The Kindertransports: An Introduction

Anthony Grenville

This article is a revised version of the introductory paper given at the conference on the Kindertransports held on 17 September 2009 at the Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies, University of London. After reviewing certain historical distortions in modern views of the Kindertransports, it sets out in broad outline how the idea of children’s transports from the Reich originated and was implemented in practice. It then considers how the children were received in Britain and how they responded to the experience of forced emigration. The tone of the original paper has largely been retained.

It seems very fitting that we should be meeting at this conference to subject to scholarly study and scrutiny the Kindertransports, which in 1938/39 brought nearly 10,000 children, mostly Jewish, from territories under Nazi control to safety in Britain and which were cut short on 3 September 1939, some seventy years ago, by the outbreak of the Second World War. Fitting not only because the conference falls close to the anniversary of the outbreak of war, but also because the historical reality of the Kindertransports is in danger of becoming somewhat obscured by a largely ahistorical mythology that has grown up around them, removing them from the historical conditions of their origins, organisation and implementation, the way in which they actually worked and the concrete realities of the experience of the Kindertransport children.

It is the highly emotive image of young Jewish children being rescued from Nazi terror and persecution that, perhaps understandably, dominates public awareness of the Kindertransports today. On 1 September 2009, the Today programme on BBC Radio 4 broadcast reports on two events held to commemorate the sixty-fifth anniversary of the outbreak of war. One was the ceremony held on the Westerplatte, just outside Danzig (Gdansk), scene of the opening attack by German forces on Polish territory. The other was the departure of a steam train from Prague, retracing the journey via Germany and Holland that was made by some 660 Jewish children from Czechoslovakia whose rescue was undertaken by Nicholas Winton - that Sir Nicholas, aged 100, was present at Liverpool Street Station to meet the train added to the emotive impact of the story.
The British, in particular, have come to see and celebrate the Kindertransports as evidence of their humanity and generosity, as part of the story of their ‘finest hour’ in the war against National Socialism. This conveniently ignores the fact that the Kindertransports took place against the background of Neville Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement and its failure in the wake of the Munich Agreement, not against that of Churchill’s wartime coalition government and the Battle of Britain; and it fails to take account of the very mixed nature of British policy towards the Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution.

It is also noticeable that with the passage of the years depictions of the Kindertransports have lost some of the intensity of their anguish. Karen Gershon’s volume We Came as Children, published by Gollancz in 1966, conveys the painful nature of the children’s experience with a more raw directness than does the volume edited by Bertha Leverton and Shmuel Lowensohn, I Came Alone: Stories of the Kindertransport, which appeared in 1990.\(^1\) The volume Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport, which appeared in 2000, is the book of the award-winning documentary film of the same name by Deborah Oppenheimer and Mark Jonathan Harris.\(^2\) Its subtitle, The British Scheme that Saved 10,000 Children from the Nazi Regime, demonstrates the growing trend to celebrate the rescue of the children and their subsequent lives as a humanitarian triumph over evil adversity – in a way not dissimilar to the portrayal of the survival of the Jews on Oskar Schindler’s list – though both these two more recent volumes still contain much evidence of the darker sides of the story.

The only full-scale study of the Kindertransports, Barry Turner’s ... And the Policeman Smiled: 10,000 Children Escape from Nazi Europe, also reveals in its title the tendency to focus on the dimension of the escape of the children from Nazi persecution to a relatively humane haven.\(^3\) Again, though, it is only fair to note that Turner’s book, which draws in detail on the records of the Refugee Children’s Movement held by the Central British Fund for World Jewish Relief, dwells on the hardships and painful experiences that were often the lot of the unaccompanied children exposed to life in a strange country.\(^4\)

On the opposite side of the argument, critics of Britain and British policy towards the Jews during the Nazi period have used the Kindertransports to portray the attitude of the British to the Jews of Europe as heartless, double-faced and tinged by anti-Semitism. Though it takes some ingenuity to depict the rescue of 10,000 children