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KINDERTRANSPORT REUNION

No event in Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1945

received so much foreign press coverage as Kristallnacht.

The reports sent home by foreign journalists,

and printed in full in newspapers around the world,

were graphic and explicit.

The British public

Was told everything,

within hours of it happening.

This created a widespread revulsion at Nazi actions,

And stimulated an unprecedented desire to help.

The search for a mechanism of rescue was immediate.

Even those Britons who did not like Jews
were affected by the night of terror.

As Neville Chamberlain wrote to one of his sisters:

‘Jews aren’t a lovable people,
I don’t care for them myself,
but that is not enough to explain the pogrom.’

In the House of Commons,

David Logan, a Labour Member of Parliament,

was emphatic about the need for Britain take an initiative:

‘I speak, he told the House of Commons, ‘as an orthodox Catholic, feeling to the depth of my heart the cause of the Jew. I hear mention made of the question of money. If we cannot have civilization contented, if we cannot bring sunshine into the lives of people, without being concerned with the question of money, civilization is doomed. Today an opportunity is offered to the British nation to take its proper stand among the nations of the world.’

In a public broadcast launching the Lord Mayor of London's Fund,
to help Jewish refugees who reached Britain,

Lord Baldwin, Neville Chamberlain's predecessor
as Prime Minister, spoke with feeling:

'Thousands of men, women, and children,' he said, 'despoiled of their goods, driven from their homes, are seeking asylum and sanctuary on our doorsteps, a hiding place from the wind and a cover from the tempest.'

Baldwin, who had earlier been Leader of the Conservative Party for thirteen years, added:

'They may not be our fellow subjects, but they are our fellow men. Tonight I plead for the victims who turn to England for help.... Thousands of every degree of education, industry, wealth, position, have been made equal in misery. I shall not attempt to depict to you what it means to be scorned and branded and isolated like a leper. The honour of our country is challenged, our Christian charity is challenged, and it up to us to meet that challenge.'

On 14 December 1938,
a historic moment in the history of Britain,
Neville Chamberlain's Cabinet agreed to allow,
in the first instance,
5,000 German Jewish children
to enter Britain,

provided the refugee organizations in Britain
or individuals
would provide a bond of £50

(at least £1,500 today)

and sponsorship for the cost of board and lodgings

The bond was, in the words of the legislation,
'to assure their ultimate resettlement' outside Britain.

Your ultimate resettlement, that is.

In the event,

almost 10,000 children were brought to Britain

from Germany, German-annexed Austria and

– after Hitler's forces occupied Prague –

– from Czechoslovakia

– before the outbreak of war

– and the effective sealing of Germany's borders

– with the West.

The conditions of rescue were onerous
but not insuperable.

Each child needed to have a sponsor and guarantor.

My own parents took in Ilse
(I was only two years old
and, alas, I never knew her surname,)
She became my nanny.

I still have a prized photograph of Ilse and me,
Taken just before I was evacuated to Canada in 1940,
which she has inscribed on the back:
'Martin mit ich.'

My father also struggled

to get members of our family to sponsor a German couple

the Werblowskis

whom I remember well

and whose daughter lives today in Manchester

Sponsorship could pose many problems:

In the Lincolnshire town of Grantham,
Muriel Roberts and her sister Margaret
had pen pals overseas.

Muriel's pen pal was Edith, an Austrian Jewish girl.

Muriel recalled after the war how Edith's father:

‘wrote to mine asking whether we could take his daughter,
since he very clearly foresaw the way events were leading.

We had neither the time – having to run the shops –

nor the money to accept such a responsibility alone;

but my father won the support of the Grantham Rotarians
for the idea,

and Edith came to stay with each of our families in turn....

Muriel Roberts added:

‘She was seventeen, tall, beautiful, well dressed,
evidently from a well-to-do family,
and spoke good English.’

Edith told Muriel and Margaret Roberts
what it was like to live as a Jew
under an anti-Semitic regime.

One thing she reported
particularly stuck in their minds:

in Vienna, Edith said,
the Jews ‘were being made scrub the streets.’

Margaret Roberts was later to be
Britain’s first woman Prime Minister –
Margaret Thatcher.

When it came to the mechanisms of rescue, the generosity – the humanity - of individuals, of individual families, made an enormous difference.

