

Seventy years of *Kindertransport*

I am here because I have the great privilege of counting Kinder Bertha Leverton and Hermann Hirschberger amongst my constituents. Ordinary individuals who have done extraordinary things – they have told the tale of the plight of the Kindertransport and have done all that they can to keep the flame of the memory of the Holocaust alive – the story of those they left behind. And it is a story that needs telling to our younger generations because, as Richard M. Weaver has said:-

“...the chief trouble with the contemporary generation is that it has not read the minutes of the last meeting.”

When Eric Reich came to see me to discuss this event, he very kindly gave me a copy of the Hansard containing the 1938 speech of M.P. Phillip Noel-Baker proposing a motion in the House of Commons that led to the Kindertransport programme. Reading it made me proud to be a member of that place. Too often when the House is deliberating on trivial matters, we are told that it was the ‘House at its best’ – when it invariably was not and the importance of the place was over exaggerated. But

Not in this case – Noel-Baker spoke with a passion, foresight and eloquence and his vision was realised when the first of nearly 10,000 Kinder arrived in Harwich on the 1st December 1938. But, appalling as it may seem, 1938 was not an easy time for such a debate – despite the well-documented knowledge about the treatment of the Jews in Europe. In 1939, the Wagner-Rogers Bill – an attempt to do something similar to Kindertransport in the USA – never got out of Committee in the House of Representatives and had no support from Roosevelt. That same year, infamously, The Prime Minister of the day, Chamberlain, said:-

“No doubt Jews aren’t a loveable people. I don’t care about them myself: but that is not sufficient to explain the Pogrom”

So that which Noel-Baker initiated was truly God’s work, but was not without pain, anguish, suffering and tragedy. Kristallnacht and Kindertransport in English strike me as apparently benign phrases–Crystal Night, Children’s Transport– but they mask the

banality of evil and murder, and hide the guilt of those who got away and the pain and anguish of those left behind to perish.

As Hermann Hirschberger has said:-

“Can you imagine what it means to take your children to a railway station and kiss them goodbye with the knowledge that you may never see them again?”

So it is right that we mark the 70th anniversary of such inspirational stories; that we celebrate the lives of those, in Bertha Leverton’s words, who ‘came alone’, but also to mark the tragedy of those left behind who put themselves in harms way that their children might be free.

It is also right that, finally, in the same place where Noel-Baker spoke so eloquently for humanity, we right a wrong. Next Tuesday, the House of Commons will pass a Pensions Bill that includes clause 134 – entitled ‘pre-1948 insurance affecting German Pension entitlement’. Its effect will be to disregard the pre-1948 insurance contributions made by Kinder – thus entitling them to pensions from the German state. A small recognition of the road travelled by the Kinder and the

rectification of an anomaly that, after ten years and more of hard work by Hermann Hirschberger, Henry Grunewald from the Board of Deputies and others – rights a wrong and renders justice.

So we remember because we must – if we forget then we will be damned to repeat the tragedies of history. The world is now, we hope, a different place and we smugly assert that it could never happen again – but the ugly vapours of anti-Semitism swirl around our continent and the Middle East, attacks on Jewish Cemeteries and Synagogues are up, and our vigilance will continue to be tested. We have yet to feel safe in the ‘Home we build together.’

John Locke said that:-

“For it is unreasonable that any should have a free liberty of their religion who do not acknowledge it as a principle of theirs that nobody ought to persecute or molest another because he dissents from him in religion.”

We might add ‘race or ethnic background’ as well. Humanity survives when we work together as one. In the story of the

Kinder, we celebrate the strength, soul, resilience and endurance
Of our guiding humanity – in the Holocaust we remember the
Darkest depravities, evil and tortuous descent of humanity into the
abyss. We need to remember both to remain confident in our
humanity and the bright hope and aspiration it should render to
Everyone – for how can we know who we are or where we are
going to, if we fail to understand the road we have travelled to arrive
here at this place and at this time.

I would like to end by quoting from Philip Noel-Bakers

*“It is my great privilege to do what little I can to make sure
that memory endures”.*

Tony McNulty
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