



# Kindertransport

## What was the Kindertransport?

The rise of the antisemitic Nazi Party in 1930s Germany and the threat that this posed to Jews and other minorities across Europe left hundreds of families in turmoil, with events such as the Kristallnacht posing an obvious threat to Jewish community. Kristallnacht saw Jewish businesses targeted in riots and window smashing on 9-10<sup>th</sup> November 1938.

The Kindertransport (Children Transport) started directly after Kristallnacht, and was a process where children under 18 would be transported to safety in other countries. The aim was for them to be taken in by foster families or relatives, until they could be returned to their parents at the end of the war. The majority of the children did not see their families again, as they were victims of the Holocaust.

It was largely financed by the Refugee Children's Movement and the Central British Fund for German Jewry. The 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2018 marks the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Kindertransport refugees arriving in Harwich, and we aim to commemorate this anniversary as part of our Surrender to Sanctuary project. The first ship arrived at Harwich on the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1938 three weeks after Kristallnacht with nearly 200 children.



Press photographs of some of the first children to arrive in England on the Kindertransport into Harwich, 1938.

## Who was involved?

Jewish and 'non-Aryan' children between the ages of approximately 5 and 18 were able to travel over to England to seek their 'sanctuary', but the journey was not easy. To guarantee safe passage to England, children were required to secure a 'sponsor' and guarantor plus the equivalent of £50 as a secure to move them onto future accommodation. These could be relatives living in England, generous strangers, or religious groups such as Quakers and the Church of England.

Alongside this, refugees were required to complete an application form to the Co-ordinating Committee for Refugees in London. Nevertheless, approximately 10,000 children made this passage throughout the winter of 1938.

*'I left home with several hundred children in December 1938.*

*My mother insisted on kissing me over and over again, and I got impatient with her demonstrativeness, not realising of course that this was to be the final parting.'*



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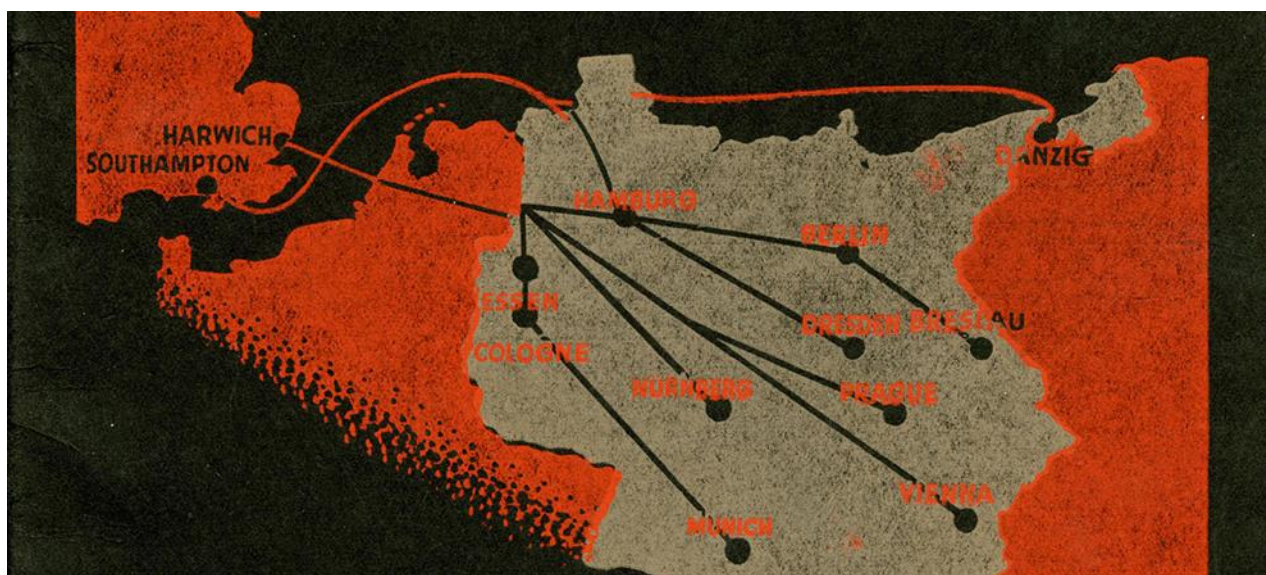
## Why did the children come?

The anti-Semitic policies of Hitler in Germany (and later German-occupied areas such as Poland and Holland) meant that many Jewish communities were unsafe. Many parents therefore made the decision to try and move their children to the safest possible place – however this was extremely difficult.

