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The politics of compassion: the Refugee Children's Movement and caring for the Kinder

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The Kindertransport migrations of 10,000 children from Nazi-occupied Europe to Britain were organized with great urgency as a response to Kristallnacht in late 1938 and carried on into 1939, when the danger faced by children deemed Jewish or “non-Aryan” under Nazi rule became terribly apparent. Although the parents of the children were facing the same peril, they were not usually allowed by the British authorities to accompany their children to refuge.¹ The Kindertransports thus remain by far the single biggest immigration of unaccompanied children to Britain to date. As children alone, the Kinder needed financial and practical care. The “basic machinery” for this care, as Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz has outlined in *Never Look Back* (2012), had already been established between 1933 and 1938 through a network of émigré schools and Jewish refugee committees that had been moulded by increasing need into efficient conduits for care.²

After Kristallnacht on 9/10 November 1938, the Movement for the Care of Children from Germany (known from July 1939 as the Refugee Children's Movement [RCM], the name I will use here for clarity) was hurriedly established as the primary organization for care of the Kinder by a coalition of the largest of the many voluntary groups that had already been working with refugees, led by the Central British Fund for German Jewry. Other groups involved were the Central Council for Jewish Refugees, the Inter-Aid Committee for Children from Germany, the Society of Friends (Quakers), Save the Children Fund and the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia, along with representatives from the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England.

The RCM was originally based at Woburn House in central London and

1 For the most authoritative account of British migration policy during this period see Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933–1948: British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees, and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

2 Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, *Never Look Back: The Jewish Refugee Children in Great Britain, 1938–1945* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2012), esp. 23–48.

then at Bloomsbury House from early 1939 and was initially largely funded by the Central Council for Jewish Refugees' appeal of 1938/39, which had raised about £800,000, supplemented by additional funds through donations and grants.³ In spring 1939 this was augmented by a £220,000 grant from the Baldwin Fund,⁴ which was intended to guarantee the costs of subsequent transmigration of the children and just about lasted until October 1941, when the government began to pay seventy-five per cent of the administration costs of the RCM, including a guaranteed weekly subsistence payment for foster carers.

In the last twenty years, an increasing number of historians have moved away from the initial focus on memory literature in Kindertransport research to examine the organizational mechanics behind the migration. Lousie London's influential work is the definitive account of British government policy towards Jewish refugees from fascism.⁵ She is critical of the "self-interest" of government policy that resulted in a betrayal of the humanitarian impulse and an insufficient response to the dire need of European Jewry. Pamela Shatzkes's account, *Holocaust and Rescue* (2002), provides a detailed redemption of the work of Anglo-Jewry from previous accusations of an insufficient response to the suffering of their co-religionists. She emphasizes the dire financial situation and overwork of the main Jewish refugee organizations, saying they were "ill-equipped for the huge scale of the task".⁶ Amy Zahl Gottlieb in *Men of Vision* (1998) gave a largely sympathetic top-down analysis of the leadership and organization of the Central British Fund for Jewish Relief in the period, praising the "men of honour" and the "women who worked with them".⁷ Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz discusses the establishment of the RCM in instructive detail and makes it apparent that the leadership of the organization was, at least initially, simply a continuation of the organizational heft of the Council for German Jewry under a new name.⁸

3 Letter from C. H. Nathan, auditor, 21 June 1940, ACC 2793/03/04/01-03, Accounts, RCM/Central Jewish Fund Archives, London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter, LMA), London.

4 John Presland (Gladys Bendit), "A Great Adventure: The Story of the Refugee Children's Movement", July 1944, ACC 2793/03/04/11, *ibid.*

5 London, *Whitehall and the Jews*.

6 Pamela Shatzkes, *Holocaust and Rescue: Impotent or Indifferent? Anglo-Jewry 1938-1945* (London and New York: Palgrave, 2002), 81.

7 Amy Zahl Gottlieb, *Men of Vision: Anglo-Jewry's Aid to Victims of the Nazi Regime* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), 196-7.

