Refugee Voices
(The AJR Audio-Visual Testimony Archive):
A New Resource for the Study of the Kindertransport

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This report discusses the recently created filmed oral history resource, entitled ‘The AJR Refugee Voices Audio-Visual Testimony Archive’. It describes the content and scope of the archive and highlights its potential and value for future research and studies about the Kindertransport.

Introduction

In the last two decades exhibitions, plays, films, and books on the Kindertransport have been written and produced. The best known book in English, by Barry Turner ... And the Policeman Smiled: 10,000 Children Escape from Nazi Europe was published in 1990 and another book by Vera K. Fast, Children’s Exodus: A History of the Kindertransport, has recently been published. In German, Rebekka Göpfert published her study Der jüdische Kindertransport von Deutschland nach England 1938/39, in 1998. The academic literature on the Kindertransport is accompanied by many autobiographical studies, such as Karen Gershon, We Came as Children: A Collective Autobiography, published in English in 1966, Olga Levy Drucker, Kindertransport, published in 1992, Mona Golabek, The Children of Willesden Lane: Beyond the Kindertransport, published in 2002 and probably the best known, I Came Alone. The Stories of the Kindertransport, by Bertha Leverton and Shmuel Lowensohn, published in 1990.

However, Anthony Grenville states in a recent article in the AJR Journal that ‘no proper academic study of the history of the Kindertransports in English exists’ and that ‘a truly authoritative study of the subject [on the Kindertransport] remains to be written’. Grenville points out that no comprehensive study on the Kindertransport which follows the lives of the former Kinder to the present has been written. Most studies finish with a short section on the period after the war. In this short survey I would like to describe a new oral history resource which can help to fill this gap in the research, the AJR Refugee Voices Audio-Visual History Archive. Among the 150
interviews with Jewish refugees from Austria and Germany, 34 of whom had come to Britain on a Kindertransport. Projects like Refugee Voices and the AJR Kindertransport Survey (also featured in this Yearbook) will enable future researchers to study the long term effects of the experience of the Kindertransport on the lives of the children who came to Britain (and perhaps also on their descendents) and thus cover themes which have previously not been dealt with.

Background and Methodology of Refugee Voices

Refugee Voices is a collection of 150 filmed interviews with refugees from Nazism now living in Britain. It includes 450 hours of filmed interviews and more than 7,500 pages of transcripts. The interviews, the interview summaries, interview transcripts, and an extensive database are digitized and accessible at a number of academic institutions in the UK and world-wide. The aim of Refugee Voices was to capture the experiences of ‘ordinary’ German and Austrian Jewish refugees who have settled across the UK. Refugee Voices is an oral history archive and was inspired by the aims of the general oral history approach, which attempts to gather evidence of historical events and at the same time gives space to individual memory and the creation of narratives. Refugee Voices thus on the one hand gathered evidence of historical experiences not widely recorded, such as the post-war lives of the Kindertransportees in the UK and on the other hand enabled individuals to narrate his/her life story and to reflect on his/her experiences. The testimonies were all filmed and therefore provide the viewer with an additional layer of interpretation which includes gestures, movements, expressions, and silences. Each interview included a reflective section at the end which gave room to the interviewee to reflect on his/her experiences. Questions like ‘what impact did your experiences have on your life?’, ‘how different would your life had been if you had not been forced to emigrate?’, and ‘how would you describe yourself in terms of your identity?’ guided this reflective process.

The Kindertransport Interviews

This section will give a brief overview about the interviewees in the Refugee Voices Archive who came on a Kindertransport to the UK.