From Europe to the Antipodes: Acculturation and Identity of the Deckston Children and Kindertransport Children in New Zealand

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This study concentrates on oral history interviews with the Deckston children – 20 orphans brought to New Zealand from Bialystok in 1935 and 1937, and Kindertransportees, who emigrated from Britain to New Zealand in 1939-40 and 1946. Whilst the backgrounds of these children differ considerably, they all battled on their antipodean journey with the experience of cultural alienation in a colonial Anglophone setting. The analysis of central themes in identity articulation, such as the role of familial or group-centred socialisation, of religion, education, social advancement and engagement with the community, enables a differentiated view of issues related to exile and belonging.

In the years 1933-1946, approximately 1,100 Jewish refugees and post-war displaced persons from Europe gained sanctuary in New Zealand. The country’s immigration policy, based on the Immigration Restriction Amendment Act of 1920, aimed to limit the entry of emigrants of non-British origin by enforcing the principles of the so-called White New Zealand Policy. The policies of the New Zealand government towards child refugees were, however, comparatively liberal and found broad public support. According to Ann Beaglehole, the reasons for this attitude included the humanitarian impulse of helping children to the widespread belief that New Zealand was one of the safest countries in the world in which to raise children. Among the children resettled in New Zealand were twenty orphaned Polish children, mainly from Bialystok, in two groups (1935 and 1937) by Annie and Max Deckston, an elderly childless couple from Lachowicze, Poland, and five Kindertransportees who migrated from Britain in 1939-40 and 1946. The passage of the Polish children and their resettlement at the ‘Deckston Home’, a large property in Newtown, South Wellington, was sponsored by the Deckston couple. Although few obstacles were encountered for the first group of eight children, the second group of twelve was costly, with a £2,000 guarantee required for each child. The Deckstons were also reliant on administrative guidance of groups such as the UK-based Movement for the Care of Children from Germany (later the Refugee Children’s Movement, RCM). Their goal of resettling the Polish Jewish children
did not seem to accord with the relief and social orientations of Jewish welfare societies in New Zealand, which were still in their infancy. The relocation of the Kindertransportees on the other hand involved travel costs and the required landing money of £200, and was mainly based on family sponsorship and organisational support from the RCM.

The attitude of the New Zealand public in the 1930s towards child refugees was characterised by sympathy and a focus on their status as victims, which generated expectations of grateful, undemanding behaviour. At the same time, the geographical isolation and relative monoculturalism of New Zealand society - that regarded itself as the most remote British outpost in the South Pacific - produced strong pressures for rapid adjustment to the new environment.

How did the Deckston children and Kindertransportees adjust to life in the Dominion? What factors aided or impeded their acculturation at the ‘edge of the Diaspora’? In answering these questions, we concentrate on major themes in oral histories such as departure from home and arrival in New Zealand, cultural contact, and the construction of homelands and identity. As the childhood and youth memories examined are at the intersection of various family constellations and group affiliations, we use selected examples to explore the effects of familial socialisation or affiliation with an outsider group on the experiences of the children.

### From Bialystok to Wellington: the Deckston Children

The story of the Deckston children in interwar Bialystok and Wellington is an ethnically-specific and inter-generational memory, and is largely obscured in the historiography of exile experiences of East European Jewry by other narratives of resettlement of children and youth from Central and Western Europe. Its omission is apparent in studies of other unofficial Kindertransports from Poland that saw children relocated before 1939 and thereafter in often dangerous circumstances to Australia, Palestine via Persia (the ‘Tehran Children’), to South Africa, and to New Zealand. In this context, the contribution of Max and Annie Deckston to undertake their own version of a ‘Kindertransport’, a privately-funded initiative that was curtailed in its ambition by a restrictive government and Commonwealth policy on immigration, cannot be overstated. The initiative also can be analysed for its ambivalent effects on the children and their