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Kindertransport: A Happy Ending?*

Olga Levy Drucker

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Abstract: In early 1939, at age eleven, the author was sent from her native Stuttgart, Germany, on a Children's Transport to England, where she remained for the next six years, living with strangers. *Kindertransport*, her autobiography, was conceived as a book for young adults at the 50th reunion in London in June 1989. This paper deals with historical as well as emotional aspects of this part of the Holocaust. It points out the existence of intolerance in today's world, and asks whether a repetition of the atrocities of the thirties and forties can be prevented, both in our time and in the future.

Holocaust Stories and Happy Endings

When I was a little girl, I always made my mother change the end of a fairy tale if it didn't have a happy ending.

Holocaust stories are not fairy tales and, unfortunately, most don't have happy endings. My particular story, *Kindertransport* (Children's Transport), does have a happy ending, I hope.

Now, let us consider, for a moment, some good news and some bad news.

First, I would call the recent opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in our nation's capital "good news." (Incidentally, I've been told that my book, *Kindertransport*, has made it into the museum's book store. Good news!)

There seems to be an ever-increasing awareness of discrimination in our public schools. Intolerance is out. Understanding

is in—in most places. Good news. Children as young as nine or ten are being taught about the Holocaust. We survivors are being invited to come and meet these kids and tell them of our experiences. Good news. Why are we being invited? Because we are the last remaining witnesses, the living past. We are linked to the present and we are pointing to the future.

And the bad news? I'm sure you all know, the neo-Nazis are alive and well, not only in Germany, but in these United States. In Hicksville, Long Island, not ten miles from where I live, the party has its own post office box. Little incidents happen: graffiti—the writing on the wall; most citizens think little of it. At most, it's mere pranks. Jokes. Nothing to worry about.

There was a time when many German Jews, my father included, held the same view. The horrors did not start full blown out of the head of Zeus.

We expected then, as we do now, that our lives would follow a certain course. Then, as now, we expected that if things were good, they would stay good. If they were bad, we expected them to become better—never, never, worse. This attitude cost many people their lives. It almost cost us ours. But mine is a story with a happy ending. My family and I survived.

The Kindertransport Reunion

My book, *Kindertransport*, was conceived at a reunion in London, England, in June 1989. The reunion was the brainchild of Bertha Leverton, herself a "kind" who lives in London. One day she found herself thinking: "It's fifty years since I came here with the Kindertransport—half a century. Someone really ought to do something." You can all guess who that someone turned out to be.

Bertha advertised in Jewish publications all over the world, and, with the help of her sister in Israel, wound up having to hire a hall big enough to hold 2,000

people. I was one of 200 Americans attending. I learned things about the Kindertransport that I had never known: how it was organized, who organized it (Jews and Christians, including many Quakers). I learned that in the nine months between Kristallnacht and the first day of World War II, 10,000 children had been rescued, and that of these 10,000 children, 9,000 never saw their families again. I knew that I had to write my personal account of the Kindertransport, and that I had to address myself to children. I had to pass on what I knew to the younger generation, so that when they grow up they will know how to prevent such things from happening again—an awesome charge. But mine would be a story with a happy ending.

I felt a great deal of urgency about my project. I still do.

The Plot of Kindertransport

At first glance, my story has a happy ending. Briefly, it goes something like this:

My father and his brother were owners of the Herold Verlag, a children's book publishing company in Stuttgart, which had been founded by my grandfather in 1872. It still exists, although my family no longer owns it. The Nazis stole it.

My father was a veteran of World War I, having fought for the Kaiser and having been awarded a medal. Naturally, he said: "Nothing will happen to us. They can't do anything to me." Any American veteran might, justifiably, say the same under similar circumstances. Both my parents came from well-assimilated families. We were more German, perhaps, than the Germans. I know some American Jewish families of whom the same might be said.

But then began a gradual erosion of our "rights," termed "legal" by the Nuremberg Laws, and culminating on the night of November 9, 1938, now known as Kristallnacht. My father was taken out of his bed at night and forcibly taken to the Dachau concentration camp. Fortunately, my older

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brother was by then in school in London, and so he was spared.

