

The children's ark

As Europe hovered on the brink of war in 1938-39, thousands of Jewish children were quietly taken from their homes and despatched to safety in England. **Caroline Baum**, whose father was among those rescued, tells the little-known story of their ride to freedom.

I ALWAYS USED TO WONDER WHY preparation for family holidays induced anxiety rather than anticipation in my father. Why the packing of suitcases was a ritual filled with tension. Why farewells were fraught and tearful. There were other mysteries, too: my father's obsessive quest for the perfect fish and chips; his reverence for Quakers, although he was not one; his unexplained drive around the elegant English city of Bath in search of a house that no longer existed.

Eventually, when I was old enough to disguise my questions with studied casualness, I began to get answers. But each time I asked for this story

to be told, more gaps would be filled in, only to be replaced by a freshly gaping hole elsewhere. It has taken me 20 years to find out this much...

ONLY DAYS AFTER THE TERROR OF KRISTALLNACHT, that night in November 1938 when Jewish synagogues, schools, shops and homes were reduced to rubble and broken glass, my grandparents called their children together in the sitting room of their Vienna apartment. They told my father, Harry, 11, and his elder sister, Franzl, 15, that they were sending them to England for a brief holiday and would join them there later. By this time, the Nazis had already methodically requisitioned the family's



Railway children: Caroline Baum's father shortly before he was rescued from Vienna in 1938; (top) children about to depart Berlin on a freedom train in May 1939.

furniture and possessions. They were not going to be allowed to take the children.

The plan to evacuate Harry and Franzi had been in preparation for months, my grandparents having successfully registered them with a local Jewish relief organisation. They were to be among the first 400 children to leave Vienna as part of Kindertransport – which in German literally means “the moving of children”.

My grandparents packed a small suitcase and rucksack for each of their children. They were instructed to include an unbreakable cup, washing supplies and food for one breakfast, lunch and dinner. No money, jewellery or cameras were allowed. Amazingly, my father secured a special export permit for his cherished stamp collection.

On December 11, 1938, the goodbyes at the station were low-key; my grandparents did not want to impose their own fears on their children,

or betray the emotions they felt at the risk they were taking. Like the other relatives, they had been forbidden to accompany their children onto the platform where the train was waiting and warned against tears or emotional farewells, or the children would be prevented from leaving.

HARRY AND FRANZI ENTERED AN OPEN carriage that was overflowing with other children aged between six and 16. They knew none of their fellow travellers. Guards inspected their luggage and confiscated valuables, including musical instruments. At the time, my father had no idea of what fate had in store for him, or for the family he had left behind. Nor did he know that he was part of a remarkable refugee program which carried more than 10,000 children from Hitler's clutches to safety.

Organised by the Red Cross and British Quakers, Kindertransport was the largest child rescue effort ever attempted, reaching across Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland. It was the result of intense co-operation between seemingly disparate parties: the trains were provided and paid for by the Germans, with the personal approval of Adolf Eichmann; Catholic nuns accompanied the children; Jews and Quakers took care of the paperwork and received the children into their care at journey's end. The scale of the operation was unprecedented at the time and its success was due largely to the appeals of former Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and the Quaker foreign minister of the day, Sir Samuel Hoare, who urged the British Government to action and raised the funds needed

to organise an aid program. It also improved the image of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, whose popularity following his appeasement of Hitler in Munich was at an all-time low.

Legislation was promptly passed to give the children temporary visas and residency. When the tense situation in eastern Europe worsened, the British Government also decided that parents of Kindertransport children could be given temporary residency status, on condition that the only employment they accepted was as unskilled hospital help, domestic servants or agricultural labourers. Tragically, the outbreak of war interrupted Kindertransport, and 30,000 children registered for future transportation never made it. Other trains, leaving from the same platforms, took them to concentration camps.

