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"All the leaves have lost their trees": the Kindertransport as an experience of uprooting in the poetry of Gerda Mayer

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The celebratory narrative of the Kindertransport and Britain's welcoming of refugees has gained prominence, especially in recent years. However, the widespread view of the operations as a mainly positive affair is challenged in the poetry of Gerda Mayer (née Stein), who was rescued from Czechoslovakia on a Kindertransport aeroplane in March 1939.[1] Aged just twelve and leaving her parents in the increasingly dangerous city of Prague, Gerda was able to escape to the relative safety of Britain thanks to the rescue efforts of the Kindertransport.

In Gerda's childhood diaries, held in her archive in London's Wiener Holocaust Library, the Kindertransport is depicted as an exciting and positive event.[2] Gerda's unpublished journals, written just before she left her hometown of Karlsbad (where she lived before moving to Prague) present the journey to Britain as an exciting adventure, filled with promise and, story-like, dramatized with heroes and villains. However, as an adult, Gerda, who in Britain became a successful published poet, reflects on the experience of the Kindertransport in her writing from a more negative perspective, focusing on her childhood uprooting and subsequent re-settling in often grief-filled and nostalgic poems.

The Kindertransport scholar Andrea Hammel points out that Kindertransport memoirs written by male authors "narrate their memories like adventure stories with themselves as the central male hero",[3] whereas female authors often portray themselves as a victim. Gerda, then, partly conforms to both male and female memoir tendencies: as a child,

1 See Annabel Cohen and Barbara Warnock, "The Experiences of Kindertransportees and their Parents: Evidence from the Archives of the Wiener Holocaust Library", in this volume, 33–50.

2 The Wiener Holocaust Library, London (hereafter, WHL), Gerda Mayer Papers, folder 1.

3 Andrea Hammel, "Gender and Kindertransport Memoirs", in *Exile and Gender I: Literature and the Press*, ed. Charmian Brinson and Andrea Hammel, Yearbook of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies 17 (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2016), 26.

depicting an adventure story, although not with herself as the central hero, then presenting herself as suffering due to her past, when she is an adult. These two contrasting stances characterize Gerda's ambivalence towards her rescue, which has ultimately impacted her ability to live in the present. As a result, stuck in the past, the writer is unable to move beyond the nostalgic gaze with which she looks at her pre-Kindertransport life. Rather than an event of rescue and adventure as she once saw it, the Kindertransport is seen by Gerda in later life as a traumatic uprooting that detached her from her *Heimat* (the specifically German understanding of "homeland"). This offers an alternative view to the often romanticized success of the Kindertransport in British national narratives and depicts a rawer and long-lasting trauma.

Biographical details

Gerda Stein was born in 1927 to a Jewish family in Karlsbad, a spa town west of Prague located in the Sudetenland. This area was primarily home to ethnic German-speakers, and the Stein family lived in this heavily German-influenced community. However, mass upheaval occurred on 21 October 1938 when the Sudetenland was annexed by the Nazis and became part of Germany. The Stein family, like many other Sudeten Germans, whether because they were Jewish or involved in anti-Nazi politics, fled Karlsbad in September 1938, just before the annexation, and moved to Prague.

From Prague, Gerda was brought to Britain as part of the Prague Kindertransport operations by Trevor Chadwick, a schoolteacher from Swanage who became involved with the rescue of Czech children. These rescue efforts were initiated by the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia (BCRC), a voluntary organization supported by major groups including the Labour Party, the *News Chronicle*, and the Quakers.[4] The BCRC soon opened an office in Prague in addition to their London base, as there was an increasing need to assist those living in the progressively more dangerous Czech city, the threat of Nazi invasion becoming more imminent. This outpost was headed by Doreen Warriner, an academic from London, and aided by her secretary, Bill Barrazetti, who was himself a refugee from Germany.

