

Children's Exodus: A History of the Kindertransport

Review Number:

1071

Publish date:

Sunday, 1 May, 2011

Author:

Vera Fast

ISBN:

9781848855373

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£25.00

Pages:

288pp.

Publisher:

I. B. Tauris

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Phyllis Lassner

A landmark moment in Holocaust history and memory occurred in 1989 when about 1,000 Kindertransport survivors attended their 50-year reunion in London. The event commemorated the transport of 10,000 children from Central Europe to safety in Britain. Launched on November 9, 1938, the transport continued for a year until the Nazis ended it when war was declared in September 1939. Before they began to share their memories of the transport, few had thought of themselves as Holocaust survivors. After all, they had escaped the round-ups and deportations that began shortly after November 9, 1938, when the Nazis orchestrated *Kristallnacht* (night of broken glass), the nation-wide pogrom against the Jews, their synagogues, and businesses. None of these child refugees had suffered the ghettos or camps. They were not among the children who had been hidden with non-Jewish families or in convents, and they did not pass as Aryans with forged identity papers. And yet, as Vera Fast discovered in interviews, memoirs, and archives, despite being rescued, those 10,000 children did not escape the effects of the Holocaust. Almost all the children's parents had been killed. For the younger children, this would mean that in addition to losing their parents, they would have no memory of them to mourn. For the older children, memories could be fleeting or remain as excruciating reminders of their loss. Of the few parents who survived, the trauma of separation was exacerbated when reunions were painful. However, despite these losses and pain, almost all of the Kinder grew up to have successful careers and rich personal lives, and they remained unequivocally grateful to the nation that saved them. Yet as memoirs and interviews reveal, their experiences were also complicated by the process of adapting linguistically and socially to an alien culture and society that did not always understand the emotional needs and religious customs of these Jewish children. Their story of rescue and adaptation is crucial to our knowledge of the Holocaust as it represents another facet of the intricate and global reach of Hitler's designs to persecute and exterminate the Jewish people.

Children's Exodus is welcome evidence of the significance of the Kindertransport story. The book's intense focus weaves together the multi-faceted organizational efforts to launch the rescue with the experiences and responses of the Kinder. Vera Fast also sets the story in its historical contexts, including the accretion of persecutory legislation in Germany once the Nazis consolidated their power. In her Preface, Fast announces that her book is a survey of the immigration of Jewish children from the first Kindertransport in 1938 to the 1948 arrival of the last displaced persons. In addition to charting the experiences of children with clear Jewish identities, she devotes an important chapter to 'Jewish Christian children, those from mixed marriages, designated by the Nazis as variations of *Mischlinge* or non-Aryan Christians'. Her chapter on post-war refugees addresses the lives of children who had survived in hiding or even the camps. As she demonstrates, her study makes important use of primary archival sources to offer enriching detail about well known aspects of the Kindertransport and adds complexity to features that had previously been discussed. Among the fruits of these labors is the story of Orthodox and observant Jewish children and that of Rabbi Solomon Schonfeld, the Orthodox rabbi who held himself responsible for their fate and welfare and whose archives enable his story to come to light.

Fast's method synthesizes statements from published and unpublished memoirs, interviews, and accounts gleaned from collective Kindertransport autobiographies such as Karen Gershon's edited collective autobiography, *We Came as Children*, Barry Turner's ... *And the Policeman Smiled*, Leverton and Lowensohn's *I Came Alone*, and Harris and Oppenheim's *Into the Arms of Strangers*. She does not include or analyze such individual memoirs as Lore Segal's *Other People's Houses* or Karen Gershon's two volume memoir, *A Lesser Child* (London: Peter Owen, 1994) and *A Tempered Wind*, or autobiographical fiction such as Gershon's novel, *Bread of Exile*.⁽¹⁾ Her first chapter sets collective accounts into the historical, cultural, and political contexts of Jewish life in Germany going back to the 19th century. Her attention to the assimilation of German Jews reminds us that they had every reason to feel secure in their economic, cultural, and social successes. Although antisemitism was not solely of German provenance, Jewish emancipation did exacerbate German feelings that perhaps the Jews were taking unfair advantage of the nation's largesse. Like other historians of modern Europe, Fast shows how antisemitism became legitimized not only in Germany with the rise of Hitler but throughout Central and Eastern Europe with Nazi conquest and occupation.