UNTIL NOW, THE STORY OF KINDERTRANSPORT has remained relatively untold, with attention focused instead on the achievements of individuals such as Oscar Schindler and Varian Fry (the foppish American who helped artists including Marc Chagall and Max Ernst escape the Nazis) in saving adult lives. For many of the children who were part of Kindertransport, the memories are too painful to discuss: 90 per cent of them never saw their parents again.

At last, some of the *kinder* have been persuaded to talk about their experiences in a documentary film, *Into the Arms of Strangers*, which opened this week. Many of them carry a burden of guilt and feel unworthy of having survived; others have spent their lives trying to achieve something in

Trains of salvation: (right) Dutch well-wishers greet freedom-bound children at the border; (below) refugees from Berlin await their fate at London's Liverpool Street station in August 1939.



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order to somehow justify their parents' sacrifice.

Some of the children eventually emigrated to the United States, Israel, Canada and Australia. Over the years, I visited several of them in London and Melbourne, but the experience of seeing elderly people break down and sob over childhood memories was too distressing, and I abandoned any idea of writing about them.

Deborah Oppenheimer, the producer of *Into the Arms of Strangers*, was more persistent. The executive producer for *The Drew Carey Show*, she became interested in Kindertransport when she discovered it was her own mother's story. She then sought out the Academy Award-winning documentary writer and director Jonathan Harris, who won an Oscar for the film *The Long Way Home*, which followed Holocaust survivors as they set about rebuilding their lives.

The film is narrated by another Oscar winner, Dame Judi Dench, and has interviews with a dozen *kinder*, as well as a foster mother and two rescuers who helped families prepare for their ordeal. One is the remarkable Norbert Wollheim, a social worker in Berlin who personally helped save the lives of more than 6,000 children, but was unable to stop himself, his wife and their three-year-old son being transported to Auschwitz. He died shortly after his interview for the film.

THE JOURNEY FROM VIENNA TO ENGLAND took two days. Many of the children wept from homesickness and fear of being separated from their parents for the first time. But my father has



Small mercies: young refugees on their way from Harwich to their English "holiday home" in 1938 (above), and (at right) new arrivals in England in 1939.

a happier memory – of the train coming to a halt somewhere in the Hook of Holland, where it was greeted by thousands of Dutch citizens. "They were under the impression that we were starving, and handed us fresh bread rolls through the windows, which were filled with a rather curious combination of cheese and chocolate."

When the train arrived at Harwich, my father and his sister were given a numbered label to hang around their necks, then taken to a Butlins holiday camp which had been converted to house the young refugees. Although it was a bitterly cold and wet winter, and the chalet dormitories for the children at Dover Court were unheated, my father remembers the place with great fondness.

In later rescue missions, when numbers swelled, children were taken to London and herded into a large school gymnasium near Liverpool Street station. A rope had been slung across the centre of the room. As each child's name was called out, they would step up to the rope to meet their new foster family. Considering there was little or no vetting of those who applied to take in children, it's a miracle that, of the 10,000 placed in care, only 50 reported being abused or mistreated.

LIFE AT DOVER COURT WAS FILLED WITH distractions. Apart from English lessons, there were sports, including fencing, games and visits to the local cinema. My father tasted fish and chips for the first time, and to this day says they have never been bettered. Marks & Spencer delivered a truckload of gumboots, which were a novelty to children from Germany and Austria, and local barbers came to give the children free haircuts. Outings were organised by benefactors; one afternoon, a wealthy couple, Mr and Mrs Stone, turned up in their Rolls-Royce and took my father and his sister out for afternoon tea.

At mealtimes, the cattle call took place: complete strangers came to look at the children while they ate, selecting the cutest ones to take away and foster. The preference was for younger children, so my father and his sister, wishing to

stay together, were not among those chosen first. Eventually, however, they were taken as part of a group of children to be housed with families in Bath. They arrived at an ivy-covered house on the outskirts of the city, reminiscent of something out of Dickens. Their hostess, Mrs Tanner, thought she had taken delivery of slave labour. The children were led to a scullery with no heat or light, where Franz found a dead mouse in the coffee grinder. They were terrified of both Mrs Tanner and the house, which was filled with threatening suits of armour that rattled as they ran past.