Despite Warriner managing to help a significant number of political individuals in danger, the fate of the many children in Prague was not her

4 William R. Chadwick, *Rescue of the Prague Refugees 1938/39* (Leicester: Troubadour, 2014), 9.

priority, even if several were rescued under her organization. This became the focus of Nicholas Winton, a stockbroker from London, who soon created a children's division of the BCRC, which later became the start of the Kindertransport from Prague. This, in total, resulted in bringing 669 refugee children from the Czech city to safety in Britain.

Meanwhile, Trevor Chadwick had decided to contribute to the Prague operations. In his own account, Chadwick explains: "in 1938 I was teaching at our family prep school. Rumours of the many distressed children in Central Europe reached us, and it was decided to adopt two."[5] From this point onwards, Chadwick's involvement in the rescue of the Prague refugee children speedily increased and before long he and Winton were collaboratively running the Prague Kindertransport. It was with Chadwick that Gerda travelled via plane to Britain, living with Muriel Chadwick, Trevor's mother, who served as the guarantor until Gerda was eighteen.

In 1942 Gerda moved to Dorset to attend a boarding school for exiled children, Stoatley Rough, where she stayed for two years. After a brief period working on farms in Worcestershire in preparation for kibbutz life in Israel (which she soon decided against), she moved to London where she got married and in 1949 became a naturalized British citizen. Although Gerda's parents, Arnold and Erna Stein, both intended to follow their daughter to Britain, neither was able to. Evidence suggests that Arnold died in a Soviet labour camp and Erna in Auschwitz. The loss of her parents weighed heavily on Gerda throughout her life; feelings of survivor guilt, regret, and grief can be seen in her poetry.

Following her degree in English, German, and history of art which she completed at London's Bedford College, Gerda left academia in favour of pursuing her poetry. She continued to be involved with the memorialization of the Kindertransport, writing letters to newspapers in an attempt to get Chadwick more recognition for his work, in 1999 nominating him to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem as a righteous Gentile.[6] In a somewhat surprising turn of events, having become a member of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in 1997, in 2001 Gerda stood as their Parliamentary candidate in her constituency of Walthamstow but received only 298 votes. Gerda still lives in Essex and in 2017 celebrated her ninetieth birthday.

5 Trevor Chadwick quoted in Karen Gershon, *We came as Children: A Collective Autobiography of Refugees* (London: Victor Gollanz; New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1966), 22.
6 Letter from Gerda Mayer to Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 17 Jan. 1999, WHL, Gerda Mayer Papers, folder 4.

A real "adventure"

An early diary entry written while she was a child in Prague, aged eleven, records that writing was something Gerda enjoyed, even then: "and now dearest diary I'll confide a secret in you which however you musn't betray to a soul. When I'm grown up, I shall become an author".[7] Gerda's strong imagination and tendency to dramatize as a child is shown in her writing about her first move, from her home of Karlsbad to Prague, just before the annexation of the Sudetenland. Although it was a frightening and dangerous time, she describes the unfolding annexation as something exciting and positive. In her own typewritten later translation of her childhood diaries, she states: "The Czechs will throw Hitler out in a week, my mother predicts. Even so – a week's holiday from school! And, who knows, Hitler might oblige and stay a full fortnight. . . . the lights of Prague beckon, romantic poverty and adventure."[8] The full extent of what Hitler's invasion meant was unknown to Gerda, her childhood naivety shown in her excitement at the thought of a week off school. Suggesting that Hitler might "oblige" implies that there exists the potential for bargaining. Their destination, Prague, is depicted as a city full of potential, a film-like location, its "romantic poverty" reflective of Gerda's ignorance of the real nature of what being poor entailed. This diary entry is characteristic of Gerda's positive outlook: relocation and leaving home, rather than being cause for sadness, are full of promise.