My mother then made a decision on her own, and placed my name on the list for the Kindertransport. This was a hastily organized rescue operation, with hard-won permission from the Nazis, to transport as many children as possible from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, by train and ferry to England, to be taken care of there until it was safe to return them to their homes. English families, as well as institutions, were recruited. An Act of Parliament was passed to help raise the needed funds. Much of the money came from ordinary, private English citizens. Permission was sought, and granted, from the Dutch government to allow the children to get off the trains in Holland and embark on boats across the English Channel. The logistics must have been mind-boggling.

Could the signs of erosion of basic freedoms have been recognized earlier and acted upon? My father would surely have said something about "hindsight."

While preparations (which included a few English lessons), were being made for my departure, my father came home from Dachau—on my eleventh birthday. Our maid and my nanny, Frieda, had had to leave earlier. The Nuremberg Laws stipulated that "Aryan" women under age 35 could not work for Jewish families.

I said *auf wiedersehen* to Stuttgart and to my parents on March 3, 1939. My train passed through my grandmother's city. She came to the station to say goodbye to me. It was to be the last time we saw each other.

My mother had promised that she and my father would join me in England in six weeks. But who could have known that war would intervene? Those six weeks stretched into six years, while my parents desperately looked around for a country that would let them in.

And then I was faced with learning a new language, new customs, a new religion. I had to deal with my English peers and with English authority. I had to cope with loneliness and, eventually, my newly awakening adolescence, and, as it turned out, as many moves from one home to another as the number of years I lived in England. And, of course, the war.

My parents reached New York in 1941, by way of Spain and Portugal. They managed to leave Stuttgart one day before the American Consulate closed its doors.

1944 was my last year in the Midlands of England. I was 16, and dropped out of high school to go to work as a mother's helper for a family with six children. It was my happiest year. The Wolton family and mine still visit each other as often as we can. Mrs. Wolton (the name I gave her in my book) is now 86 years young. We still visit each other frequently.

The American visa that my parents anxiously had sought for me was granted, and I arrived in New York in March 1945.

Aftermath of the Holocaust

Yes, after six years I was reunited with my parents. My brother joined us a couple of years later. The only one in my immediate family who perished at the hands of the Nazis was my beloved grandmother. She died in Theresienstadt. The rest—uncles, aunts, cousins—were scattered to all parts of the world. Their lives, and ours, were broken. But we survived. And, for the most part, we healed—a happy ending.

Six critical growing-up years—I was 11 when I was sent away, 17 when I came back. All of our lives had been disrupted and forever traumatized. We all had to learn to know each other again—perhaps to love. I have stated that I came back. But of course it was not a coming back. It was another disruption, another starting all over again, on yet another continent, in yet another culture. Now I had to learn about baseball, hot dogs, and chocolate malteds. One of the good things that came out of these experiences for me was that I at last returned to the faith of my ancestors. Had I been allowed a normal life in Germany—who knows? A happy ending.

Telling the Story

You see, I had to tell my story, not because I feel sorry for myself—it *has* a happy ending—but because I believe

prevention is the best medicine. I wrote my story, which Henry Holt published. I talk to children, and to adults, whenever and wherever I'm asked. I show them my photos. I try to answer their questions.

Could the signs of erosion of basic freedoms have been recognized earlier and acted upon? My father would surely have said something about "hindsight."

Could more have been done? Without a doubt.

This I know. Had the Kindertransport not been organized, I would not be presenting this paper. Had the plain, ordinary people in England, most of them non-Jews, not taken me into their plain, ordinary homes, I would not be writing this. Had my mother not had the courage to place my name on that list, I would not be here today. Once again, she changed the story to give it a happy ending.

What would you have done?

Or—G-d forbid—what would *you* do?

More to the point: *What might our children do?*

Does my story have a happy ending? For the moment it seems so. But it is really up to you, parents and grandparents and teachers and librarians, any of you who teach and guide and play with our children.

And ultimately, it will be up to the children themselves.

Olga Levy Drucker received her master's degree in English Literature from Adelphi University in 1977 and has since written for magazines and newspapers. She is a member of the International Women's Writing Guild and the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. Her autobiography, Kindertransport (Henry Holt & Co., 1992), was selected by the American Library Association as the "Best Book for Young Adults, 1994." She has recently written another children's book, about the Exodus from Egypt (a time warp).