslau, Germany

In Harwich we were greeted by a band of ladies who hugged us, kissed us and embraced us for what seemed an eternity... The train from Harwich to London Liverpool Street station, the last leg of our tiring journey, took us through the East End of London. On either side we saw rows and rows of derelict houses with caved-in roofs. Some houses, apparently still occupied, had broken or boarded-up windows... This tremendous culture shock, the absence of our beloved, caring parents, the odd 'refreshments', the new, strange language, and, yes, even the differing weather, presented huge obstacles at first that we would have to overcome.



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Vera Gissing, Čelákovice, Czechoslovakia

At Liverpool Street Station, we were ushered into a great big hall, full of benches, and there we sat with labels around our necks, waiting for our foster-parents or, for the lucky ones, relatives to claim us. Name after name was called. Then my sister disappeared through the side door, but came back and pushed a piece of paper into my hand and said, 'Look, Vera, this is my address. Send me yours the minute you arrive at your destination.' Slowly the hall emptied. Eventually it was only me left sitting in that great empty hall. I was filled with incredible panic. You can imagine: I had no address, no knowledge of English. I was so frightened what would become of me. Perhaps the family had changed their mind. Perhaps they didn't want me...

Then the door opened, and there stood this little lady, barely taller than myself. Her hat sat all askew on her head, and her mackintosh was buttoned up all wrong. She peered at me from behind a big pair of glasses. Suddenly, her face broke into the most wonderful smile, and she ran to me and hugged me, and spoke to me words I did not understand then, but they were, 'You shall be loved.' And those were the most important words any child in a foreign land, away from her family, could hear. And loved I was.

Bertha Leverton, Munich, Germany

Most families wanted little blue-eyed and blonde girls from about three to seven. Little boys were accepted as well. The older children found it a bit more difficult to find foster-parents. They hastily established hostels to take a big influx of the children who weren't chosen quickly because we had to be chosen fast, in and out. Every week another transport would arrive from Germany, so the children had to be sent out to make room for the new ones.

Memories of the Kindertransport: Becoming British?

John Richards, Vienna, Austria

It was 3 September 1939 – the day war was declared... I could speak a little bit of English then; they had the radio on and I heard this man's voice saying, '...this country is at war with Germany'. I looked at the people in the room and said to the man who had fetched me, 'Does this mean that I can't go home any more, that I won't see my mother and father again?' He tried to explain in a very kind way what it was all about, then he said, 'Maybe if God is willing, maybe you'll see your mother and father again; maybe.' And it was the way that he said it...

Other boys and girls who went into homes were adopted and kindly treated; but I was a lad on my own... the Catholic faith was imposed on me; I was treated like a Catholic and I didn't want this.



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Bertha Leverton, Munich, Germany

On the one hand, you couldn't speak a word, you couldn't express yourself. On the other hand, you also realised that those people took you in out of the kindness of their heart, and how dare you say you would rather be in a Jewish home when there wasn't a Jewish home for you to go to? It was quite a dilemma for older children like myself...

There were some wonderful people who worked on behalf of those of us who came on the *Kindertransport* to Britain: Jewish, non-Jewish, churches, lots of groups and we are very grateful to them. But I believe that we have also given something to the people who sheltered us. We have given ourselves and made contributions in many fields: education, medicine and many other areas. Also, it must be stressed that many of the boys, as soon as they came of age, joined the British Army, and the girls the Land Army, as well as other services. And after the war, many became interpreters in Germany when the war crimes trials started.

Ruth Barnett, Berlin, Germany

It was a huge surprise to get a letter suddenly from my mother in May 1949, and soon after that, she came to England to take me back with her to Germany... I went through the original Kindertransport experience a second time, this time in reverse. Overnight I had lost my home, foster parents, language and everything familiar... My parents desperately wanted their sweet little four-year-old back, the one they had sent off on the Kindertransport. They were in no fit shape to cope with a teenager, and a dislocated one at that... You simply can't pick up a relationship again after a ten-year gap.

Testimonies from: Lyn Smith (ed.), *Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust* (Ebury Press, 2005); Mark Jonathan Harris & Deborah Oppenheimer, *Into the Arms of Strangers* (Bloomsbury, 2000); Ruth Barnett, *Person of No Nationality* (David Paul, 2010)



Memories of the Kindertransport: The foster families

Mariam Cohen, Norwich

I remember motoring to Norwich to pick up Kurt... We saw a ship coming in, and then we saw these poor little things straggling off the gangplank. They had been sick, and were dirty, and they smelled of ship and seasickness. And we brought them home...

My mother, bless her, she took a little girl, Elizabeth, whose family used to phone every Friday night from Vienna. One Friday night, there was no phone call, and poor little girl, she knew what it was. She sat in that little grandmother's chair and she covered her head with a shawl, and she just sobbed and sobbed.



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Warren Mitchell, London

Something like five or six hundred children came off that train... Ilse came to live with us, she didn't speak for about a week, she was so traumatised by what had happened to her. Her father was in a concentration camp. She learnt to speak English very quickly. She began to tell us what had happened and the appalling thing was that it wasn't the Nazis – the Gestapo or the SS – it was the neighbours, the ordinary people who behaved so abominably to towards the Jews in their community. Ilse and her sister Lotte got out. She was very tearful, she didn't think she'd see her parents again. She did get two letters via the International Red Cross and in a very short space of time she was speaking English and doing tremendously well at school. Ilse was my second sister, we played Monopoly together and we argued and fought just like brother and sister.

Richard Attenborough, Leicester

We all said that we thought it was a marvellous idea: for three boys suddenly to have two sisters in the family was very good luck. But the remark I always remember more than any other was my mother's. She said, 'The problem, darlings, is this: your father and I love the three of you so much, but we are going to have to give perhaps even more love to these two girls than we give to you at this time, because, of course, they have none.' This remark has affected my whole life in terms of attitude towards those who are not as fortunate as my brothers and I have been.

For eight years Irene and Helga were our sisters. We did everything together. There were little jealousies, little quarrels, as with any kids, but we came to love each other very much. I am sure my brothers would agree it was one of the best decisions we ever made. After the war, which Helga's and Irene's parents did not survive, the girls went to America.