Once in Prague, anything out of the ordinary, away from normality, proves to be an equal source of excitement. As a child, Gerda is optimistic in even the most poverty-stricken situations, evidence of her story-like manner of thinking and desire for adventure, or at least for anything other than the monotony of her past life. Even when there is nowhere for her to sleep, while staying with relatives in Prague, Gerda comments: "I am allowed to sleep in a drawer on the floor – a thrill and a treat. This is adventure indeed."[9]

Gerda's eventual acceptance on the Kindertransport – a "miracle",

7 Gerda Mayer, diary entry, 14 Nov. 1938, ibid., folder 3.

8 Gerda Mayer, "Prague Winter", in "Names Calling/Prague Winter/Flight to England", Leo Baeck Institute Archives Online, http://search.cjh.org/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CJH_ALEPH000201824&context=L&vid=lbi&lang=en_US&search_scope=LBI&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,gerda%20mayer%20&sortby=rank&offset=0 (accessed Dec. 2018), 4.

9 Ibid., 3.

she states, which saved her life – was made possible by Trevor Chadwick. He was, in Gerda's eyes, "certainly . . . a superman. . . . at the time . . . it seemed as if Trevor Chadwick almost single-handedly had killed the dragon and was wafting me away."[10]

The use of fairy-tale imagery not only positions Gerda as the princess in need of rescue but also identifies Chadwick as the hero that will lead to her "happy ending". It is not until the journey that Gerda reflects on the fact that she has had to leave the rest of her family behind. In her short memoir *Prague Winter*, written in 2005, she comments, "I am on a raft and they are in a choppy sea."[11] Likening her relative safety, and the life-threatening situation her parents were in, to being at sea implies not merely a voyage but conjures up images of shipwrecks, pirates, and other children's adventure stories. Despite being only eleven, Gerda is clearly aware of her good fortune and the precarious situation in which her parents were left.

Although she was excited at first, Gerda's positivity about travelling with Chadwick soon dissolved when she realized the full extent of what moving to Britain meant, which was losing her home and deserting her parents. Her mother attempted to prepare Gerda for potential disappointment, which was seen by the girl negatively. In *Prague Winter*, she explains that prior to leaving "my mother tries to send a warning note. We are walking along the street, my mother and I. 'Not everything in England might be as rosy as you imagine'./ I, airily: 'Yes, I know.'/ But on arriving home, in a whiny voice: 'Daddy, Mummy is trying to spoil it for me.'"[12] Clearly, Gerda did not want to be confronted with any potential negativity that might affect her British "adventure".

In an unpublished memoir written as an adult, Gerda looks back at the realization of her imminent journey: "14th March 1939. I was eleven and going to England; on a real plane . . . Frankly, I was cock-a-hoop."[13] Here, there is a clear mix of Gerda's childhood view and that of her adult self. The fact she was going on a "real plane" was a source of excitement, yet her adult, arguably anglicized, voice comes through with the use of "cock-a-hoop", a phrase she is unlikely to have known at the time. Admittedly, Gerda's Kindertransport experience was an atypical one: the vast majority of children travelled by train, rather than plane. Gerda does, however confess that "we would have been equally euphoric had it been any other

10 Ibid., 4.
11 Gerda Mayer, *Prague Winter* (London: Hearing Eye, 2005), 88.
12 Ibid., 46.
13 Mayer, "Prague Winter", 1.

country whatever. As it happened, it was England . . . And, as everyone knew, England was populated exclusively by Lords and Ladies or, at least, by ladies and gentlemen . . . everyone on horseback, whistling."[14]

Caroline Sharples notes that for many of the Kindertransportees, "Britain was eagerly anticipated to be a veritable land of opportunity and plenty".[15] Gerda's expectations of the idyllic England to which she would be taken certainly contrast with the poverty in which her family lived while in Prague. A sense of grandeur is suggested, a romanticized view of England that Gerda is likely to have gained through stories.