8 Baumel-Schwartz, *Never Look Back*, 55-7.

Shatzkes and Baumel-Schwartz have comprehensively established the context and practical details of the organization of the Kindertransports. In this article I build on their work and use as the main source material the archives of the RCM to examine the construction of both a legal and financial framework and an institutional ethics of care around the Kinder. I first establish the legal and financial footing on which the maintenance of the Kinder was based and then look at the arrangements for foster care, placing them in the context of philosophies of child welfare of the period. I examine some of the criticisms that have been made of the care of the Kinder and attempt a rationalization of certain problematic decisions. I argue that compassion was present in the conceptualization of the Kinder's care at all levels – from the British government to the RCM to foster carers to, mostly, the British public. Compassion, though, was not always enough. Missteps were made and the structural politics of the care were mired in bureaucratic crisis, perennial lack of money, fear of public outcry, and unstable wartime conditions.

Although the RCM was to oversee the care of the Kinder once in Britain, the organization was an international project, with the organizers on the British side working extremely closely with religious leaders and social workers in Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. It was initially organized by this international coalition of religious and political voluntary agencies with the acceptance of the British, Austrian, German, and Czech governments, and was subsequently financially and legislatively supported by the British government. The project was envisaged to be internationally transmigratory although, given the international political instability, the government and voluntary agencies involved also had to anticipate the likelihood of the children staying long-term.⁹

In the context of a public memory-culture around the Kindertransport that many historians working on the subject agree is overly simplistic and celebratory, a clear-eyed analysis of the practicalities and problems surrounding the care of the Kinder is useful.¹⁰ This article is not about

9 See Paula Hill, "Anglo-Jewry and the Refugee Children, 1938–1945" (Ph.D. thesis, Royal Holloway University of London, 2001); Jennifer Norton, "The Kindertransport: History and Memory" (MA thesis, California State University Sacramento, 2010), <http://csus-dspace.calstate.edu/handle/10211.9/832> (accessed 12 July 2019); Jennifer Craig-Norton, *The Kindertransport: Contesting Memory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

10 Caroline Sharples, "The Kindertransport in British Historical Memory", in *The Kindertransport to Britain 1938/39: New Perspectives*, ed. Andrea Hammell and Bea Lewkowicz, *Yearbook of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies* 13 (Amsterdam and

hailing forgotten heroes of care, not because there are no forgotten heroes but because that kind of research does not allow a serious understanding of the politics of care. Many of those caring for the Kinder at the RCM and in their homes believed they were primarily motivated to do so on humanitarian or compassionate grounds. This benevolence of intention did not automatically result in an uncomplicated happy-ending story. Compassion, additionally, is not particularly helpful as a historical lodestar. A defensive position on intention can prevent a systematic analysis of the wider social and political implications of a project, particularly one that evokes such powerful retrospective emotions as child trauma.

The motivations of those organizing the Kindertransport and the politics that allowed them to do it should be understood in context. Ideas of child welfare in the 1930s were less focused on attachment than they are today and more on the physical wellbeing and social mobility of the child. In a broader geopolitical context, transnational fostering and adoption of children is always a result of what a leading theorist has termed “a global crisis of social reproduction”.¹¹ As such, it inevitably forces an awkward smoothing over of family and cultural catastrophe. As London points out, “one reason for British readiness to accept child refugees was because Anglicisation would minimise the extent to which their ethnicity would be perceived as alien”.¹² Tara Zahra, one of the leading historians of child migration, goes further than London and has argued in *The Lost Children* (2011) that, while assimilation into a new society kept children safe, it also “transformed children into a form of plunder, to be captured and remodelled by nations looking to expand their ranks”.¹³ Those in the RCM were painfully aware that the children’s migration to Britain was contingent on their assimilation, but felt that children were adaptable. They considered that getting as many children as possible to as safe an environment as possible was the best they could do with limited time and funds. As vulnerable children alone, their basic maintenance was to be ensured with as much consideration as was realistically possible in the

New York: Rodopi, 2012), 24; see also Tony Kushner, *The Battle of Britishness: Migrant Journeys 1685 to the Present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), ch. 5, “Constructing (Another) Ideal Refugee Journey: The Kinder”, 124.

11 Karen Wells, *Childhood in a Global Perspective* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 93.

12 London, *Whitehall and the Jews*, 281.

13 Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe’s Families after World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 36.

circumstances. As small players in a global crisis, their unaccompanied migration was symbolic of the bitter limits of the humanitarian impulse.

