Polish *Kinder* and the Struggle for Identity

**Jennifer Craig-Norton**

Utilising case files of Kindertransportees who arrived in the United Kingdom from Poland, this article explores issues of identity and sheds light on previously neglected areas of Kindertransport historiography. These German-born children, who were considered Polish nationals, experienced a terrifying deportation and the shock of being refugees in Poland and England. Some of them struggled to establish Polish nationality, which exempted them from internment and deportation, but which for many remained a problematical identification. The files reveal that for these children, conflicted identity remained a life-long legacy of the Kindertransport. Note: All quotations transcribed exactly as written. Names marked with * are pseudonyms.

Many of the children who were brought to the United Kingdom on the Kindertransports struggled with their identity as they adapted to life in a new country. Language and cultural differences were the immediate problems to be dealt with, but religious and national identity posed life-long conflicts for many of these children. The refugee children’s struggle for identity has not been fully explored in Kinder historiography and research, which has often lacked rigour and penetrating analysis. This is partly attributable to the persistence of a one-dimensional celebratory narrative and partly due to a lack of available sources to which intellectual vigour might be applied.

Many strands of Kindertransport history have yet to be adequately studied and newly discovered case files help to remedy these gaps in the historiography. These archival sources are very useful for exploring issues of identity, as well as revealing the story of the children who came from Poland, one of the least studied groups of Kindertransportees. These children, who were expelled from Germany and came to Great Britain as double refugees, faced perhaps the greatest challenges to national and individual identity of all the Kinder. German born, German speaking, but not German citizens, the children who arrived from Poland were impelled by wartime Britain’s undifferentiated suspicion of foreigners to embrace Polish nationality as a matter of necessity and many contended with uncertain identity for the rest of their lives.

Very little has been written about the Polish Kinder, who came in two distinct groups from within the Polish borders. One group came from the free city of Danzig and travelled to England via the
‘normal’ route from Hoek van Holland to Harwich. The other group, who are the subject of this study, arrived in three transports in 1939 aboard the packet steamer Warszawa from Gdynia, Poland. The emigration of these children had been arranged by an Anglo-Jewish philanthropic group, the Polish Jewish Refugee Fund (PJRF or ‘Fund’), and most came from a refugee camp on the Polish-German border.

The expulsion crisis that propelled the Polish Jewish Relief Fund into their rescue activities had been precipitated by a game of political one-upmanship between Germany and Poland. In the first two decades of the 20th century, thousands of Polish Jews seeking economic opportunity had immigrated to Germany where they were considered Polish nationals by the post-1918 German governments. By the late 1930s, however, the Polish government, beset with financial crises and increasingly nervous about Nazi expansionism was not anxious to claim these émigrés as citizens. On 1 April 1938, in an effort to cut ties with the expatriates, the Polish Sejm passed an act annulling the citizenship of those who had lived abroad for more than five years, igniting suspicion in Germany that Poland intended to “toss” the Polish Jews to the countries where they resided at the time.1

The crisis came to a head when the Polish government announced a timeline for the enforcement of the act. All Poles living abroad without revalidating their passports had to surrender their documents to the nearest consulate for ‘checking’ by 30 October 1938.2 Recognising that this would effectively render Polish Jews stateless, the German government acted pre-emptively and deported many of them just before the revocation deadline was due to take effect.3 It is believed that about 17,000 Jews were, without warning, arrested or detained on 28 October 1938. Told to pack enough food for two days, collect what they were able to carry, and take no more than 10 RM per person, they were rounded up, packed into sealed third class carriages and sent towards the border.4 At several deportation points, Jewish families were allowed to enter Poland, but at the border town of Zbąszyń, where the largest number were sent, 8,000 to 9,000 Jews were held and forced to establish a refugee camp in an abandoned flour mill and adjacent stables.5

International relief organisations were joined by those from Warsaw to bring immediate help, and it was in this context that the Polish Jewish Refugee Fund was formed. It was not until after the shock of Kristallnacht, and the subsequent decision by the British