



The Holocaust and Wales – Episode 2: Leaving Home

Transcript

Morris Brodie: 1938. Nazi Germany. As the dust settles in the aftermath of the Kristallnacht pogrom, a train of child refugees approaches the Dutch border. Evelyn Kaye, a young Jewish girl from Vienna, sits nervously on board.

Evelyn Kaye: Well...the Nazis walked up and down and said if we made a noise, they'd stop the train and turn us off the train, and then the Gestapo got on at the border, and they said if we had any gold, we had to give it to the Gestapo otherwise they'd throw us off the train. And I had this lovely signet ring, and the bracelet, which I didn't dare wear, and I put it into the seat of the train, and it had disappeared. Yeah, I could never find it again.

Morris Brodie: In July 1939, another child refugee, Renate Collins, arrives in London from Prague.

Renate Collins: When I got to Liverpool Street station, the...my foster father, he was there waiting for me, and he was a Baptist minister, he had a black hat, black suit, black coat, and of course a minister's collar, and they just took me up to him, I caught hold of his hand and I went with him. I can't imagine how a child nowadays would go, but he just smiled at me and off we went.

Morris Brodie: By the middle of 1939, it was clear to many Jews in Central Europe that they were no longer safe in their own homes and workplaces. The annexation of Austria and Czechoslovakia, alongside a vicious pogrom in November 1938, prompted many Jews to flee the German Reich. This was no easy task, since few countries around the world were willing to accept them. Some, however, managed to escape to Britain, and to Wales.

I'm Morris Brodie, historian at Aberystwyth University. In this second episode of The Holocaust and Wales, we look at the perilous journeys taken by refugees to get to

Wales. How did they leave Central Europe? What barriers did they face? And how was their journey into the unknown?

For Claus Ascher (later Colin Anson), who lived in Aberdyfi, in Gwynedd, during the war, the spark for leaving was a tragic one. His father had been murdered by the Nazis in Dachau concentration camp in 1937 for speaking out against the regime. Making the decision to flee was just one of many challenges facing potential refugees.

Colin Anson: After my father was killed, it became obvious that there wouldn't be much of a future for me, and all manner of avenues were explored for immigrating here there and everywhere. There was an uncle of my half-sister [...] And this uncle was going to Cuba, and we were trying to get the necessary documentation. It was a scramble by all sorts of people, mostly Jewish people, trying to get out of the country in circumstances when it was being made very difficult to get out. And there was an enormous weight of red tape and many obstacles to overcome.

Morris Brodie: Some refugees had family in Britain who could help them escape. Lore Confino, who was eventually evacuated to Wales, was living in Frankfurt in 1938.

Lore Confino: And my father then phoned our family in England [...] And he phoned them up and he said, 'look here, you must help her to get...Lore help to...to come to you, because it will be either now or never.' And so, they managed to get all the papers together. And I remember in Frankfurt itself, I mean, there were long queues of Jews all needing to...to have their papers stamped and everything got ready for them to leave and there was a lot of [...] fear and nervousness. And I remember the queues, and you had to stand and wait. And then...it was all very, very stressful. And eventually [...] I got permission to leave.

Morris Brodie: The main problem for refugees was to find a country that would let them in. For hundreds of thousands of potential refugees, the door to safety was firmly shut. In Britain, one of the few ways to get a visa was to find a job as a domestic servant, like a housekeeper. Fanny Höchstetter, from Laupheim in Germany, managed to escape after her sister, Bertl, got her a job as a domestic servant in the Wirral, where she had managed to flee herself. Fanny then moved to Llangollen. Bertl first tried to get a visa for the US with the help of a famous relative, Carl Laemmle, living in California. Here's Ernie Hunter, Fanny's son.

Ernie Hunter: And Bertl wrote to him [...] and almost by return post, she got a one-million-dollar affidavit from Carl Laemmle [...] a guarantee [...] that she would not be a burden on the American state. Bertl went to the consulate [...] the American [...] Consulate in Stuttgart with this document, which you had to hand in [...] She got a number, and Bertl realised the number was going to take two or more years to get to, because there were annual quotas in addition to the entry requirements. And she didn't think she's gonna last that long, so she placed an advert in *The Times*, for a domestic job, because that's the only work women were allowed to do in the UK to get in, and a Mr Pretty, from Heswall in the Wirral, took her on as a housekeeper.