The Refugee Children's Movement and the framework of care

The Kindertransport was organized rapidly in response to Kristallnacht, when the immediacy of the danger faced by those considered Jewish under Nazi legislation became clear. In the first few weeks of the migration, priority was given by the newly formed RCM to the children perceived to be in the most danger, mainly Jewish orphans and teenage boys. This strategy, however, rapidly changed as organizers wanted children who, according to their own definitions (of which more later), would integrate easily into British life. Claudia Curio, in “‘Invisible’ Children” (2004), has established that a deliberate policy of selecting children who would “give a positive impression and thus . . . support further emigration” was rapidly implemented.¹⁴ The voluntary associations under the RCM umbrella had limited funds and staff. Under the terms of agreement with the Home Office, the RCM had initially assumed financial responsibility for the care and education of each Kind until they reached the age of eighteen, at which point it was expected that they would migrate or at least become self-supporting. The legal position was in fact imprecise. While the Home Office held the RCM to be nominally responsible for the children in its caseload, no one was strictly legally responsible for the children.

It was immediately clear that not all children whose parents wanted them to come would be able to do so. A process of selection was clearly going to be necessary and rapidly assumed two strands. This is relevant here as the selection pathways fed directly into the way the children were subsequently cared for.

First selected were the children who, through their own connections (whether family, business, through friends, or a school), were able to get a British person to stand as guarantor and offer the £50 surety of subsequent transmigration that was required from 1 March 1939 onwards on their behalf. Being able to find a private guarantor could be a sign that children were from a middle-class and well-connected family with international friends and an ability to write in English. A degree of selection by class was implicit in this. The children who had private guarantors would often

14 Claudia Curio and Toby Axelrod, “‘Invisible’ Children: The Selection and Integration Strategies of Relief Organizations”, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 23, no. 1 (2004): 48.

(although not always) be found foster care through the same network, whether this was extended family, a local Jewish refugee committee, or a benevolent stranger. These children therefore bypassed much of the administrative mechanics of Bloomsbury House.

Secondly, the European aid committees nominated by the RCM chose children without guarantors. In Vienna this was done jointly by the main local Jewish organizations, the Kultusgemeinde, the Paulusbund, and the Society of Friends. In Berlin, the Paulusbund made the political and Christian selections (which were relatively few), while the Reichsvertretung, supported by a coalition of smaller Jewish organizations and social workers, chose the Jewish children. In Prague, British volunteers from the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia (which initially represented the *News Chronicle* newspaper, the Labour Party, and the Society of Friends) worked alongside local Jewish social workers to select children.¹⁵

On arrival in Britain, most of the children in the first few months of the migration programme passed through one of two temporary reception camps established for the purpose in two disused holiday parks, Dovercourt Bay Holiday Camp near Harwich in Essex and Pakefield, near Lowestoft in Suffolk. Matching of children with prospective foster families often took place at these holiday camps. Former Kinder have spoken movingly of the process of being scrutinized and chosen (or not chosen) by foster parents.¹⁶ The children without guarantors and private fostering arrangements were either found placements with strangers at the reception camps, through small regional refugee committees, placed through schools, or placed in group foster homes that were often funded by local Jewish communities or sometimes by other religious groups.

In January 1940, the British government decided to allocate considerable funds to the voluntary agencies that supported refugees. There were particular qualifications but, broadly, all voluntary organizations that

15 For the most detailed account of the organization between Germany and Britain, see the work of Claudia Curio, esp. *Verfolgung, Flucht, Rettung: Die Kindertransporte 1938/39 nach Grossbritannien* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2006). For a comprehensive account of the organization of the Prague Kindertransport, see Laura E. Brade and Rose Holmes, "Troublesome Sainthood: Nicholas Winton and the Contested History of Child Rescue in Prague, 1938–1940", *History and Memory* 29, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2017): 3–40.

16 See Imperial War Museum Sound Archive's (IWMSA) long interviews with former Kinder with detailed accounts of the Dovercourt experience: e.g. Manfred Landau, IWMSA, ACC/18487; Frank Peter Henley, IWMSA, ACC/30066; Celia Jane Lee, IWMSA, ACC/17635; Gitta Rossi-Zalmons, IWMSA, ACC/20105, Imperial War Museum, London.

