

THE KINDERTRANSPORT



The Kindertransport, which translates to "children's transport" in German, was a remarkable humanitarian effort that saved thousands of mainly Jewish children during the Holocaust. It was a response to the desperate situation faced by Jewish families in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland as the Nazi regime tightened its grip on power in the late 1930s.

As Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitic policies intensified and anti-Jewish violence erupted during Kristallnacht in November 1938, the plight of Jewish children became even more dire. British Jewish and Quaker leaders successfully appealed to the British government to relax the immigration requirements for unaccompanied children, following the devastation of Kristallnacht.

UK Government legislation was hastily enacted to allow this, with each child requiring a £50

guarantee (equivalent to £3,000 today) to finance their eventual repatriation. Various Jewish, Quaker and non-Jewish groups were allied under a non-denominational organisation called the “Movement for the Care of Children from Germany” which funded the operation so that the children did not become a burden on the public, and was responsible for finding homes for the children.

The Kindertransport program officially began on 1st December, 1938, just weeks after Kristallnacht. It allowed unaccompanied Jewish children under the age of 17 to enter the United Kingdom, providing them with a chance to escape the horrors of the Nazi regime. The British government issued temporary visas to these children, with the understanding that they would be taken in by host families, foster homes, schools, or other facilities, which would take care of their needs until the end of the war.

In the span of nine months, until the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, around 10,000 unaccompanied, mainly Jewish, children boarded

trains and embarked on a perilous journey to freedom. Often leaving their families behind, these children faced unimaginable emotional turmoil, knowing they might never see their parents again. The farewell scenes at train stations were heart-wrenching as parents bid farewell to their beloved children, not knowing if they would survive the war.

The Nazis insisted that the evacuations must not block ports in Germany, so most Transport parties went by train to the Netherlands; then to a British port, generally Harwich, by cross-channel ferry from the Hook of Holland. From the port, a train took some of the children to Liverpool Street Station in London, where they were met by their volunteer foster parents. Children without prearranged foster families were sheltered at temporary holding centres located at summer holiday camps such as Dovercourt near Harwich.

The transports continued until the outbreak of war in September 1939, with one very last transport leaving IJmuiden, the Netherlands,

on 14 May 1940. The Kindertransport was not without its challenges. The children faced language barriers, adapting to a new culture, and the trauma of being separated from their families. Many of them had to cope with the grief of losing relatives in concentration camps. However, they were grateful for the opportunity to escape the horrors of the Holocaust.

The Kindertransport was made possible through the dedication of numerous organizations and individuals, both in Britain and on the continent. Among the notable figures was Sir Nicholas Winton, who orchestrated the transportation of over 600 Czechoslovakian children to safety.

The British public demonstrated remarkable generosity during this time. Many families volunteered to foster the children, providing them with care, support, and often becoming a second family. The children were encouraged

to maintain their Jewish identity, practice their traditions, and attend religious services.

Tragically, not all the children who reached safety were reunited with their families after the war. The vast majority of their parents perished in concentration camps, leaving these children orphaned. Nonetheless, the Kindertransport was a testament to the power of compassion and solidarity during one of humanity's darkest hours.

The Kindertransport's legacy is profound, highlighting the importance of humanitarian action and the positive impact of collective efforts in times of crisis. Many of the Kindertransport survivors went on to make significant contributions to their host countries and beyond, enriching their new homes with their resilience and talent.

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