The plane journey itself is an enjoyable time for the children, all "happiness and hullabaloo", despite the fact that, as Gerda explained, "We stopped in Holland and were given the choice of lemonade or milk. We all asked proudly for lemonade, like cowboys calling for whisky", likening the children to characters from a Western.[16] Gerda's tendency to embellish stories and to view her journey as an adventure is perhaps a typically childish thing to do. However, there is little reference to loss of home and rarely a mention of her parents, both issues that appear to haunt her as an adult.

Gerda's reflections as an adult

It is primarily through poetry that Gerda, as an adult, looks back at the Kindertransport, not, though, as a successful escape but rather an event which uprooted and isolated her. It was after completing her degree that Gerda began to focus on her continuing interest in poetry, despite the fact that her mother had not approved of the career choice. In a letter to Gerda as a child, her mother wrote: "I can see from your letter that you have it in you to become a splendid person. You have a firm good character, you are truthful, sensible and gifted in drawing and writing poetry etc. . . . although it is all lovely interesting amusing, that is to say, the writing of poetry, drawing, acting . . . I beg you on no account to lose yourself in such trifles . . . for you as a Jewess it is absolutely essential that you learn something which will support you later."[17] Gerda's mother, through emphasizing her daughter's identity as a woman and a Jew, implies that she sees this

14 Gerda Mayer, "Flight to England", in "Names Calling/Prague Winter/Flight to England", 26.

15 Caroline Sharples, "Reconstructing the Past: Refugee Writings on the Kinder-transport", *Holocaust Studies* 12, no. 3 (2006): 51.

16 Mayer, "Flight to England", 7.

17 Letter from Erna Stein to Gerda Stein, n.d., WHL, Gerda Mayer Papers, folder 3.

as already enough of an obstacle to a career: choosing to follow an artistic path may only make finding a job more difficult. Charmian Brinson in *Exile and Gender II* (2017) suggests that female exiles were "perhaps doubly marginalized, firstly by their alien origins and difficult experiences and secondly by their gender".[18] Arguably, Jewishness and a desire for a career in the arts would have further marginalized these women, and Gerda's mother was aware of the obstacles her daughter would have to face given her background and identity.

Nevertheless, Gerda did go on to a career as a poet, writing on a wide variety of themes but most notably about the loss of home resulting from her relocation to Britain. Her hometown of Karlsbad takes on an idyllic quality, viewed through the lens of nostalgia. In her 1978 poem "All the Leaves have lost their Trees", the narrator acknowledges previous safety and stability in contrast to a later lack of rootedness. Although it is not explicit, it can be presumed that the voice is that of Gerda: "Yet I grieve for my lost tree;/ Far away the wind bore me."[19] Gerda here positions herself as a detached "leaf", fallen from the sturdy tree that she now looks back on with nostalgia, thus positioning Karlsbad as a yearned-for place of former attachment, and Heimat. It suggests a sense of stability inherent in the unchanging nature of Heimat; and in opposition to this, a loss of safety and grounding that she experienced on losing her homeland.

Gerda's poetry suggests an air of isolation, cut off from the country of her childhood. In her poem "The Man on the Desert Island", written in the 1960s, she paints a picture of a lonely man, trapped on an island:

> *Day in, day out of time*
> *He communes with himself and sends*
> *Messages in green bottles:*
> *Help me they say I am*
> *Cast up and far from home.*
> *Each day he goes to watch*
> *The horizon for ships.*
> *Nothing reaches his shore*
> *Except corked green bottles.*[20]

18 Charmian Brinson, "Introduction", in *Exile and Gender II: Politics, Education and the Arts*, ed. Charmian Brinson, Jana Buresova, and Andrea Hammel, Yearbook of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies 18 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1.

19 Gerda Mayer, "All the Leaves have lost their Trees", in *Bernini's Cat* (North Shields: IRON Press, 1999), 52.

20 Gerda Mayer, "The Man on the Desert Island (5)", in ibid., 65.

The imagery, consistent with Gerda's earlier diaries in which she likens her situation to floating on a raft in a choppy sea, again displays the way she turns her experiences into story-like narratives. However, as an adult, any likening to storybooks comes with a negative outlook. Waiting for ships on the horizon and messages in a bottle mirror Gerda's own waiting for a letter from her father: although he sent her regular postcards, in 1940 this suddenly stopped when he was put into a Soviet labour camp. "Cast up and far from home" implies that the man in the poem does not see the island as a home, perhaps suggestive of the poet's, and indeed Gerda's, own feelings towards Britain.