supported refugees were eligible for half of their running costs for the first six months of 1940, subject to a monthly maximum of £27,000.¹⁷ An official letter was sent to refugee organizations: "In putting forward this scheme of assistance, the Government asks voluntary organisations to do their utmost to prevent refugees from becoming a charge on Public Assistance, and to maintain the voluntary assistance in kind and in service which has hitherto been given to refugees by way of guarantees, hospitality and service."¹⁸ In summer 1940, the Central Council for Jewish Refugees, which provided the supervision and administration for the RCM, made it clear that it was no longer able to function on this fifty per cent funding basis. As a consequence of this, from 1 October 1940, the British government agreed to meet all the maintenance obligations for refugees, and seventy-five per cent of the costs of administration, care, and emigration.¹⁹ Supplemented by additional funds raised through public subscription, this increased grant largely sufficed for the next year. In October 1941 the RCM applied to the Home Office for extra maintenance guarantees for children in its care. It had, until this point, depended on a grant of £220,000 from the Baldwin Fund to supplement maintenance costs for children, but the funds had nearly run out. The Home Office agreed to give 18 shillings a week for children living with foster parents and the like.²⁰ It is significant that, until this date, payment for foster carers was dependent on the arrangements put in place for each individual child and was by no means guaranteed.

The Guardianship (Refugee Children) Act 1944 was created to establish a definitive legal position and ensure the short- and long-term care of unaccompanied or refugee children. It made Lord Gorell, the chairman of the RCM, the legal guardian of all the under-age children in the care of the RCM. The Act was created specifically for child refugees from fascism (including those from Spain), with the criteria being "that the person arrived in the United Kingdom at any time after the end of the year nineteen hundred and thirty six in consequence of war (whether foreign or civil) or

17 Central Committee for Refugees, Memorandum on Government Grant to Voluntary Refugee Organisations, 13 May 1940, ACC 2793/03/01/07, RCM/Central Jewish Fund Archives, LMA.

18 Minute, 23 January 1940, Germany Emergency Committee Minute Book 1939–40, Friends House Archives, London.

19 Central Council for Jewish Refugees, Notes on the Accounts of the 1940 Appeal, ACC 2793/03/04/03, RCM/Central Jewish Fund Archives, LMA.

20 Refugee Children's Movement Ltd, Third Annual Report, 1941–42, ACC 2793/03/04/04/3, *ibid.*

of religious, racial or political persecution, and had not at the time of his arrival attained the age of sixteen years.”²¹ It effectively changed the law, which had previously limited adoption to British-born children, to allow those who cared for now orphaned Kinder to adopt them if they wished. Legally, until the guardianship act came into force, the RCM had actually had no right to remove children from unsuitable foster placements or make decisions about their future. It had been anticipated that all such decisions would be made by discussion with the parents about what was best for their child. Of course, by 1944 this was no longer possible for many of the children, a significant number of whom nonetheless remained legal minors.

The RCM described its work as “to care for the children’s every need”.²² This would include their emotional, physical, educational, and financial welfare. The RCM, however, was responding to a sudden crisis, meaning that the practical, legal, and financial framework of care for the Kinder was largely put in place after the children had arrived in Britain. This had the benefit of being responsive to their changing situation and the drawback of lagging behind rather than anticipating their needs. The Kinder were cared for by negotiation. Their parents had had to relinquish nearly all decision-making about the welfare of their children to the RCM. In negotiation with the Central Council for Jewish Refugees and the Home Office, measures were gradually put in place to ensure the maintenance of the children until they reached adulthood.

*The context of caring for the Kinder: foster care, adoption,
and social work in British society*

The family is a governed and regulated social unit. Agents of the state enforce the legal responsibilities of parents towards their children. Some families are viewed as legitimate and some as problematic. In this context, as Karen Wells points out, transnational adoption and fostering is always related to a “global crisis of social reproduction” that compels a fundamental negotiation of the child’s reconstitution in a new social context.²³ Of course, the Kindertransport migration to Britain was initially

21 The Guardianship (Refugee Children) Act 1944, 5 Sept. 1944, HO 45/22391, The National Archives, Kew.

22 RCM Administration, Internal Report, 14 Jan. 1942, ACC 2793/5/RCM/5, RCM/Central Jewish Fund Archives, LMA.

23 Karen Wells, *Childhood in a Global Perspective* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 93.

intended to be both temporary and transmigratory, so the status of the Kinder as potential adoptees was not initially envisaged but came after they had already been fostered in Britain for some time.

