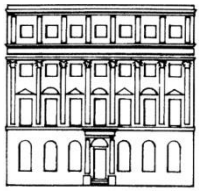
German Historical Institute
London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Aaron Jochim:
Forward from the Past: The Kindertransport *from a Contemporary Perspective*
Conference Report
German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 35, No. 2
(November 2013), pp177-181

Copyright © 2013 German Historical Institute London. All rights reserved.

Forward from the Past: The* Kindertransport *from a Contemporary Perspective. Symposium organized by the Leo Baeck Institute (LBI) in cooperation with the German Historical Institute London (GHIL), the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies, and Aberystwyth University, School of European Languages, and held at the GHIL on 25 June 2013.

For a long time, the *Kindertransport* was presented as Britain's redemptive answer to the Holocaust. In major narratives of escape, asylum, and generosity the boundaries have been blurred between celebratory commemoration, collective memory, and well-meaning historiography. In recent years new research looking more closely at untold stories, post-war experiences, and methods of memorialization has cast doubt on former assessments.[1] Following this realignment, the symposium 'Forward from the Past: The *Kindertransport* from a Contemporary Perspective', part of a series of events commemorating the 75th anniversary of the *Kindertransport*, brought together international experts to analyse critically the transports to Britain in 1938–9, their aftermath, and representation. The symposium was also attended by a considerable number of representatives of the first and second generation of the *Kindertransport*, creating a fruitful dialogue between research and contemporary witness.

After a welcome by host Andreas Gestrich, Director of the GHIL, Raphael Gross, Director of the LBI, Bea Lewkowicz (Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies, University of London), and Andrea Hammel (Aberystwyth University), the symposium opened with a first panel reflecting the representation of the *Kindertransport* in British historiography. Drawing on unconsidered individual cases and Britain's contemporary immigration policy, Tony Kushner's keynote paper challenged dominant tropes and narrative patterns describing the *Kinder's* journey in the light of escape and redemption. Kushner showed how the memory of the *Kindertransport* has been instrumentalized to portray the emergence of a successful symbiosis

The full programme can be found under Events and Conferences on the GHIL's website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

[1] See esp. the collection of articles in Andrea Hammel and Bea Lewkowicz (eds.), *The Kindertransport to Britain 1938/39: New Perspectives*, Yearbook of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies, 13 (Amsterdam, 2012).

between Britain's generosity and the *Kinder*'s gratitude. According to Kushner, this story does not reflect the full complexity of the *Kinder*'s journeys and lives, which have been anything but perfect. While Kushner highlighted the organization of the *Kindertransport* as a 'remarkable grassroots movement', Rose Holmes shed more light on the often neglected voluntary tradition. Referring to the Quakers' voluntary contribution, she described how the *Kindertransport* was organized, financed, and managed. Holmes emphasized the generosity of the Quakers and their efforts, which were later unfairly claimed by the government itself. Thus, by considering non-governmental help from British citizens, her paper corrected another major narrative. The first panel closed with a paper by Jennifer Craig-Norton which investigated the complex relationships between the carers and the children. She discussed how official letters from carers, compared with the foster child's memory, can serve as an important source. The paper demonstrated that the plight of the children and pressure of time often made it impossible to guarantee the carers' competence. Foster families were barely informed about the past and the fate of the *Kinder*, and often treated them like orphans. Even if carers made great efforts, their generosity did not always outlast the hardship of wartime.

The second panel focused on the experiences and memories of the former *Kinder* after 1945. Elizabeth Heineman outlined a research project questioning the 'happy end' of children who were reunited with their parents after the war. With reference to her own family, Heineman is writing a micro-history in order to show how long-term family dynamics, separation, and the influence of additional elements, such as religion or education, affected relationships in reunited families, sometimes for the worse. While Heineman revealed the richness of her family's literary legacy, Bea Lewkowicz stressed the importance of the AJR Refugee Voices Archive as an invaluable source for new research. The archive contains a collection of 150 filmed interviews with Jewish survivors and refugees from Nazism now living in the UK.[2] Regarding two interviewees, Ursula Gilbert and Susan Einzig, who came to Britain with the *Kindertransport*, Bea Lewkowicz discussed how reflective sections at the end of each interview give particular insights into different ways of coping with an often traumatic past.

