

The *Kindertransport* - Background

The *Kindertransport*

On November 15, 1938, a few days after “*Kristallnacht*,” a delegation of British Jewish leaders appealed in person to the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain. Among other measures, they requested that the British government permit the temporary admission of children and teenagers, who would later re-emigrate. The Jewish community promised to pay guarantees for the refugee children.

The next day, the British Cabinet debated the issue. The Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, said that the country could not admit more refugees without provoking a backlash, but the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, suggested that an act of generosity might have the benefit of prompting the United States to accept additional immigrants.

The cabinet committee on refugees subsequently decided that the nation would accept unaccompanied children ranging from infants to teenagers under the age of 17. No limit to the number of refugees was ever publicly announced.

On the eve of a major House of Commons debate on refugees on November 21, Home Secretary Hoare met a large delegation representing various Jewish and non-Jewish groups working on behalf of refugees. The groups were allied under a nondenominational organization called the Movement for the Care of Children from Germany.

The Home Secretary agreed that to speed up the immigration process, travel documents would be issued on the basis of group lists rather than individual applications. But strict conditions were placed upon the entry of the children.

The agencies promised to fund the operation and to ensure that none of the refugees would become a financial burden on the public. Every child would have a guarantee of 50 British pounds (approximately \$1,500 in today’s currency) to finance his or her eventual re-emigration, as it was expected the children would stay in the country only temporarily.

The Home Secretary announced the program to the assembled Members of Parliament at the House of Commons, who broadly welcomed the initiative that would come to be known as the *Kindertransport*.

Within a very short time, the Movement for the Care of Children from Germany, later known as the Refugee Children’s Movement (RCM), sent representatives to Germany and Austria to establish the systems for choosing, organizing, and transporting the children.

Appeal for Foster Homes

On November 25, British citizens heard an appeal for foster homes on the BBC Home Service radio program. Soon there were 500 offers, and RCM volunteers started visiting these possible foster homes and reporting on conditions. They did not insist that prospective homes for Jewish

children should be Jewish homes. Nor did they probe too carefully into the motives and character of the families: it was sufficient for the houses to look clean and the families to seem respectable. In Germany, a network of organizers was established, and these volunteers worked around the clock to make priority lists of those most imperiled: teenagers who were in concentration camps or in danger of arrest, Polish children or teenagers threatened with deportation, children in Jewish orphanages, those whose parents were too impoverished to keep them, or those with parents in a concentration camp. Once the children were identified or grouped by list, their guardians or parents were issued a travel date and departure details.

The First Departure

The first *Kindertransport* from Berlin departed on December 1, 1938, and the first from Vienna on December 10.

For the first three months, the children came mainly from Germany, then the emphasis shifted to Austria. In March 1939, after the German army entered Czechoslovakia, transports from Prague were hastily organized. Trains of Polish Jewish children were also arranged in February and August 1939.

Since the German government decreed that the evacuations must not block ports in Germany, the trains crossed from German territory into the Netherlands and arrived at port at the Hook of Holland. From there, the children traveled by ferry to the British ports of Harwich or Southampton.

The Last Departure

The last group of children from Germany departed on September 1, 1939, the day the German army invaded Poland and provoked Great Britain, France, and other countries to declare war. The last known transport of *Kinder* from the Netherlands left on May 14, 1940, the day the Dutch army surrendered to Germany.

Tragically, hundreds of *Kinder* were caught in Belgium and the Netherlands during the German invasion, making them subject once more to the Nazi regime and its collaborators.

Life in Great Britain

Upon arrival at port in Great Britain, *Kinder* without prearranged foster families were sheltered at temporary holding centers located at summer holiday camps on the cold windy coast of East Anglia—Dovercourt near Harwich and, for a short period, Pakefield near Lowestoft.

Finding foster families was not always easy, and being chosen for a home was not necessarily the end of discomfort or distress. Some families took in teenage girls as a way of acquiring a maidservant. There was little sensitivity toward the cultural and religious needs of the children, and, for some, their heritage was all but erased. A few, mainly the youngest, were given new names, new identities, and even a new religion.

In the end, many of the children for whom no home could be found were placed on farms or in hostels run by the RCM.

From the moment of their arrival, the children struggled to maintain contact with their parents. At first, letters between parents and children flowed fairly easily, and many were filled with hopes and plans for reunion. The beginning of the war in 1939 meant the end of this dream. In addition, the German government restricted the delivery of mail to and from Jews, forcing parents and children to rely on intermediaries or the Red Cross.

As the war escalated, the British government evacuated children and pregnant women from major British cities to “safe areas” in anticipation of devastating German bombing raids. Many *Kinder* were hastily moved to new homes in the countryside. Those who went with their schools benefited from a degree of organization and care, but some found themselves completely isolated and living with uncomprehending families in remote areas. It took years for the refugee organizations to establish contact with many of the scattered children.

Internment

Older children suffered a different hardship when, in 1940, the British government ordered the internment of 16- to 70-yearold refugees from enemy countries—so-called “enemy aliens.” Approximately 1,000 of the *Kinder* were held in makeshift internment camps, and around 400 were transported overseas to Canada and Australia. Those shipped to Australia on the HMT *Dunera* were mistreated during the long voyage, and a scandal that followed revelations about the mishandling of internment led to a program of releases in late 1940. Men in particular were offered the chance to do war work or to enter the Alien Pioneer Corps. About 1,000 German and Austrian teenagers served in the British armed forces, including combat units. Several dozen joined elite formations such as the Special Forces where their language skills could be put to good use.

Conclusion

Most of the *Kinder* survived the war, and a small percentage were reunited with parents who had either spent the war in hiding or endured the Nazi camps. The majority of children, however, had to face the reality that home and family were lost forever. The end of the war brought confirmation of the worst: their parents were dead. In the years since the *Kinder* had left the European mainland, the Nazis and their collaborators had killed nearly six million European Jews, including nearly 1.5 million children.

In all, the *Kindertransport* rescue operation brought approximately 10,000 children to the relative safety of Great Britain—a large-scale act of mercy unique in a tragic historical period marked by brutality and widespread indifference.