Foster care of the Kinder additionally took place in the context of a rapidly changing system and philosophy of care in Britain. In the period after the First World War, social and welfare work was increasingly professionalized and formalized. Degree programmes, courses, and professional certifications were introduced. In 1925 Elizabeth Macadam published the first account of social work in Britain, in which she argued that it was “the application of economic and philosophical theories to practical social organisation”.²⁴ For Macadam and her peers, removing vague missionary ideas about just needing love and prayer to reform society was fundamental to decreasing poverty and suffering. Improved social service financial provision to provide basic welfare for even the poorest families ensued, meaning that fewer children were placed in group homes. It became clear to all involved in working with families that “the foundation of education must be a good start in a home which contains at least the minimum essentials of healthy family life”.²⁵

The first legislation introducing formalized legal adoption of children in the United Kingdom was passed in 1926.²⁶ Before this, foster care and adoption had been based on informal arrangements or institutional care. Given the need in the British Empire for labour, it was relatively commonplace for institutionalized children to be forcibly migrated to Canada or Australia to be apprenticed in agricultural or domestic work.²⁷ This practice did not end until the 1970s. Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt in *Children in English Society* (1973) linked the end of this practice to both an “increasing sensitivity to the welfare of the children of even the poorest” and a declining need for colonial labour.²⁸ In 1949 the Adoption of Children Act gave adopted children exactly the same status within a

24 Elizabeth Macadam, *The Equipment of the Social Worker* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1925), 16.

25 Elizabeth Macadam, *The New Philanthropy: A Study of the Relations between the Statutory and Voluntary Social Services* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1934), 189.

26 Adoption of Children Act, 1926 (16 & 17 Geo. 5, Ch. 29), National Archives, Kew.

27 Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt, *Children in English Society*, vol. 2: *From the Eighteenth Century to the Children Act 1948* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), ch. 18, “Transportation and Emigration”.

28 *Ibid.*, 581.

family as birth children.²⁹ The 1949 legislation meant that, for the first time in Britain, adoption would attempt to recreate family ties and legal status, placing social relationships on the same legal footing as blood relationships. Heather Montgomery in *Childhood and Violence in the Western Tradition* (2010) has established that social attitudes to adoption in the mid-twentieth century were closely linked to social mobility and giving a child a better chance, hence pressure on unmarried mothers to give up their babies to wealthier, more stable families. This contrasts with social attitudes that became more common later in the twentieth century that emphasized the importance of family attachment to the welfare of mother and child.³⁰

The migration of the Kinder came between the 1926 and 1949 pieces of legislation. Social sensitivities about what was in the best interests of a child were evolving. It was generally considered that, while institutional care was sometimes unavoidable, a family environment was much preferable. Blood ties could be mimicked but not replaced. The welfare of children should be overseen by professional social workers acting as agents of the government.

Foster carers: supervision and support

In accordance with the preferred family-based welfare model of the time, the RCM placed responsibility for the welfare of the Kinder “mainly in the hands of the families with which they stay”.³¹ Foster homes were always preferred by the RCM to group homes where possible, as a stable home environment was considered to be better for a child’s emotional wellbeing. Foster placements were arranged and monitored by the welfare officers employed by the twelve regional committees of the RCM, which were based on the Civil Defence regions of the country (1 Sunderland; 2 Leeds; 3 Nottingham; 4 Cambridge; 5 London; 6 Oxford; 7 Gloucester; 8 Cardiff; 9 Birmingham; 10 Manchester; 11 Scotland; 12 Tunbridge Wells). Once placed in a foster home, each child was to be visited by a welfare officer twice a year at a minimum and more often if there were any concerns. The paid employees of the regional committees were further supported by

29 Adoption of Children Act 1949 (1949 ch. 98), National Archives.

30 Heather Montgomery, “Unwanted Children and Adoption in England”, in *Childhood and Violence in the Western Tradition*, ed. Laurence Brockliss and Heather Montgomery (Oxford and Oakville, Canada: Oxbow Books, 2010), 83–90.

31 Movement for the Care of Children from Germany, First Annual Report 1938–39, ACC 2793/03/04/04/1, RCM/Central Jewish Fund Archives, LMA, 12.

local voluntary committees and in some places by the National Council of Social Service.