Morris Brodie: Another route for refugees to Britain was to find work as an agricultural labourer. Like domestic servants, the British government deemed farm workers to be in short supply during the 1930s. For Herman Rothman, who later worked on farms near Abergele in North Wales, gaining experience in agricultural work as well as fleeing Germany was a bonus. Herman's family intended to send him on hachshara, a Jewish training programme to prepare young people for life on a kibbutz (a type of agricultural planned community) in what was then the British Mandate of Palestine.

Herman Rothman: My parents thought it is a good idea if I would leave, and possibly also my brother, and arrangements were made to...to apply for...to be taken, either to Israel or anywhere else, because they were advised by their German, non-Jewish friends that the...there is no hope for you at all here. There's nothing here left. Nothing left. Take and go. They then arranged for me to go on Vorbereitungslager, for preparation for emigration to Palestine. But they said you go first to England where you will be trained in agricultural work, so that you could have a useful profession when you go to Palestine in those days.

Morris Brodie: Herman, who was 14 at the time, benefited from a policy which allowed unaccompanied child refugees to come to Britain without a visa, provided they were sponsored by friends, family, or other charitable organisations. This became known as the Kindertransport (children's transport). Ten thousand children were able to come to the UK under this scheme. Colin Anson was one of them.



Colin Anson: It eventually became possible through sponsorship of the Quakers, of the Society of Friends, to get me attached to a children's transport on the basis of a temporary [...] transit visa to Britain, which in turn was founded on the fact that I had applied for immigration into the United States, who would accept the application and give you a waiting number, because they would accept immigrants but only a certain quota.

Morris Brodie: The British government was willing to accept refugee children, but did not organise the transports themselves. This was the task of the Refugee Children's Movement, an umbrella organisation in the UK, as well as organisations in Europe. It was mainly Jewish associations, such as the Central British Fund for German Jewry, which funded the transports, but some children were supported by non-Jewish groups like the Quakers. Fifty pounds was needed for each child's upkeep, around £4,000 in today's money. Bea Green, who was later evacuated to Wales, came to Britain through the help of a well-known Anglo-Jewish Liberal family.

Bea Green: In my case, some friends, in fact, I think some distant relatives from Munich, came to Sevenoaks, where they met up, I think with a member of the Waley Cohen family, who were then or...had been Liberals, active Liberals, and this Waley Cohen woman, being a Liberal was...acquainted with a Mrs Williams, who was one of the leading lights, an old lady by then, who had already agreed to take a girl from Hamburg, and whether she had second thoughts about having one child, and that perhaps it might be better to have two, or whether she was persuaded by Mrs Waley Cohen, who had spoken to these distant relatives of ours, saying, you know, this is a nice girl, or whatever she said, she agreed to my coming to her house provided the £50 were found.

Morris Brodie: Five-year-old Renate Collins, from Prague, had agreed to stay with a couple in Porth, South Wales.

Renate Collins: I knew where I was coming to in Wales, because if you were under seven, you had to have a home to go to, and I've got pictures, which I've still got, of where I was going, the people, the husband and wife and the father, grand, grandfather, and they had pictures of me. And I've got letters here that I wrote, went back and forward and I particularly said, obviously my mother had typed the letter, that 'I hope there was no spinach in England, but if there was plenty of ice cream, I would probably



be a very good girl.' So, I don't know how good I was, because there wasn't much ice cream during the war! [Laughter]

Morris Brodie: The last main route through which refugees gained permission to enter Britain was for industrialists who agreed to open factories in pockets of high unemployment, known as 'Special Areas'. One of these 'Special Areas' was at Treforest, near Pontypridd. Des Golten, son of a factory owner and by then living in Prague, remembers the procedure.

Des Golten: So, and then in 1939 there came a mission to Prague from this country, and the mission was sponsored by the Board of Trade. And the purpose of the mission was to invite industrialists to come to this country, particularly to South Wales, to start a factory to employ people. So, in August 1939 we came to this country.

Morris Brodie: For those refugees who managed to get permission to leave, there were a number of restrictions. The Nazis were pleased to see Jews leave Germany, but only if they left their assets behind. The government imposed a Flight Tax on emigration, effectively stealing the savings and property of those leaving the country. For many, leaving the Reich meant starting a new life almost from scratch. Children on the Kindertransport were only allowed to bring with them one suitcase, and a small amount of money: 10 Reichsmarks. Bea Green's mother helped her pack.