Kindertransport as trauma

Eva Hoffman in "The New Nomads" (1999) discusses the fact that "in exile, the impulse to memorialize is magnified, and much glorious literature has emerged from it".[21] Indeed, Gerda's memories of her uprooting as a result of the Kindertransport form the subject of the majority of her early adult poetry; later on, it is clear she felt her work had relied on her past too much and she made a decision to change tack. Her poem "Selfpity Again" explains that she has decided to drop her Aunt Selfpity, who has posed for her poems for many years. It can be assumed that this Aunt is the personification of her childhood trauma. Reflecting on her poetry in a 2009 article for *Artemis Poetry Magazine*, Gerda commented "I have written extensively but not exclusively about the past. The past is profoundly with me."[22] Although for exiles "the distancing from the past, combined with the sense of loss and yearning, can be a wonderful stimulus to writing",[23] Gerda's ambivalence towards the past and future is shown in "Selfpity Again". There she realizes that this sense of loss has weighed too heavily on her poetry:

> *I have decided to drop my Aunt Selfpity . . .*
> *She has posed for my poems for over twenty years; . . .*
> *I will certainly edge her out.*
> *But bland and blank –*
> *That is what I fear my poems will be without her.*[24]

21 Eva Hoffman, "The New Nomads", in *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss*, ed. Andre Aciman (New York: New Press, 1999), 51.

22 Gerda Mayer, quoted in Dilys Wood, "Pain into Poetry", *Artemis Poetry* 2 (2009): 11.

23 Hoffman, "New Nomads", 51.

24 Gerda Mayer, "Selfpity Again", in *A Heartache of Grass* (Calstock, Cornwall: Peterloo Poets, 1988), 34.

Further to this, if without the "self-pity" and the traumatic stories of her uprooted experience, the poet feels her poems will lack substance, it could be assumed that similarly, without the memories and reliving of them, Gerda might feel that her life would be equally mundane.

In a later poem, Gerda mourns her Aunt Selfpity and the realization that (in her opinion), her poems are now "plain": "My character changed for the good,/ My poetry changed for the worse . . ./ I've always flourished upon pain./ The poetry was in self-pity."[25] The poet here admits that she has always "flourished upon pain", making the argument that trauma provides great motivation for artistic endeavour. It is implied that just as she mourns her Aunt Selfpity, Gerda mourns the catalyst for writing that her troubled experiences provided. Edward Said states that there can be benefits to exile, such as it being a stimulus for creativity, provided "the exile refuses to sit on the sidelines nursing a wound".[26] In keeping Aunt Selfpity as a central focus in her poems, it can be assumed that Gerda was at this point "nursing a wound" and foregrounding her traumatic past: in dropping her as a subject, Gerda is ready to move away from the periphery and fully immerses herself in the present. Poetry provides a place of stability from and through which Gerda can explore the past and its continuing impact on her life.

The poem "Unseen", featured in the anthology *Treble Poets* 2 in 1975, also suggests that the poet realizes she had become perhaps too preoccupied with past events: "While Present looked back/ Absorbed in the creature,/ Future walked by;/ Unseen; without gesture".[27] "Absorbed in the creature" demonstrates Gerda's realization that the past can function as an obsession, in turn causing the individual to ignore the present and future. Personifying time implies that "Past" is a central character in her current life, leaving no room for "Future" who passes by unnoticed. Hoffman remarks that "the potential rigidity of the exilic posture" may result "not so much in a fixation on the past as in habitual detachment from the present".[28] In resisting the present, with all its developments and changes, Gerda risks becoming the eternal "Other", stuck in a different era and country, and mourning the past rather than creating a future.