In assessing the suitability of a prospective foster home, a welfare officer would make a home visit. The “hostess” would be judged on her ability to provide a “real home” for a child, taking into account the child’s need for love and security, inclusion as member of a family, provision of training and supervision, and kindly discipline. The home would be assessed for cleanliness, comfort, and amenities such as a proper bed, outside space, and room to study.³²

The RCM gave instructions to foster carers. These were a blend of an appeal for immediate benevolent treatment of the children and a sad pragmatism about their futures. It was emphasized that children should be cared for in a home environment and should be treated as part of the family. For example, foster carers were urged to be tolerant and understanding about small behavioural infractions: “It cannot be too strongly emphasized that bed-wetting, petty pilfering, lying and similar signs of instability of character are sometimes symptoms of deep-seated nervous disturbance and should not be lightly dismissed or treated by penal methods.”³³ But families were left under no illusions that there would be funds made available to support the children as young adults: “As soon as refugees leave school they should seek employment. It is detrimental for any child to be without definite work and this is especially true of refugee children, who must fit themselves for a future life of independence and self-reliance.”³⁴

Being “anglicised” was encouraged. It was seen as best for children that they should quickly come to understand English language and customs. They were not advised by the RCM to alter their names to more English-sounding versions but this was certainly not discouraged. Children were praised for attempts at integration, especially for joining clubs such as the Girl Guides or Boy Scouts and making British friends.

Each of the Kinder was supposed to have a welfare check from a member of the regional committee supervising care every six months.³⁵ This

32 Dorothy Hardisty, Care of Children Committee Paper no. 56, ACC 2793/5/RCM/4, *ibid.*

33 Instructions for the Guidance of Regional and Local Committees, ACC 2793/03/04/01, *ibid.*, 17.

34 *Ibid.*, 13.

35 “Welfare Report” form, ACC/2793/5/RCM/2, RCM/Central Jewish Fund Archives, LMA.

included a check on the health, education, standard of English, support network, and future plans for each child. Any concerns would be escalated through the regional secretary and potentially back to Bloomsbury House.

In seeking initial and continued legal and financial support for the Kindertransportees from the Home Office, the RCM found it necessary to emphasize that the children could become “useful and valuable citizens”.³⁶ Kinder were accepted into the literal and metaphorical British home but their acceptance was precarious. The RCM was well aware of the potential for public antisemitism or anti-foreign sentiment directed at the children and was at pains to stress their assimilability. In accordance with the child welfare philosophy of the period, efforts were made to secure home environments for children where possible but, aside from the biannual checks, little subsequent monitoring of those placements took place.

Controversies of care

Of all aspects of the care of the Kinder, two have generated the most discussion and controversy. First, the failure to guarantee basic provision of religious education for the Kinder, which led for some to the subsequent loss of Jewish faith, culture, and identity. This criticism centres on Solomon Schonfeld, who has been described by Bill Williams as a “maverick British orthodox Rabbi”.³⁷ Schonfeld, working with the Chief Rabbi’s Religious Emergency Council (CRREC), was effectively running a smaller Orthodox Jewish Kindertransport that brought over about 300 children alongside the RCM’s larger scheme. Notoriously sketchy about administrative details, Schonfeld was by all accounts a dynamic and difficult personality. Shatzkes says that he was regarded by the establishment, not unreasonably, as a “loose cannon”.³⁸ He worked with tireless zeal to get as many Orthodox children as possible to safety and also attempted the impossible task of trying to provide a comprehensive Jewish education to all the Jewish Kinder. Schonfeld publicly criticized the RCM in the *Jewish Chronicle* and in a pamphlet entitled *The Child-Estranging Movement* for the inadequacy of the religious provision provided, and failure to guarantee

36 Refugee Children’s Movement Ltd, Memorandum for the Consideration of the Home Secretary, 27 Sept. 1945, ACC/2793/5/RCM/2, *ibid*.

37 Bill Williams, “Jews and other foreigners”: *Manchester and the Rescue of the Victims of European Fascism, 1933–1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 217.

38 Shatzkes, *Holocaust and Rescue*, 76.

foster homes of the appropriate religious environment.³⁹ The RCM was defensive of its position, noting in 1944 that it “regards the spiritual life of the child as the foundation of its well-being” and had tried sincerely to ensure religious instruction was available.⁴⁰ It also noted that to provide an Orthodox environment in practice often meant a group home setting rather than a family home, and a family foster home was considered more important to child welfare than religious observation. Baumel-Schwarz attributes inadequate religious supervision to the initial failure to ensure Orthodox Jewish representation at a senior level in the RCM, which effectively meant that Orthodox provision was left to chance.⁴¹

