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# The Power of the People in Influencing the British Government: The Kindertransport

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Sophia Cantwell

Mr. Vannelli

PSU MEH

The Power of the People in Influencing the British Government:  
*The Kindertransport*

World War II is known primarily for the Holocaust and the terror Hitler instilled throughout Europe. It is iconic for its disastrous effect on the Jewish culture and its people, but humans all over Europe were harmed and segregated, including homosexuals, people of “insufficient” nationality, and anyone who was perceived as racially inferior. During World War II, in order to escape the horrendous torture of the concentration camps, endangered and persecuted Jews were aided by Britain, who allowed thousands of Jewish children to be rescued and transported to Great Britain via a system known as the Kindertransport.<sup>1</sup> As David Cesarani states in the introduction of the book *Into the Arms of Strangers*, a collection of first hand accounts of children who were a part of the Kindertransport, “The lives of Jewish children, like those who tell their stories here, were among the first to be affected [by the war].”<sup>2</sup> It was ultimately the actions of the Quakers and various Jewish figures of authority in Britain that got the British government to take action and rescue the Jewish children. While the British Parliament considered the plea and proposed a bill to present the idea of transporting thousands of children from Europe to Britain, the roots of the program really lay in the action, determination, and goals of the Quaker and Jewish delegations and agencies in Britain who so strongly urged Great Britain to take action. The most consistent yet underappreciated form of

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<sup>1</sup> German word, literal translation “child transportation”

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Mark Harris and Deborah Oppenheimer, *Into the Arms of Strangers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 1.

resistance took place among the ordinary and average citizens who helped Jews, often at great cost and peril.<sup>3</sup> The true credit for the Kindertransport lies with this delegation in rescuing the children, and it was the power of the people who urged the government that made the Kindertransport such a monumental success and it was the people's hard work that kept the program successful.

*Kristallnacht*<sup>4</sup>, or the Night of Broken Glass, marked the beginning of the Kindertransport program. Kristallnacht was the anti-Jewish massacre that happened in Germany on November ninth and tenth, 1938.<sup>5</sup> The event followed a previous shooting during November of the German secretary of the German Embassy in Paris, Ernst vom Rath.<sup>6</sup> During Kristallnacht, ninety-one Jews were killed, and hundreds were beaten and harassed, and more than one thousand synagogues were destroyed.<sup>7</sup> Kristallnacht was to many people a sharp realization of Hitler's ever-growing power, and that past fears and speculations of another war after World War I were now very plausible. It was also a realization for Jewish parents that their children were now living in a changing and endangered world. The horrific events were displayed across the pages of many newspapers, and President Franklin Roosevelt "announced the recall of the U.S. ambassador to Germany"<sup>8</sup>, accurately showing the widespread fear and anger that reached even the United States. The way the U.S. responded to Kristallnacht is evidence that not only were Hitler's actions affecting Europe, which he was slowly occupying more and more of, but that by striking fear across the world, he was enabling himself more power because outlying countries were too frightened to interfere and help the Jews. After

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<sup>3</sup> Pinchas Stolper, *Heroes and Helpers in Nazi Germany: Who Aided Jews?* (New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, 2004), 307.

<sup>4</sup> German word, literal translation "crystal night"

<sup>5</sup> Maria Mazzenga, *American Religious Responses to Kristallnacht* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 2.

Kristallnacht, the U.S. cabinet discussed further action, and a bill depicting an immigration program for children was presented and supported by Sen. Robert Wagner and Rep. Edith Nourse Rogers; however, a powerful anti-immigration lobby rejected it.<sup>9</sup> America's failure to allow children to emigrate from Germany displayed a futile effort to stop the genocide Hitler had begun. Disobeying or plotting against the Nazi's was unspoken of among the Jews, so most found other ways to either flee or find hiding. The source of help the Jews found instead came from within Hitler's own walls: among religious communities who then reached out to Britain. The people themselves took into their hands the fate of thousands of children, further proving that it was not just the British Parliament who aided them. Key figures began to emerge as the program progressed, giving it the leadership and organization it needed.