Anne Fox, a twelve-year-old girl from Berlin, left Hamburg with a large group of German Jewish children on December 28. She later wrote:

‘Foster homes were found - both Jewish and Gentile - hostels were opened, boarding schools contacted and established summer camp facilities were readied to receive these children. It was a tremendous undertaking, and all of us owe our lives to this venture.’

The kindness of a non-Jewish couple, Mary and Jim Mansfield,
and their family,
in the Bedfordshire village of Swineshead,
lightened the burden of Anne’s wartime life
as an evacuee from the London blitz.

Among those who showed the goodwill and breadth of spirit
that characterised the rescuers
were two teachers in the West of England,
James and Kathleen Crossfield.

They took in Pauline Makowski,
a ten-year-old Jewish girl from Stuttgart,
whose parents were Polish-born Jews.

Pauline writes: 'I was fostered by a Christian family from 16
January 1939 until I left their home in 1947 to train as a nurse. Their
home was always regarded as my home and their children still regard
me as their sister. They were exceptional people and their generosity
of spirit should be acknowledged.'

Pauline's parents did not survive the war: in her words, they
were 'part of the lost six million'.

Richard Attenborough was fifteen years old when his mother travelled to London from their home in Leicester, to bring back with her two Jewish girls, Irene, aged twelve, and Helga, nine.

Attenborough later reflected:

‘My parents’ generosity represents only one of many acts of kindness of the British people in those dark days,’ and he added: ‘My parents’ attitude to life was always that there is such a thing as “society”, and that it involves obligations of concern, tolerance and compassion for those less fortunate than we are. But taking Helga and Irene into our family as sisters wasn’t theory. It was first-hand experience. These were human beings whom we came to love.’

A crucial part was played in the mechanism of rescue
by individual British diplomats.

One of these diplomats was Captain Foley,
the British Passport Control Officer in Berlin.

Among those who saw Foley at work was a young Dutch Jew,
Wim van Leer
(whose widow Lia runs the Cinemateque in Jerusalem).

Wim van Leer was in Germany on Kristallnacht,
With permits for 12 Jewish youngsters
to come to Britain.

As he looked for youngsters to take back with him,
Foley gave him the exit documents.

Van Leer recalled:

‘The winter of 1938 was a harsh one, and elderly men and women waited from six in the morning, queuing up in the snow and biting wind. Captain Foley saw to it that a uniformed commissionaire trundled a tea-urn on a trolley along the line of frozen misery, and all this despite the clientele, neurotic with frustration and cold, doing little to lighten his task.’

No one knew how much time remained for the flow of refugees out of Germany.

Foley continued his work without interruption,
helping Jews to get both to Palestine and to Britain.

One of those who saw a great deal of Foley, Benno Cohn, a beneficiary of one of the precious Palestine Certificates, recalled twenty years later:

‘The peak of Foley’s activities was reached during the dark weeks of the pogroms of November 1938. Approaching the building of the Consulate in the Tiergartenstrasse, you could see women queuing up to be allowed to enter. The rooms of the Consulate were transformed into a shelter for Jews, looking for protection from persecution. 32,000 men were in prison in concentration camps during those weeks, their wives besieging the consul for a visa that meant liberation for their husbands. It was a question of life or death for several thousands. During those days, Captain Foley’s extensive humanity became obvious. Day and night he was at the disposition of those seeking help. Generously, he distributed every kind of visa, thus helping the liberation of many thousands from the camps.’

In the days following Kristallnacht, Robert Smallbones, the British Consul-General in Frankfurt, made extraordinary efforts to process as many British entry visas as possible.

His reports to London were stark.

On 16 November 1938 he reported:

‘I personally know of eleven acquaintances
who have taken their lives to avoid being arrested.’

‘I usually worked about eighteen hours a day,’ Smallbones later wrote. ‘The longest stretch I remember was from early in the morning until midnight when I fell asleep for a few minutes on my desk.... I went to bed.... After two hours sleep my conscience pricked me. The feeling was horrible that there were people in concentration camps whom I could get out and that I was comfortable in bed.... I returned to my desk and stayed there until the next midnight.’

After a few months, Smallbones has a nervous breakdown. ‘The last straw that broke my back,’ he wrote, ‘was the case of a person who died in a concentration camp because one of my staff had failed to get my signature and to dispatch the promise of a visa which was in order.’