Reading the RCM committee minutes and files, there was certainly little planning about the religious provision for children. Attempts were made, at least initially, to match children with foster parents of the same religious denomination, especially for the majority of the children who were placed in cities such as London or Manchester with large Jewish communities. But many children were subsequently moved again due to evacuation or the breakdown of placements and, when children were living outside urban areas, finding religious instruction could prove a step too far. After the Schonfeld accusations, a Religious Teaching Special Committee was established in 1941, which responded seriously to any reports of children who were being denied the chance to study their religion.⁴² The biannual welfare checks were also reviewed in 1941 to include a monitoring of support for religious practice. As far as it goes, Schonfeld was probably right in his criticism of the initial inadequacy of supervision, although measures were taken in sincerity to rectify this initial oversight. The questions for posterity are whether, in the circumstances, any more could realistically have been done, and whether lack of provision for religious education was a damnable offence. And that remains open to debate depending on how fundamental one considers religion to identity and welfare.

The second subject that has caused some controversy is the inadequate provision for higher and professional education. There was a continual

39 Solomon Schonfeld, “Religious Education of Refugee Children: Surveying the Problems”, *Jewish Chronicle*, 12 Nov. 1943; *The Child Estranging Movement: An Expose on the Alienation of Jewish Refugee Children in Great Britain from Judaism* (London: Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, Jan. 1944).

40 Presland, “Great Adventure”, 8.

41 Baumel-Schwartz, *Never Look Back*, 57.

42 See Religious Teaching Special Committee and Sub-Committee Minutes and Reports, 11 June 1941–June 1949, ACC 2793/5/RCM/4, RCM/Central Jewish Fund Archives, LMA.

tension between the need to provide basic welfare – food, housing, and clothing – for refugee children and the acknowledged long-term need to equip them to provide sufficiently for themselves in adult life. As the Central British Fund committee noted, “it would be more advantageous to spend more generously not only on maintenance of refugees but upon their training, education and welfare”.⁴³

The position of the RCM on education was unequivocal and did not change during the period of its care of the refugee children: “The Movement caters for elementary education only, which is free. If it is thought desirable to give higher education to a promising child this must not be at the expense of movement funds, but should be furnished through local efforts, or through the generosity of a private benefactor or group of benefactors.”⁴⁴ In practice this meant that bright children, sometimes from professional backgrounds, could be denied the kind of educational opportunity they would have expected to receive under different circumstances. Unless private funding could be found, Kinder were expected to leave school at the end of the term in which they turned fourteen and find training leading to employment at the age of sixteen. They were to be encouraged to take evening classes to continue their education alongside their paid work.

This lack of funding for higher education was compounded by the fact that, even if a child was entered for and won a prize, bursary, or scholarship, the Board of Education had placed restrictions on refugees entering higher education by means of scholarships. Exceptions could be made in individual cases but Kinder were sometimes required to turn down places they had won at universities. The RCM chose not to intercede with the government on this matter, as the institutional philosophy was that “frequently Training or Technical Education seemed more valuable”.⁴⁵ It was judged that, given the precarious Movement finances and dependence on government funding, to make too much of educational inequalities with the government might be to “prejudice good arrangements”.⁴⁶

The RCM initially pushed agricultural training on boys, proposing that

43 Central Committee for Refugees, Memorandum on Government Grant to Voluntary Refugee Organisations, 13 May 1940, ACC 2793/03/01/07.

44 The Executive Committee of the Movement for the Care of Children from Germany, Instructions for the Guidance of Regional and Local Committees, May 1940, ACC 2793/03/04/01, 8.

45 Conference of Regional Chairmen and Representatives of their Committees, 16 July 1941, ACC 2793/5/RCM/1.

46 Ibid.

it was one of the best chances for future employment. Boys aged between fourteen and sixteen could be placed in an agricultural training group home that would equip them to earn their living. Girls were encouraged into domestic training although it was recognized that, like their British counterparts, they “would not stay in domestic service a minute longer than could be helped”.⁴⁷ In fact, the onset of war and the associated rapidly changing labour market meant that initial concerns about employment for the older Kinder soon abated. There were plenty of war jobs and the entire structure of the job market changed. By 1945, most of the older boys were in the armed forces, mainly the army, with the next largest category of employment being engineering. The girls tended to work in clerical jobs, clothing (mostly dress-making), engineering, nursing, or the armed forces.⁴⁸

“Is a maid kept?” The blurred boundaries of care and domestic labour

A third significant issue of care that has not been a subject of particular debate among those who study the Kindertransport, but that should be considered, is the blurred boundary between the care of children and the domestic labour of those children, particularly relating to teenage girls.