[2] See <http://www.refugeevoices.co.uk/>, accessed 10 July 2013.

From the angle of a literary scholar, Andrea Hammel surveyed the narrative layers of three memory texts by former Kindertransportees: Martha Blend's *A Child Alone*, Vera Gissing's *Pearls of Childhood*, and Ruth L. David's *Ein Kind unserer Zeit*. Approaching these works as a 'creative exploration' of the past, Hammel highlighted that, in retrospect, the memoirs constituted specific portrayals of childhood. She described how the techniques featured in the texts, especially the interaction between narrated self (the child) and narrating self, evoked the impression of estrangement and defamiliarization, and represented the experiences of a disturbed identity.

The third panel addressed the experiences of the second generation, which have hitherto received little attention. In brief talks, four representatives of the second generation revealed how the *Kindertransport* affected their family lives and different ways of dealing with their parents' legacy. Melissa Rosenbaum forged a bridge from feelings of shame about being Jewish, initially present in the family, to the importance of her parents' past for their own identity. Gaby Glassman followed on by explicitly addressing psychological and psychoanalytical issues. Dismissing the construction of a hierarchy of suffering, she stressed the subjectivity of suffering and how, in the case of the *Kindertransport*, the children of the *Kinder* could unconsciously associate with the grief of their parents. Karen Goodman, on the other hand, considered her family's past as an appeal to take responsibility. Thus, she said, it had influenced her personal engagement as a social worker for asylum-seeking children. Melissa Hacker, president of the *Kindertransport* Association, explained how the felt difference between children of former Kindertransportees and other Jewish families in New York provided an impetus to find out more about their parents' past. These efforts resulted in the film *My Knees Were Jumping*, parts of which were shown after the talks. Bea Lewkowicz commented on how the film, focusing on the transmission of the drama through the generations, unveiled specific characteristics which defined the family life of former Kindertransportees: the tension between history and imagination, as well as between assimilation and the feeling of being different.

While the second generation experience was conveyed as essentially a transition from personal experience to (cultural) memory, the fourth panel referred to specific memorializations of the *Kindertransport*. The visual representation of the *Kindertransport* was the topic of

a talk by Nathan Abrams. Comparing four documentaries and one fictional film, Abrams analysed prevailing techniques of staging the *Kindertransport* in film. He convincingly demonstrated that using black and white images, or specific motifs, such as biblical reconstructions, contributed to hidden narratives presented by the films. An instance of contrast was seen in the film *Vienna's Lost Daughters* (2010), which resisted many of the prevailing documentary techniques.

The last two presentations discussed the approaches of material culture. Suzanne Bardgett (Imperial War Museum, London) gave insights into the *Kindertransport* section of the IWM's Holocaust exhibition. The exhibition tries to convey an understanding of the personal stories by means of specific artefacts. Judith Vandervelde (Jewish Museum, London) added to this by presenting particularly emotive Jewish artefacts exhibited in the Jewish Museum, London. She also reflected on the curator's role in telling specific stories by selecting and presenting the exhibits. According to Vandervelde, the untold stories which seldom came up for discussion included the apathy of Britain's Jewish community at the time of the *Kindertransport*, anti-Semitism, and the often traumatic evacuation of the children within the UK. These two talks invited debate on the issue of space in both physical and cultural terms. How is it possible to present the *Kindertransport* appropriately within a limited exhibition space? And why are these spaces limited? Does the timeline of the IWM's Holocaust exhibition, stopping in 1945, not dramatically limit the scope of the *Kindertransport* section?

In his concluding remarks, Daniel Wildmann (LBI, London) picked up on the points which came up in the preceding discussion. Highlighting the issues of space, identity, and the (lack of) confidence of British Jewry, as well as the public presence of Anglo-Jewish history and culture in the UK with reference to the *Kindertransport* as still open questions for research, he came full circle to Tony Kushner's starting paper. The sphere of representation in particular makes it clear that the *Kindertransport* still has to fit into certain cultural contexts, limits, and narratives, and that the 'Battle of Britishness' might not be completely over.

The symposium ended with the opening of the exhibition 'Double Exposure: Jewish Refugees from Austria in Britain', designed by Bea

Lewkowicz, and a performance of Hans Gál's 'What a Life!' (Norbert Meyn: tenor; Malcolm Miller: piano).

AARON JOCHIM (University of Heidelberg)