

Kindertransport & Child Refugees in Wales: Part 1 - Driving Forces

Brief history: Kinderstransport

SETTING THE STAGE

On 9-10 November 1938, Jewish homes, shops and synagogues were destroyed during Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass). This Nazi-sponsored violence occurred throughout Germany and in the German annexed territories of Austria and the Sudetenland (in Czechoslovakia). Following Kristallnacht, and after a debate in the House of Commons, Great Britain agreed to help an unspecified number of orphans and child refugees. The children had to be under the age of 17 and would have to travel as unaccompanied minors. Each child needed a sponsor to pay for their care and education, and to fund their return home after the danger had passed. The British Broadcasting Company (BBC) Home Service issued a plea to British citizens to open their homes to child refugees. Volunteers went to Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe to organise transports. Organisations in Great Britain helped to prepare for the arrival of the children. This effort became known as the Kindertransport (Children's Transport).

KINDERTRANSPORT

The first Kindertransport left Berlin, Germany, on 1 December 1938, and arrived in Harwich, Great Britain, on 2 December 1938. Most children travelled by train to ports in Belgium and the Netherlands, where they boarded a ship for Harwich. Some children travelled from Czechoslovakia to Great Britain by plane. Transports continued to leave from major cities such as Berlin, Vienna, and Prague, until 1 September 1939, the day World War II began. The last transport left from the Netherlands on 14 May 1940 – four days after the Nazis invaded. Once the children arrived in Great Britain, they were sent to live with foster families. If no family had been found for them, the children were sent to hostels, boarding schools or farms. Between 9,000 and 10,000 children were saved, including 7,500 Jewish children. Most of the children were treated well in their new homes, but some were beaten, starved and treated as hired help. Approximately 1,000 of the children – mostly boys over the age of 17 – were held in internment camps in Canada, Australia, or on the Isle of Man. Once they were old enough, some joined the British army.

AFTERMATH

When the children left their homes, they believed the separation from their family members would be temporary and that they would eventually return home to be reunited. However, most family members left behind in Nazi-occupied Europe were killed during the Holocaust. In 2018, Germany announced that it would pay €2,500 (£2,249 in 2018) to each living Kindertransport survivor.

TESTIMONY

USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive (VHA) preserves over 55,000 testimonies of Holocaust and genocide survivors and witnesses, including 750 Holocaust testimonies that discuss the Kindertransport.