I have written elsewhere about the complex negotiations around gender, national identity, and labour that accompanied the domestic service migration of young women.⁴⁹ After the youngest children, who were often seen as potential adoptees for childless families, the most desired Kinder among prospective foster families were teenage girls who could sometimes be expected to help with the housework and childcare. The Kindertransport was by no means conceived as an extension of domestic service immigration; nevertheless, the Refugee Children’s Movement was aware of the potential vulnerability of girls to exploitation. The notes given to volunteers who assessed the suitability of a home for a child indicate an awareness of this issue. After the eight key questions regarding names, ages, occupations of potential foster parents, question nine, “Is a maid kept?” is poignant, indicating a real concern that refugee girls would be treated as unpaid servants or au pairs. Dorothy Hardisty emphasized in her

47 Report of Conference of Regional Representatives, 19 Oct. 1944, ACC 2793/5/RCM/2.

48 Refugee Children’s Movement Ltd, Training and Employment Department, Statistics up to and including 1 Jan. 1945, ACC 2793/5/RCM/2..

49 Rose Holmes, “Love, Labour, Loss: Women, Refugees and the Servant Crisis in Britain, 1933–1939”, *Women’s History Review* 27, no. 2 (2018): 288–309.

notes about placing children that “an adolescent taken into the home to help with younger children or to assist an overworked or delicate mother is not regarded as satisfactorily placed”.⁵⁰

It was envisaged by the RCM that many of the young women and girls who came over on the Kindertransports would be likely, in time, to find work as domestic servants given the shortage in the labour market and the comparative ease of finding such jobs. And, since 20,000 German and Austrian women had by late 1939 already used the shortage of domestic labour to find refuge from fascism, one can understand a degree of confusion in the public mind over the legal and employment position of young women refugees. Additionally, in a normal family home a teenage girl would have been expected to help with housework and childcare to some degree, as part of participating in family life. Undoubtedly, though, the domestic labour of some Kinder was exploited, potentially at the expense of their ability to find other paying work or meaningful education. It is clear from the records that the RCM did little to combat this. Unless a teenage girl complained vociferously of egregious mistreatment (and many would not have felt able or known how to complain), they were not removed to a home where they would be treated as a guest rather than a servant.

Conclusion

In 1946, the Home Office introduced a Naturalisation Scheme for Refugee Orphan Minors. This meant that the guardianship of the Kinder who remained under-age was transferred on a case by case basis from the RCM to individual carers and guardians, and the children who did not have such relationships were treated as British children would have been under the same circumstances and placed in orphanages or foster homes under the direction of their local authority. The Refugee Children’s Movement Ltd was wound down and was finally formally voluntarily liquidated at the end of 1948.⁵¹

The care of the Kinder had been the subject of an ongoing negotiation between the British government, the voluntary agencies, and the people who looked after the children. On a political level it was felt by everyone

⁵⁰ Dorothy Hardisty, Care of Children Committee Paper no. 56, ACC 2793/5/RCM/4, RCM/Central Jewish Fund Archives, LMA.

⁵¹ See correspondence of D. Hardisty to Clark, Battams and Co. Chartered Accountants, ACC 2793/5/RCM/3.

involved that these children were sufficiently assimilable to be welcomed into the literal and metaphorical British home. Some deliberate measures were taken to ensure their physical and emotional wellbeing. They were financially supported by the government and were subsequently allowed to take British nationality.

On an emotional level, some of the children were lucky enough, in the forced absence of their parents, to be loved by those who were caring for them. Those organizing care on behalf of the RCM, many of them seasoned youth and social workers, were well aware that, given the urgency of the crisis and the insufficiency of funds, whatever provisions they were able to put in place would be inadequate. There was not time or money enough to set up adequate monitoring of foster placements or to ensure the quality of the children's religious or academic education. There was not the broader political will to allow the children's families to join them in refuge.

As a general philosophy of care the RCM took the views that were common among social workers at the time. Namely, children were adaptable, group care settings were acceptable (although inferior to a family environment), and physical and financial maintenance were of more immediate importance than emotional security. The organizing committee of the RCM also considered that getting as many children as possible to physical safety was the best way in challenging circumstances that they could respond to the humanitarian crisis presented by fascism. Whether this was the "right" view or not has been subject to debate at the time and over subsequent years. At best, the Kindertransport was an open-hearted attempt to save imperilled children. At worst it was a naïve and inadequate response to the family ruptures produced by fascism.