Most of this history is very well known but it is important to Fast's study as it demonstrates how the Kindertransport originated in the same ideologies, conditions, and policies that produced the ghettos, concentration camps, and killing centers. Highlighting another connection to Holocaust victims, she shows how parents' agonizing decisions to send their children to safety resembled those of Jews wrestling with conflicts between recognizing the imminent threats to their lives and seeking their own safe harbor while leaving behind family members who were too old, infirm, or without financial means and sponsorship to escape. The quotas imposed on possibilities for sponsorship by the United States and Canada were, as has been well documented, instrumental in abandoning the Jews to Nazi destruction. While the Kindertransport demonstrated the widespread compassion of the British people, it must also be remembered that the government did not issue the same welcome to the children's parents. A telling example of the anguish this caused the children is Lore Siegel's testimony of going door to door pleading with people to offer her parents work and sponsorship.

One of Fast's contributions to Kindertransport history is to provide details gleaned from her archival research that develop a comprehensive story of the complex, competitive, and contentious relations among the various organizations that were instrumental in spearheading the rescue of the children. The paramount issue that gave rise to dissension among the rescue organizations was the fate of the Kinder's Jewish identity. Concerns about placing Jewish children with non-Jewish guardians and fears of conversion were complicated by the fact that many of the children came from highly assimilated families while others were deeply devout and observant. Moreover, as Fast reports, 'while there were too few vacancies in Jewish homes, the non-Jewish community opened its doors wide' (p. 86). While she confirms this point by citing the unsuccessful efforts by Jewish community leaders to pressure and plead with Jewish families, the issue is more complex. What remains to be investigated is whether there were too few Jewish homes, too few Jewish volunteers, or Jewish families of too little means and those with too many responsibilities. Another

dimension to this issue calls for research into the attitudes of British Jews across the range of assimilated, secular, liberal, and Orthodoxy toward the child refugees and how these attitudes were shaped by their Anglo-Jewish social, cultural, and economic conditions. For this historical context and its intellectual and ideological underpinnings, it is surprising not to see such important works consulted as Todd Endelman's *The Jews of Britain 1656-2000*, Geoffrey Alderman's *Modern British Jewry*, Richard Bolchover's *British Jewry and the Holocaust* or the study of *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination* by Tony Kushner.⁽²⁾ Fast's access to Rabbi Schonfeld's papers leads to extensive discussion of both his heroism and parochialism. On the one hand, his relentless efforts included winning the support of the Home Office to guarantee the rescue of hundreds of Austrian children and find them homes. But his laudatory commitment to Orthodoxy also led him to accuse other organizations of 'discriminating against religious Jewish children' (p. 99). Although Fast gives more attention to the Orthodox experience than has been previously explored, it should be noted that much of the Schonfeld story, including use of his archive, as well as that of the Jewish rescue organizations was covered by Pamela Shatzkes in her book *Holocaust and Rescue* ⁽³⁾, which is not consulted. What Fast does accomplish is to examine the many facets of this conflict with scrupulous attention to individual personalities and the structures of Jewish community economic, social, and cultural power.

However, there are elements of her analysis of this experience that hint of special pleading and require interrogation. She claims, for example, that 'Orthodox children survived the ordeal of separation and new beginnings better than any other group [because they] knew who they were; persecution was not unknown in their own lives and [...] they had this unshakable belief in a God whose children they were' (p. 112). Immediately following this point, she quotes a non-Orthodox Jewish *Kind* who celebrates Orthodoxy as 'a huge force for civilization, not just for the preservation of monotheism but also for Jews to survive as Jews [...]' (pp. 112-3). While this latter quote clearly expresses a deeply felt response, it cannot be made to corroborate either the statement that precedes it or to represent the wide ranging attitudes and experiences of other non-Orthodox *Kinder*. Since the experience of adaptation to British culture also depended on the attitudes of host families and staff at hostels, attention must be given to the effects of this social and cultural interaction.

Fast's third chapter, 'Strangers in your midst', surveys how the first steps towards this adaptation were in so many cases very painful for the children. The method of selection consisted of inviting sponsoring couples to the lunch hour at the entry camps to choose a child. Labeled 'the market', the process was pragmatic, designed to resettle the children as quickly as possible (p. 41). Although rescue organizations did their best to screen foster families, questionnaires and even home visits could not guarantee caring, empathetic, and responsible care. Moreover, there was neither sufficient time nor staff to offer individual guidance to host families about the children's religious or psychological profiles or needs. Younger children were preferred because they were thought to be malleable. Older children, particularly adolescent boys, were the hardest to place, as were those boys and girls who were not physically attractive. After weeks of waiting and being rejected by individual families, these children finally found a welcoming home and often a more satisfying experience in youth hostels. Separating siblings who could not be placed together exacerbated the trauma of separation and loss. Lore Segal's memoir *Other People's Houses* offers a graphic picture of this painful process. Remembering the tense waiting to be chosen, she records:

I turned, eager to charm. An enormous, prickly-looking fur coat rose sheer above me. An old woman looked at me with a sour expression from behind her glasses. She frightened me. She had a small, gray, untidy face with a lot of hat and hair and spectacle about it. I had imagined that the family who would choose me would be very special, very beautiful people. I signaled to the lady with the list that I wanted to go with someone else, but she didn't see, because she was attending to the woman in the fur coat, who said, "How old is she? See, we wanted to have one about ten years old – you know, old enough to do for herself but not too old to learn nice ways".