Mrs Tanner clearly had a screw loose. My father recalls her appearing in floating negligees and playing the piano brilliantly (brought up in a musical household, he recognised it as Liszt). Then, mid-phrase, she would break off with a chilling shriek and run upstairs, continuing the

Eventually, my father's persistence paid off: his mother was given permission to join him in July 1939, securing a job as a housekeeper. But he never saw his father again, and the rest of his extended family also perished.

More than 70 per cent of Kindertransport children were taken in by non-Jewish families. The Quakers, whose refusal to proselytise is well established, did not attempt to convert the children they fostered. However, my father has always said, "If I had not been born Jewish, I would have become a Quaker; I believe they are the best people on earth."

Like my father and his sister, others of the refugee children were not practising Orthodox Jews. This prompted a statement from Britain's very influential but conservative Rabbi Schonfeld; he was concerned that, having little or no sense of

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piece on another piano exactly where she had left off. She would repeat this process, completing her performance on the third floor of the house.

Finally, starving, freezing and frightened out of their wits, my father and his sister ran away, seeking refuge with one of the other foster families in the area. They were returned to Dover Court until a more suitable placement could be found.

They were taken in two weeks later by a modest Quaker family based in York. The Hugheses were kindness personified, and tried to allay my father's constant anxieties about his parents. Even at such a young age, he was lobbying on their behalf, writing letters and appealing for help to whoever might listen. Like many of the Kindertransport children, he had developed a precocious maturity and a sense of responsibility well beyond his years, and understood that without sponsorship from the British end, his parents could not be rescued.

Harry and Franz's stay with the Hugheses was shortlived. Authorities decided it would be better for them to live with a family with children their own age, so they were moved to the home of a quietly wealthy Anglican family, the Birches.

On Sundays, the Archbishop of York, Dr William Temple, would invite the children to afternoon teas of strawberries and cream. My father always went, sensing that this might provide an opportunity to help his parents. Dr Temple, who later became the Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote letters on my father's behalf.

ritual or worship, these children might corrupt the local Orthodox Jewish families. To him, a lapsed Jew was a dead Jew. (To his great credit, Schonfeld almost singlehandedly rescued 750 children from Berlin and established Orthodox hostels for them in Britain.)

There were also Jews who did more than their share: filmmaker John Schlesinger's father, a senior doctor at the Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital, used a recently acquired inheritance to buy a house in Highgate, north London, which he furnished to accommodate 12 children, providing them with a cook, a house mother and two assistants – all refugees. (Another filmmaker, Sir Richard Attenborough, recalls his non-Jewish family taking in two girls aged nine and 12, whom he regarded as sisters. They later emigrated to the US, but have corresponded ever since.)

Deborah Oppenheimer researched *Into the Arms of Strangers* for three years, then spent another three years getting the film made. In the meantime, the topic hit the British and American stages in a play, *Kindertransport*, by Diane Samuels. Suddenly, as the *kinder* grew older and more frail, their memories more unreliable, there was a realisation that if it was not told now, this story could never be told by eyewitnesses.

Many of those who survive have stayed in touch through reunions and newsletters. Some, who had lost each other last century, found each other again by watching Oppenheimer's film. My father has never attended a reunion. Until I told him about them, he was unaware they took place. Like his fellow *kinder*, he does not call himself a survivor. As Oppenheimer says, "Most of them lost their parents and know the fate they were spared, so they are modest about their experiences."

The German word for child – *kind* – in English means caring, which is exactly what the Kindertransport children desperately needed and, mostly, got. My father, who embarked on such a traumatic journey into the unknown with so little, became incapable of travelling light, requiring an embarrassing number of suitcases for even a short trip. Strangest of all, the career he chose, denying his academic promise as a historian, was as a travel agent, forever sending people away on holidays.