

## The Kindertransport - 75 years on

On 7 November 1938 Herszel Grynszpan, a 17-year old Jewish refugee, entered the German Embassy in Paris and shot a German diplomat. Ernst vom Rath, died of his wounds two days later on 9 November. What followed that night came to be known as Kristallnacht or the Night of Broken Glass. C1,200 synagogues and prayer houses were set alight, there were attacks on c7,500 Jewish-owned businesses throughout the Third Reich, resulting in an official death toll of 91.

The following day, more than 26,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps. The events of 9-10 November 1938 received extensive press coverage around the world, and convinced the majority of German Jews that there was no future in Nazi Germany, many desperately increased their attempts to emigrate.

The events of Kristallnacht, and what would constitute an appropriate British response to them, were the subject of a debate in the House of Commons on 21 November 1938. The British government agreed to waive its stringent immigration restrictions. It was one of few countries to do so. The Kindertransport is the informal name given to the result: the arrival of c10,000 unaccompanied children, under the age of 17, from Germany, Austria, and the Polish Corridor (over 75% of whom were Jewish) on temporary travel documents, alongside 669 children from Czechoslovakia courtesy of a parallel initiative organised by stockbroker Nicholas Winton and others.

The children were permitted to enter Britain on condition that (a) their stay would be temporary and (b) a £50 bond per child was posted with the Home Office, to ensure that children allowed into the country would not be a burden on the public purse. Voluntary organisations were responsible for organising the transports and making arrangements for the children to be cared for once they arrived in Britain. Theoretically, there was no limit on the number of children that would have been permitted to enter Britain. The number that did arrive was limited by logistical, organisational and economic constraints. The programme effectively lasted nine months from December 1938 to the outbreak of World War II, although a final transport left the Netherlands for Britain on 14 May 1940.

The past few months have seen the consolidation of the Kindertransports as part of Britain's war memory. There has been an emphasis on celebrating both Britain's humanitarian gesture in opening its doors (often positively contrasted to the United States' refusal to do something similar), and the contribution of the Kinder to British culture and society. The government now plays an increasingly prominent role in promoting Holocaust memory, with Britain as a founder member of the **International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance** (<http://www.holocaustremembrance.com/>), the establishment of an annual Holocaust Memorial Day (27 January, 2001ff), and awards honouring British Heroes of the Holocaust (2010ff), providing significant financial support for the **Holocaust Educational Trust's Lessons from Auschwitz programme** (<http://www.het.org.uk/index.php/lessons-from-auschwitz-general/about-lfa>). Such active support for Holocaust remembrance and education can serve to overstate the limited, albeit significant, role the British government played in the Kindertransports, which they facilitated but did not otherwise initiate or organise, that role being played by individuals (such as Winton) and non-government organisations (such as the Refugee Children's Movement, the Friends' Committee on Refugees and Aliens, and the Chief Rabbi's Emergency Relief Council).

British government policy on refugees remains complex and controversial, and the challenges of meeting the needs of today's refugees, both children and adults, continue to grow, as the two accompanying comment pieces by my colleagues demonstrate. Yes, it is only right and proper that we remember and celebrate the Kindertransports, seventy five years on, but we should do so by exploring them in all their complexity, not as a simplistic and heroic adventure story, and forever mindful of the adults and more than 1.5 million children who were not rescued. We honour the memory of those who survived and those who did not, through clear-eyed, active remembrance, committed to addressing the humanitarian crises of the present day, rather than romanticised and simplistic nostalgia.

**Isabel Wollaston** (</staff/profiles/tr/wollaston-isabel.aspx>), Senior Lecturer in Jewish and Holocaust Studies, **Department of Theology and Religion** (</schools/ptr/departments/theologyandreligion/index.aspx>).