25 Gerda Mayer, "Funereal", *Ambit* 100 (1985): 120.

26 Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile", in *Reflections on Exile: And Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2000), 185.

27 Gerda Mayer, "Unseen", in *Treble Poets* 2, ed. Florence Elon, Daniel Halpern, and Gerda Mayer (London: Chattos & Windus, 1975), 49.

28 Hoffman, "New Nomads", 51.

Despite standing for UKIP in later life, which might suggest that Gerda felt fairly affiliated with the British, her writing suggests that she remained tied to her former home and grieved for her childhood in Karlsbad. Her poem "Carve me up when I die" details where to put different parts of her body after her death: she sends her skull to the dentist, her heart to her cat's grave, but states: "Except for my feet./ Send them back into childhood./ Bury them in the garden there."[29]

In addition to the loss of her childhood, the loss of her family is a major focus in many of Gerda's poems. One of her later verses clearly shows the debilitating effect of her separation from her parents, as she wishes for a return to her childhood with them. Written in a highly formal and unusual manner, the poem "Mrs K's Letter" simultaneously suggests a return to childhood yet also the possibility of a wish for death:

> *Dear Sirs, I want to disinter*
> *My deceased parents – him and her.*
> *Could you locate them? Somehow I*
> *Am not quite certain where they lie.*
> *[. . .]*
> *I hope to leave here and renew*
> *My life with them. My thanks to you.*[30]

Mourning for the life that could have been, in Karlsbad, is a prominent theme in the vast majority of Gerda's adult poems, some hinting at the sense of adventure she imagined as a child, yet in a more negative way. According to Sharples, "the majority of Kindertransport memoirs seek to provide some sort of happy or redemptive ending to their tales".[31] There is, however, little happiness evident in the poetry of Gerda Mayer. Although she seems to focus on the past instead of the present, the childhood home she dreams of returning to is no longer a place of safety and comfort. Gerda revisited her hometown of Karlsbad approximately fifty years after she had left and Karlsbad had, naturally, changed significantly since her childhood. After the visit, Gerda wrote in her poem "The Town": "It spat me out./ It welcomes me now/ Cautiously/ as a guest/ who comes/ & goes again."[32] Uncomfortable in Britain, yet only a guest in her idealized childhood home, it is suggested that the poet, and most probably Gerda, did not really feel at home anywhere.

29 Gerda Mayer, "Carve me up when I die", in *Bernini's Cat*, 75.
30 Gerda Mayer, "Mrs K's Letter", in ibid., 81.
31 Sharples, "Reconstructing the Past", 57.
32 Gerda Mayer, "The Town", in *Heartache of Grass*, 45.

Conclusion

The complex nature of an individual's interaction with the Kindertransport experience can be revealed through exploring the diaries and poetry of Gerda Mayer. Rather than focusing on the child's experience of the Kindertransport, it is perhaps time to look at the continuing impact of the Kindertransport into adult life, exploring the lasting impact of uprooting, and loss of home and family. Although it can be assumed that Gerda was never able entirely to come to terms with her experience, the act of writing poetry about this childhood trauma could indeed have served as a positive exercise for her.

Rather than privileging either Gerda's childhood or adult view, more can be gained through a comparison of her dual interpretations of the Kindertransport. Through exploring the changing perception of personal experience over time, and through multiple genres, a fuller understanding can be gained of the enduring impact of the Kindertransport. It is clear that the emotional ambivalence towards the Kindertransport as an event of both rescue and separation is a central theme in the Kindertransportees' continuing experience.

In comparing the child's view with the adult's, it must be acknowledged that the latter can be affected by idealistic and nostalgic tendencies of looking at the past. Whether or not Gerda Mayer's poetry is tainted by this tendency, it is still clear that the influence of her childhood uprooting on her adult life is a source of both great creativity and enduring trauma.