Kristallnacht set into action a delegation of British Quaker and Jewish figures that took the problematic state of the Jew's safety to their own government. While Kristallnacht may have scared the governments of various countries away from helping the Jews, the ordinary people of those countries recognized the need for action and bravely sacrificed their own safety by offering their services. It was the power of the people, not the government, that created a successful program to rescue thousands of children. While the effort to appeal to the American government had failed, agencies next turned to the British government.

Britain was in a way politically obligated to help the Jews in the first place, most obvious the "assumption by Britain at the end of the First World War of responsibility for the government of Palestine under the mandate to facilitate the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people."<sup>10</sup> Britain was evidently politically involved post World War I, and when presented the bill concerning the Kindertransport, already had enough to deal with. However,

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<sup>9</sup> Harris, *Into the Arms of Strangers*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe 1939-1945* (New York: 1979), 1.

with these political obligations to the Jews came an obligation to their people, who so desperately wanted to aid the Jews. Although it took much pressing and action on the side of the people alone, Britain did engage. Britain already had several (rather peaceful) relations with countries around the world, but had certain ties that inexplicably included them in this dilemma. The British Colonial Office originally turned down a request they received from the Jewish Agency asking the admission of ten thousand children into Palestine, but later seemed to accept this number as a suitable goal for Britain to meet in accepting child immigration.<sup>11</sup> On November 21<sup>st</sup>, 1938, Home Secretary Sir Samuel Hoare met with a group of both Jewish and non-Jewish people as well as Quakers.<sup>12</sup> This was the beginning of the founding of the Kindertransport, as Sir Samuel Hoare agreed that in order to speed up the process they needed to issue travel documents on a group basis rather than the typical way of individual applications.<sup>13</sup> Funding for the Kindertransport was assured by the refugee agencies and every child was promised fifty pounds, the equivalent to roughly one thousand pounds today.<sup>14</sup> This assurance that the program would be sufficiently funded demonstrated the determination of the Quakers and British Jews. Without proper funding, the program would have been unable to adequately continue or help the projected ten thousand children who were in compromised situations and danger in Europe. Without much delay, after the decision was made to allow children into Britain, the Refugee Children's Movement (previously called the Movement for the Care of Children from Germany) sent representatives to both Austria and Germany to begin selecting, processing, and transporting children out of Germany.<sup>15</sup> The Refugee Children's Movement

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<sup>11</sup> Harris, *Into the Arms of Strangers*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

(RCM) realized the limited amount of time they had, as World War II was nearing its onset, and so took action immediately. They targeted children and teens that were in most need first: teens that were in trouble with the law, children headed for concentration camps, or young children whose parents had been taken to concentration camps.<sup>16</sup> An executive of the Jewish refugee agencies, Norman Bentwich, traveled to Berlin to speak personally with the Jewish leaders in the battered communities, and soon a national network was set up in order to accommodate as many children in need as possible, while volunteers of the RCM worked around the clock to compile lists and rosters of those endangered.<sup>17</sup> The common British people played an increasingly larger role in the program, taking over organization and management of the Kindertransport entirely, and the British government became less of a presence. As the common people began to rise to leadership for the Kindertransport program, many more people took notice and filtered in to help in any way that they could. Among the most helpful and influential volunteers was Nicholas Winton.

Nicholas Winton (who is still alive today) was an English stockbroker at the time that was responsible for the rescue of around 669 Jewish children from Prague.<sup>18</sup> On a visit to Czechoslovakia, Winton observed the agencies rescuing children and making lists and applications, and was asked to lend a hand. He soon saw the need for more help and personally set up an agency in his hotel dining room.<sup>19</sup> Winton managed to set up a Kindertransport for Prague before heading back to London in 1939 to manage everything else from Britain. Winton worked day and night, and had to convince the Home Office to let the children into Britain, as

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Geyer, *Virtue in Despair: A Family History from the days of the Kindertransports* (Indiana University of Press, 2005), 323-365.