⁽⁴⁾

Fast comments in her preface that ‘a memoir can offer the reader no more than one individual’s experience of larger phenomena’.⁽⁵⁾ Yet as this passage from Lore Segal reveals, there is much to learn from the closely observed and examined memory of a child’s perspective. Representing the child’s emotional response humanizes the historical survey through the graphic language of felt experience. And while one response cannot represent the whole, it does provide psychological depth and complexity by validating the child’s perception and endowing her with a voice. The adult writer looking back at herself as a child is therefore granted the status of witness to her own experience and in turn, the memoir is granted the emotional and narrative power of testimony. There is also a concomitant value in quoting illustrative passages from individual memoirs rather than piecing together bits from different writers as Fast does. A string of partial quotes elides individual responses and voices while it cannot construct or depict a generalized depth of feeling.

In addition to examining the problems encountered by the various rescue organizations in finding places for the children, Fast offers perspectives from the wide range of geographically, socially and economically situated host families. In general, she finds, most families did their best to provide clean, welcoming environments. Drawing upon published collective autobiographies, but few individual ones, she also offers a spectrum of the children’s experiences. These range from their initial encounters with potential host families to being exploited as unpaid labor and reminders that they must comport themselves with gratitude even when they were billeted in homes that were primitive compared to the comfortable middle class homes they had to abandon or subjected to emotional indifference and neglect. Fast’s survey of these difficulties includes the case of older children being sent to do manual labor when their middle and upper-middle class families had instilled expectations for higher education and entering the professions or business. There were also cases of sexual abuse but Fast asserts that these were exceptional. Further problems ensued as Fast delineates the evacuation of school age children during the bombings which intensified the Kinder’s ongoing feelings of dislocation. The internment of refugees considered ‘enemy aliens’ was perhaps the most heinous of the British government’s restrictive policies. Those over 16 years old were interned regardless of the traumas they had already suffered and without distinguishing between their being German Jews and non-Jewish Germans. Although most were sent to camps on the Isle of Man, some of the young refugees were sent as far as Canada and Australia under brutal conditions, complete with beatings and robberies.

Fast’s chapter ‘In Later Years’ reveals that most of the Kinder remained in Britain and those who had been sponsored by Youth Aliyah went to Israel once the State was declared. About 25 per cent went to the United States, Canada, and elsewhere. Marriage and family became principal goals, many choosing spouses among fellow refugees. The story of their successful adult lives also embeds prevailing tensions between assimilation to British culture and society and the expression of their Jewish identities. Assimilation led to division within the Anglo-Jewish community and many never stopped feeling that they remained outsiders. Nonetheless, Fast’s research leads her to conclude that ‘most of the Kinder, especially the younger ones growing up in English homes, felt accepted and comfortable in England’ (p. 171). This conclusion might have been more complex had the special issue of the journal *Shofar* ⁽⁶⁾ been consulted.

Vera Fast’s historical survey takes its place among an increasing number of studies that are making use of archives and memoirs to develop comprehensive histories that demonstrate the multilayered and vast reach of the Holocaust. As a result, the Kindertransport is now recognized as key to understanding how survival and its aftermath represent a continuum of Holocaust history, experience, and memory. By implication, *Children’s Exodus* also reminds us that individual testimony and memoirs represent the lives to which historical narratives owe their significance.

Notes

1. Lore Segal, *Other People’s Houses* (New York, NY, 1964); Karen Gershon, *A Lesser Child* (London, 1994); *A Tempered Wind* (Evanston, IL, 2009); *Bread of Exile* (London, 1985). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Britain 1656–2000* (Berkeley, CA, 2002); Geoffrey Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*

- (Oxford, 1992); Richard Bolchover, *British Jewry and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1993) Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination* (Oxford, 1994).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Pamela Shatzkes, *Holocaust and Rescue* (Basingstoke, 2002).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. Segal, p. 49.[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. Ibid, p. xiv.[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. *Shofar*, 23, 1 (Fall 2004), *Kindertransporte 1938/9 – Rescue and Integration*, ed. Wolfgang Benz, Claudia Curio, Andrea Hammel.[Back to \(6\)](#)

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1071#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5443>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>