Bea Green: So, she packed, I know this sounds very funny now, but she packed my dowry in the sack. So I had initialled sheets, and blankets, and Eider downs, you know with, I don't know, duck or goose feathers or whatever. All in this sack. This was...this was my dowry for when I got married and I was 14 years old then. But this is how my mother thought, you know, that she had had a dowry, so her daughter must have a dowry.

Morris Brodie: Herman Rothman, a keen athlete, prioritised sporting prowess over practicality when he packed.

Herman Rothman: I was only permitted to take a case, and [...] I...my importance to me was that I had my spikes, my running shoes with me, and anything appertaining to



athletics had priority before anything else. But I had no winter coat and many, many other things I had to leave behind.

Morris Brodie: The most common way to leave the German Reich was by train, through the Netherlands, and onward to Britain by boat. For children on the Kindertransport, only one parent was permitted at the train station. This was often the last time they ever saw them. Julius Weil's class was evacuated from Cologne after their school was destroyed during the Kristallnacht pogrom. His father had already been arrested, so his mother saw him off.

Julius Weil: Yes, I can remember, I can see it now. I can see us at the main station called the Hauptbahnhof, in, in Cologne, on the platform getting onto a train. I think it was about three o'clock in the afternoon. And my mother was there seeing me onto the train. And it was a whole class [...] which was then moving to, to England [...] And, I, I could say at this point that, out of the family, I'm the only one who remains – not, not today, but due to the Holocaust, where the rest of my family were victims of the Holocaust. I was the only one who left Germany.

Morris Brodie: Renate Collins was assigned to a Kindertransport organised by Nicholas Winton, a British bank worker whose efforts helped save over 600 children from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia. Renate was ill when the time came for her train to leave Prague.

Renate Collins: One of my mother's best friends was our doctor, and she was putting her daughter on. She was, Tanya was about eleven years older than me, so I had chickenpox and a temperature of 104, and my mother really didn't want to put me on the train, and the doctor said, 'Well, if you don't put her on the train, she won't go.' Which is quite ironic, because the next train of Sir Nicholas's, they were actually on the train, and it was stopped.

Morris Brodie: Renate's Kindertransport was the last to get out of Czechoslovakia. She never saw her parents again. Even after leaving the station, while in Germany trains were still subject to searches and seizures by the Nazis. The promised land for those travelling through Germany, at least initially, was the Dutch border. For Colin Anson, it was a special moment.



Colin Anson: Our frontier station was Emmerich where everybody was ordered off the train and the SS frontier police had a...a last cruel game with us saying that we wouldn't be allowed to go and scattering our luggage about and cutting off people's ties in case they had hidden foreign currency in it and that sort of thing. And then with a laugh, eventually letting us back, back onto the train. And as the train pulled out, we all felt rather washed out. And not very long afterwards, the compartment door was flung open and Mr Blaschke called 'Wir sind auf holländischem boden! (We are on Dutch soil!)'. And I've never had such a traumatic, emotional shock in my life, not even when my father died – or was killed – because we were under such pressure that one, one accept...accepted that, one expected the worst at all times and to have lived under such pressure and grown quite accustomed to it for so long, made one totally unprepared for the sudden explosive release of that pressure at the moment, when we were told that we were no longer under it. I thought I'd faint. It was an amazing moment, I shall never forget it so long as I live.

Morris Brodie: Bea Green remembers the hospitality of the Dutch after crossing the German border.

Bea Green: When we finally left Germany and chug chug chugged into Holland, the train stopped again once we got into Holland, and these wonderful Dutch women came on the train. They were all big and blonde, I think, at least that's the impression I had. And they were so nice to us. And it was such an extraordinary experience. And they handed out orange juice and white bread and butter. And you know, I don't think anything had tasted so absolutely marvellous as that orange juice and that white bread and butter.

Morris Brodie: The final stage of the journey was usually by ship to a coastal town, and then a train to London. Des Golten left mainland Europe at the Hook of Holland.

Des Golten: We boarded the ship, and we went to Harwich. And on the ship, there were little children, English children, who spoke English perfect, perfectly. And I was wondering how it's possible that such little children could speak English so well, whereas I couldn't speak a word of English [...] I remember I came to this country with



great pleasure, and great anticipation. And I was expecting that I'll come to this country and it'll be nothing but rain all the day. But fortunately, the weather was very good.

Morris Brodie: In Britain, refugees were safe from the Nazis' clutches, even if many had been forced to leave their families behind in Europe. In the next episode, we discover how they adapted to their new lives in Wales, how the local community welcomed them, and how their status changed as the Second World War progressed. Until next time, thanks for listening.