<sup>19</sup> "Jewish Virtual Library," *Division of the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise*, December 1, 2013, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Winton.html>.

well as raise money to cover the costs for transportation and stay.<sup>20</sup> He was also required to find every child a foster home as well as fifty pounds, which was a small fortune at the time.<sup>21</sup> As World War II crept closer, Winton managed to help over 660 children, but the last train that was set to leave the day Britain was also projected to join the war was never seen again, nor were the children ever found.<sup>22</sup> Winton never mentioned to anyone close to him nor any family members of his actions, he kept all files secret and no survivors knew to whom they owed their life, until Greta, Winton's wife, discovered a brief case containing all of his lists of children and letters from their parents.<sup>23</sup> Today, Winton remains humble, even after being knighted by Queen Elizabeth. His work for the Jewish children will be forever remembered, and even though he rescued a fraction of the total refugees, he made a large impact on the children themselves.

The work of people like Winton set the Kindertransport in motion. The first train to leave from Germany and head to safety left from Berlin on the first of December, 1938.<sup>24</sup> Next, trains were leaving from other countries, including Italy. The trains were required to pass through Germany but then go through the Netherlands because the German government had set up laws declaring that the evacuations could not clog up the ports.<sup>25</sup> For the initial three months of the program, most trains came from Germany, but soon the importance shifted to Austria, and then in March of 1939 when the German army began to occupy Czechoslovakia, arrangements were immediately made to escort children out of Prague as well.<sup>26</sup> Conditions at first were chaotic,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Harrison, *Into the Arms of Strangers*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 13.

with children pouring into Britain in waves of hundreds.<sup>27</sup> Every child was found a place to stay, given a bed and a hut to sleep in before they found families for the children to stay with.<sup>28</sup> With the growing number of children coming to Britain, however, funding problems emerged. Despite appealing for funds, the former Prime Minister Earl Baldwin was left empty handed as the British government did not hand over any more money.<sup>29</sup> Eventually the RCM brought in Anna Essinger, who had run an outstanding Jewish school in Germany, and came, along with her students, to Britain and began to set up language and singing classes, as well as simply boosted the morale of the Dovercourt, the camp where the children were temporarily being held.<sup>30</sup> A total of around 360,000 Jews left the border between 1933 and 1939, with about 57,000 going to the United States, 53,000 going to Palestine, and about 50,000 to Britain.<sup>31</sup> The efforts made to escort, accommodate, and take in this many children was tremendous.

The Jewish people working for the RCM tried their best to find specifically Jewish homes for the Jewish children, but this was not always possible. It did not occur to the volunteers to provide kosher food for the children nor ensure that they had kosher food at the families they were headed too, so Chief Rabbi Dr. Hertz, who was working at Dovercourt, demanded that greater attention be put on religious standards.<sup>32</sup> Rabbi Solomon Schonfeld, Hertz's son-in-law, carried out the Emergency Committee, and was equally an instrumental member of the program. He specialized in bringing over Orthodox children, for whom it was nearly impossible to find homes for.<sup>33</sup> Without Schonfeld's efforts, these religiously segregated children would have

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe 1939-1945*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Harrison, *Into the Arms of Strangers*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

perished either in their homelands at the hand of the Nazis or from having no home once they arrived in England. The Quakers also played a large role in the forming of the Kindertransport even though their numbers globally as a religion have never been many.<sup>34</sup> In Hans Schmitt's book *Quakers and Nazis: Inner Light in Outer Light*, he tells his own story of how the Quakers allowed him to finish his education after being rescued from Germany. He depicts their efforts in the following excerpt:

[Amsterdam historian Ger van Room] believed that [the Quakers'] work on behalf of German refugees put to shame the hesitant commitment of major Protestant churches to that cause and therefore justified their inclusion. Such reasoning also speaks from the words of Helen Bentwich, a pillar of the Jewish relief effort in Britain, when she wrote to George Bell, Anglican bishop of Chichester, on June 23, 1934, to enlist his assistance, notably on behalf of German, Jewish converts to Christianity. 'Of Christian bodies,' she explained, 'the Quakers alone have made a continuous and sustained effort in England, France, and other countries.'<sup>35</sup>