Smallbones, like Foley,
showed a humane touch
often absent from the routine of officialdom.

Ida Cook, a British Christian who was in Germany with her sister Louise helping Jews to leave, recorded how those who went to the British consulate 'hungry and in need (no Jew was allowed to buy food for nine days) were fed', and how Smallbones' deputy, Arthur Dowden, 'even went through the streets, with food in his car, to feed those in want.'

Ida Cook and her sister made several journeys to Germany to take Jews out, the last in August 1939. They were among many British heroes after Kristallnacht, redeeming by their life-saving actions the destruction and death of that grim prelude to the Holocaust.

For the Jews of Czechoslovakia,
the German annexation of the Sudetenland
in the first days of October 1938
– under the Munich Agreement –
– was a pre-Kristallnacht warning of danger,
– should Germany's next move be
– the occupation of Prague.

In October 1938 the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia set up an office in Prague, headed by Doreen Warrender. She was joined in December by Martin Blake, a schoolmaster from Westminster School, who persuaded a young stockbroker, Nicholas Winton, the scion of a distinguished German-Jewish family, to go with him to Prague, and then, in the new year, to run the committee's London office.

In all, the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia brought 669 Czech-Jewish children to Britain from Prague between October 1938 and March 1939.

On 7 March 1939,

as Hitler's threats against Czechoslovakia intensified,

a British schoolmaster, Trevor Chadwick,

flew from London to Prague.

A week later he flew back to Britain

with twenty Jewish children.

'They were all cheerfully sick,' he later recalled, except a baby of one who slept peacefully in my lap the whole time.'

On the following day, German forces entered Prague, and the swastika flag flew above the Hradcany Castle, the centre of government.

The German occupation of Prague on 15 March 1939
put tens of thousands more Jews at risk,
including those in Prague who were refugees
from Germany, Austria and the Sudetenland.

Among those Britons who took immediate action to try to help
was a young Oxford academic, Robert Auty, who had already made
several journeys to Germany to try to help Jews leave.

After the German occupation of Prague
Auty took the first night train across Germany
to the occupied Czech capital,

and brought back a group of Jewish children with him.

Many of those who took in Jewish children after Kristallnacht hardly had the resources to do so, but wanted to help, and willingly accepted the hardships involved.

In Archway, in north London, Bertha Emily Harder, who ran a sweet and tobacconist shop, and lived in a two-room flat, took in three Berlin-born Jewish sisters – Hannelore (Laura), Liselotte (Lisa) and Rosemarie (Romie).

Six months after taking them in, Bertha Harder died of tuberculosis. But during the short time she looked after them, she took them on a holiday in the Isle of Wight, at her own expense, and tried – in vain – to get their mother out of Czechoslovakia.

Laura later recalled:

‘After the German invasion in March 1939, my father fled to Poland with an attaché case. We stayed behind in a cheap hotel, with our mother. In her desperation, she heard about the Children’s Section who tried to save youngsters up to the age of sixteen. The ladies from the committee called. They came from England. They admired my mother and hoped that they could save her too. But first they had the difficult task of finding someone who would take her three daughters. “My girls must not be separated,” she pleaded. One day we heard a Miss Harder was prepared to take us. The day came and we arrived in England on 1st June 1939. We waved goodbye to our wonderful mother at the station. She had a white handkerchief in her hands. It receded.... We never saw her again.’ Miss Harder met them on their arrival in London at Liverpool Street Station.

After the outbreak of war, Laura worked first as a maid in Epsom, then, in 1944, joined the British Army.

Lisa became a Professor at the University of Minnesota,

Romie became a much-respected teacher.

The United States, Canada, and the countries of Latin America failed to respond as the British Government had done.

During the same period that Britain took in almost 10,000 children

The United States took in 500.

Canada fewer than 200.

By the end of August 1939

Britain had become a haven for ten percent of German Jews.

But there was prejudice, and it could be disastrous - even to the end.

Five weeks before the outbreak of war,

an official at the Foreign Office, Patrick Reilly,

declined to help a group of Czech Jews

who had fled from the German occupation regime's

anti-Jewish policies.

Reilly insisted that these applicants for refuge:

(I quote) 'are not in any sense political refugees, but Jews who panicked unnecessarily and who need not have left.'