The sudden possibility of an influx of refugees caused a crisis for the British Government, with numerous public and private discussions about Jewish refugees. In July 1938, an intergovernmental organization was established – the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees – in which the countries involved (including Britain, the USA, and Australia) could coordinate and facilitate the reception of Kindertransport refugees into their nations. This policy was however one of great controversy, with Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, disapproving. Others, such as Sir Samuel Hoare – the British Home Secretary – praised the policy stating that it would provide Britain with many opportunities and employment prospects, which appealed to a nation struggling with unemployment.

*'I have never for a moment regretted that I had come. Any hardship I countered with the thought: 'better this than being in Germany'.*

The first Kindertransport journey was coordinated by Florence Nankivell – sending 196 children from a fire-damaged Jewish orphanage in Berlin. On 2nd December 1938, the organised process began, with the first refugees stepping onto English soil for the first time, and for their home for the rest of their lives. Children were also transported to France, Belgium and Sweden, and rushed organised transports continued right up until the outbreak of World War Two on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939.



A map of the routes some children would have taken to reach sanctuary in England





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## The Journey

The journey faced by many children before reaching England was long and arduous. Beginning often in their home towns (or cities closest to them) these children waved goodbye to their families, leaving mothers, fathers, siblings and many of their belongings behind with the lives they once knew, and their journey on the railways began.

The trains then journeyed across Europe, stopping to pick up more refugees along the way. Many felt a sense of both excitement and fear – many of the younger children believed that they were 'going on holiday', whilst the older ones may have had some understanding of their circumstances and their parents anguish. On arriving at international ports, the children boarded ferries that would take them across the English Channel to safety. On reaching Britain, many children arrived at Harwich and Southampton, and boarded trains to their new (though sometimes temporary) homes. Upon arriving into Harwich, the children were met by the cold December weather, and were swiftly transported to the Warner's Holiday Camp in Dovercourt or onto London to other accommodation.

## Harwich and Dovercourt

The camp provided the Kindertransport children with a base to begin adjusting to their new life in England. Living in small wooden huts, the children were provided with basic provisions in blankets and hot water bottles – however their accommodation was freezing in the winter by the North Sea Coast. The Dovercourt Camp housed many of the children that arrived in England, and taught them their first lesson in the English language. Children ate their meals in the communal dining halls, and participated in group activities such as traditional singing and games.

Alongside the religious undertones of the Camp, the children also participated in activities such as football, and were given free tickets to the 'Electric Palace' cinema to see the new *Disney Snow White* film. Far from life at home, the camp was staffed largely by volunteers of varied backgrounds, and everyone helped out where they could. A butcher is said to have offered sausages for the children at the camp, and when told that they could not have them because they were not Kosher (Jewish dietary requirements), gave them to the volunteers instead. It was at this camp that the children met their prospective families and were soon transported to their new homes.



Kindertransport children outside their accommodation at the Holiday Camp, Dovercourt



A child eats dinner at the Dovercourt Holiday camp

*'It was bitterly cold, and we were housed in chalets, using the main hall for meals, playtime and education in English.'*



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## After Harwich

After being temporarily housed at the Dovercourt Camp many children continued their journeys to sanctuary, sometimes travelling to London or further to arrive at their homes for the remainder of the war. Upon arrival the children would officially meet the people that were to house them, with many children being happy in their new homes (while often having to work and contribute to the life of the family that they were staying with). Some children faced a hard life in a new country where they did not know their language and still faced prejudice.

Approximately 1000 young people – largely boys aged 18 and over, were labelled as ‘aliens’ and sent to camps on the Isle of Man, whilst others were enlisted in the Allied Armed Forces and went on to fight against the country that had once been their home. After the end of the war in 1945, a large proportion of the Kindertransport children went on to stay in Britain, with many becoming influential figures such as Lore Segal and Lord Alfred Dubs going on to widespread success and to speak about their experiences. It is undoubtable that the Kindertransport saved countless lives of young refugee children, and set the tone for many British attitudes towards refugees today.



Miss W Herford takes children on a walk at the Dovercourt Camp



Two boys from Eton School giving a group of boys singing lessons at the Holiday Camp

## Useful Links

<https://harwichhavenhistory.co.uk/> Our project website.

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/kindertransport/> First hand accounts and reports of the Kindertransport during 1938 and 1939.

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/6-stories-of-the-kindertransport> Chosen objects from the Imperial War Museum collections

<https://www.hmd.org.uk/learn-about-the-holocaust-and-genocides/the-holocaust/kindertransport-refugees/> The Holocaust Memorial Website, with first hand accounts from Kinder who travelled to Britain.