The Quakers saved Schmitt's life and he feels strongly that they were an instrumental part of the Kindertransport.<sup>36</sup> Without their efforts it would not nearly have been successful. While their motives were very religious, they did not force any children to convert, even though there were many institutions that converted the Jewish children to Christianity. The Quaker faith believes that the true path to Christianity is one of suffering and persecution, and this is true evidence of the reason behind their selflessness and willingness to aid the Kindertransport effort.<sup>37</sup> They were, as Schmitt puts it, "sparing Europe another multinational conflict" in England.<sup>38</sup> The Quakers brought aid and solace and helped people without questioning their beliefs and origins.<sup>39</sup> They did not inquire anyone's nationality, heritage, religious affiliation or sexual orientation;

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<sup>34</sup> Hans Schmitt, *Quakers and Nazis: Inner Light in Outer Darkness* (Columbia: 1997), 6.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 165.

they acted in the name of God and followed their religion, helping thousands of people escape Nazi torture. The Quakers were predominantly responding to religious influences, and this is also what made them such driven and motivated people. The British government was not similarly motivated nor did it encompass as much determination as the people did.

For the children moving to England, the transition was difficult. Some did not know why or where they were being taken; others were heartbroken at the prospect of potentially never being able to see their parents again. They had to overcome the language barrier, as few spoke German in England, as well as cope with cultural differences, some more humorous, like having to get accustomed to putting milk in their tea, or the fact that to the Jews, the English bread looked and tasted like cake.<sup>40</sup> Upon arrival, the children did not have access to school beyond the legal minimum, so children as young as sixteen would enter the work force.<sup>41</sup> They helped with the war effort or simply looked into the job market, all the while struggling to remain in contact with their parents. Letters were easily transferred from parent to child for the first few months, but starting around September of 1939, communication was only possible through the Red Cross because of the growing Nazi power and domination.<sup>42</sup> Children who came to Britain via the Kindertransport were essentially raised British, in the English culture and with English families. Few were reunited with their parents after the war, and only some were able to return to their home countries once the war was over.<sup>43</sup> Many parents perished during the war in concentration camps, bombings, or shootings, and so some children chose to stay and live in England. In some cases, such as that of Kurt Fuchel, his parents had survived the camps, stayed in hiding, and

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<sup>40</sup> Harrison, *Into the Arms of Strangers*, 13-14.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

emerged unhurt from the war.<sup>44</sup> During Kurt's life, he was first transferred to a makeshift school at the end of a tram line because Jews were no longer allowed in the public school, and his depiction of his childhood, while witty, was very realistic: "Word got back to my parents that while on the tram I was a very talkative little boy. I told the passengers all the bad things that Herr Hitler was doing. I thought that 'Herr' was his first name, of course. When my parents heard that, they decided I shouldn't be travelling alone."<sup>45</sup> Kurt's parents were smart in their choice, because any news that Jews were speaking badly of Hitler went directly back to the Nazis, and would result in punishment or death. Kurt's father rebuked him; letting him know it was not wise to say bad things about Herr Hitler.<sup>46</sup> Kurt was fortunate that his parents recognized the need to bring him to safety once the war became a realistic prospect. Not all families were as fortunate as the Fuchel's. It sometimes took families up to years to reunite and establish contact, and often the reunions were awkward, as the children were now adults and many had forgotten how to even speak German.<sup>47</sup> While the Kindertransport remains successful in its accomplishments, the citizens of Britain were not capable of fixing every problem or overcoming every obstacle that presented itself. The program received much criticism as well, and the credit and recognition for the accomplishments given to the British government.

Unfortunately, the face and the credit of the Kindertransport are publicly given to Parliament, which is credited with passing the bill and changing the immigration process to accommodate thousands of children into their country. While the government's consent was needed to make the program legally possible, the roots of the movement are grounded in the Quakers and the common people. Britain has come to view the Kindertransport as a heroic act as

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 18.

well as proof of their humanity. Even though the children saved, now adults, recognize that they owe their lives to both the Quakers and the Jewish figures in the RCM, like Nicholas Winton, Britain likes to use the Kindertransport as proof of their charity. Some historians believe that the Kindertransport was Britain's part in the war against National Socialism, or Nazism, which ethically it may have been, but this fails to address the fact that many people in Britain had mixed feelings towards the Jewish refugees. In the years dominated by Hitler, while the majority of people recognized that the segregation and genocide was morally corrupt, few stood up to the Nazis simply for fear of punishment and death. Those who did decide to go against Hitler and his beliefs were citizens, and their way of doing so was via the Kindertransport. Instead of fighting fire with fire, they acted by way of transporting thousands of children out of their countries before Nazi forces could invade, something the American government refused to do, and the British government spent some time debating. While the program played an instrumental part in World War II, it was not perfect.

With all of its successes, the Kindertransport also had its flaws and tribulations. Towards the end of August in 1939, the RCM ran out of money and was unable and to continue to fund the Kindertransport.<sup>48</sup> Days later, the outbreak of World War II increased this dilemma, as the safety of people was immediately jeopardized and hundreds of children remained trapped.<sup>49</sup> The young children then took it upon themselves to help their parents, writing letters, knocking on doors, begging relatives for a home and jobs for their parents.<sup>50</sup> It appeared that the most prominent thought in those children's mind was making sure they had a secure home, even if the program could not sufficiently offer it at the time. The outbreak of the war was terrifying for

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

them, and soon herds of children who were originally going to be escorted out of the country via the Kindertransport were caught up in a mass evacuation of people. The leaders continued to try to raise funds for the children and also organize trains to leave Europe as soon as they could. While the program went through ups and downs and faced problems, it overall had a positive effect, as seen by the numbers of those saved. If they had not been so driven and determined to get as many children out of Europe as they could, the program would have ended when the funds did. With this, the Kindertransport left a large legacy in the name of the people, not just the British government.

The Kindertransport is not just one story; it is the stories of hundreds of volunteers and leaders, and the stories of thousands of children they saved. It is not an “act” of kindness, nor is it simply an event. The Kindertransport was a monumental program that became a movement, and a movement that became a symbol for hope and justice, and most of all it symbolized the people’s voice. People began to view it as a chance for their children to survive, when moments before they had thought the Nazi invasion meant certain death. The moment the Quakers and British Jews received consent from Parliament to alter the immigration policies, the people took action. Proper funding was assured, foster homes were arranged, and although this was the most difficult transition for these children, it was made possible by people like Nicholas Winton and Rabbi Solomon Schonfeld. Children like Kurt Fuchel were given fifty pounds and a foster home, and promised the ability to write to their parents until the Nazis prevented it. Kurt was one of the few lucky who was reunited with his parents after the war. Some survivors believed it was better not to tell their children of the traumatic experiences they had to endure during the Holocaust, but others believe it is important to ensure that the hate, anger, generosity and humanity of those times is never forgotten. It is always a difficult question of whether horrific events such as the

details of the Holocaust or the failed escape trains should be shared or kept in the past. Is it acceptable to share such a traumatic section of someone's history? Is it worth it to teach the coming generations of mistakes made in the past? Parents certainly struggled with these questions upon being reunited with their children. The Kindertransport "shows that racial discrimination and ideologies which lead to mass murder do not draw the line at the persecution of innocent children. Their plight can be the trigger that finally stirs bystanders to action."<sup>51</sup> The world as a whole was not sure how to react to Hitler's domination or the outbreak of World War II and the raw genocide and segregation that took place, and countries were wary of interfering for fear of what would happen to them. But with the strong voice of the people in Britain, they were able to sway their government into action. Nicholas Winton and Rabbi Schonfeld will forever be remembered, most dearly by the people they personally saved. While they were simply acting with the good of humanity in mind, their actions made a difference not only on the national level, but they impacted the way people learned to deal with crisis. The legend of the Kindertransport is one that will last forever, purely because it taught people how to deal with emergencies and respond to genocide, hate, and anger. The program may have been flawed in many places and did not explicitly solve the ever-present issues of massacre and segregation that unfortunately still plague our world today, but there is always a lesson to be learned from the people that came before us.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 19.

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