Reilly added that Czech Jews

‘are quite unsuitable as emigrants

& would be a very difficult problem if brought here.’

That particular group of Jews were trapped in the Nazi grip.

Early in 1939

the British Colonial Office,

in an attempt to widen the range of rescue

asked every colonial territory

to take German and Austrian Jews.

Six months later they asked each territory to report how many Jews

had been allowed in.

The result was a reflection

Of the continuing prejudice, indifference and neglect.

I will read the official list that I found in the Colonial Office archive:

Cyprus: 291
Kenya: 216
Northern Rhodesia: 186
Malaya: 188
Hong Kong: 43
British Honduras: 23
British Guiana: 19
Swaziland: 13
Ceylon: 10
The Bahamas: 10
Gold Coast: 7
Malta: 7
Bechuanaland: 6
Nyasaland: 6
Jamaica: 5
Fiji: 3
Uganda: 3
Sarawak: 3
Leeward Islands: 1
Gibraltar (with its large Jewish community): 1

Fourteen colonies had refused to take a single Jew.

These included Barbados, Mauritius, Nigeria, the Seychelles,
Somaliland and Tanganyika.

On the evening of 31 August 1939,

as German radio poured out a stream of venom against the Polish Republic,

sixty German Jewish children were travelling with their adult escort in a train crowded with German soldiers

from Cologne to Cleve.

Cleve was then the only point on the Dutch frontier to which trains were still running.

Crossing the frontier, the train proceeded to the Hook of Holland.

Overnight, the children crossed the North Sea to the British port of Harwich.

There, at dawn on September 1, those who had just reached safety learned that Germany had invaded Poland.

Today we celebrate your lives
and your achievements –
your survival

But we who know your stories,
And recount them
Also know your pain.

I would like to tell two more individual stories
of kinder.

The first was a dear friend of mine,
Eric Lucas.

On reaching Britain

Eric Lucas went regularly to the Home Office
to try to get permits for his parents to join him.

But it was in vain.

Soon after the outbreak of war,

Eric's mother Sophie, wrote to him from Germany:

'We have waited in vain. We shall never see you again. Was there no space in the whole wide world for us two, old people? I know we shall not live very long, now there is nothing to hope for. We are lonely and forsaken now, was there nobody who could have helped?'

Neither Sophie Lucas or her husband Isaac survived the war.

Shortly before he himself died in the 1980s, Eric wrote to me:

‘We have waited, and hoped, for a sign or message from our parents. It will never come. Overwhelming and crushing disaster came upon millions of us. It leaves the wounded and sore human heart lonely. The disaster has spoken to each one [of us] directly....

Can I ever grasp it? Can I fathom out why my father and my mother had to perish at the hands of insanely brutalised human beings? Can I understand why the kind, help-seeking eyes of my father had to behold the slow, scientifically organised dying of himself and my mother, and the people with him in the death camp?’

My last story is of Rudolph Wessely,
who had reached London from Prague
on 1 July 1939 – one of the last *Kinder* -

His efforts to help bring over his parents were likewise in vain.

His father was judge –

but despite his offer to do any work, even domestic work

No place could be found for him and his wife before war broke out
two months after his son's arrival.

In 1943, Rudolph Wessely joined the British Army

As did many *Kinder*

to participate in the defeat of Hitler.

In February 1946, Rudolph Wessely wrote to the people

Who had given him a new home in Britain:

‘All efforts to trace my parents on the continent having failed, I must assume that they are amongst the victims of Nazism. I feel it to be my duty, to do what they would undoubtedly have done, had they been alive; I should like to thank you and express my deepest gratitude for having saved me, their son, in 1939, for having enabled me to lead a full life and for the opportunity I thus gained to fight actively on the side of Britain.’

BEFORE I FINISH

I WOULD LIKE TO READ TWO MESSAGES

I WAS SENT THE FIRST

THREE WEEKS AGO

FOR THIS OCCASION

FROM LADY THATCHER.

THIS IS WHAT SHE WRITES:

THE SECOND LETTER

REACHED ME YESTERDAY AFTERNOON
FROM THE PRIME MINISTER,
GORDON BROWN

who

amidst his current preoccupations
was determined to find the time
to send you a message.

THIS IS WHAT HE WRITES: