

BACKGROUND: KINDERTRANSPORT



In July 1938, the leaders of 32 countries met in Evian, France to discuss the growing problem of Jewish refugees desperate to flee Nazi persecution. The major powers – the U.S., France, and Great Britain – opposed unrestricted immigration, and the Evian Conference resulted in the creation of an international body to deal with refugees that never had the necessary support to really make a difference.

Several months later, a violent attack was staged against Jewish people across Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland (the part of Czechoslovakia that had recently been given up to Germany), known as the *Kristallnacht Pogrom* (November 9-10, 1938). These events shocked many leaders around the world. Refugee and aid organizations encouraged many nations to take in Jewish refugees. The Jewish community in British-controlled Palestine asked that 10,000 Jewish children be allowed to enter Palestine over the strict quotas that were in place. This request was not granted, but the British government eventually agreed to open immigration to 10,000 refugee children, most of whom were Jewish. By agreeing to this, Great Britain was trying to deflate the pressure from Palestine, and was also responding to a good deal of sympathy among the British public for the plight of the children.

Kindertransport – or children’s transport – is the name given to a series of rescue efforts that brought Jewish children to Great Britain between 1938 and 1940. Children under age 17 from Germany, German-annexed Austria and among the German Jews who had been forcibly pushed into Polish territory in October 1938 were provided temporary travel visas. Orphans, homeless children, and children whose parents had been sent to concentration camps were prioritized. No adult family members were permitted to accompany the children on their journey to Great Britain. In a separate operation, Nicholas Winton also arranged for the passage of 669 children from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (today the Czech Republic) to Great Britain.

The first Kindertransport arrived in Harwich, England on December 2, 1938 with 200 children from an orphanage in Berlin that was destroyed during the *Kristallnacht Pogrom*. The care of these young refugees – and the roughly 10,000 that would follow – was paid for by private organizations and individuals. Jewish children were placed with foster families, on farms, and in schools, hostels, and children’s homes. The expectation was that their stay would be temporary and the children would return to their parents once the crisis was over. Most of these children never reunited with their families, the vast majority of whom perished in the Holocaust. In the years after the war, many of the Kindertransport children would become citizens of Great Britain or emigrate to countries including Israel, the U.S., Australia, and Canada.

Great Britain was the only country to put into action a program like Kindertransport, aimed at rescuing young Jewish refugees. In the U.S., a similar effort was proposed through the Wagner-Rogers Bill, but there was not enough public support and the measure was never even voted on in Congress.



ABOUT THE PHOTO

Dr. Erich Klibansky, the principal of the Yavne gymnasium (secondary school) in Köln, Germany, saved dozens of his pupils, arranging for their passage to England as part of the Kindertransport. Here, he is saying good-bye to his students in January 1939.

Source: Yad Vashem, “Rescue by Jews: ‘One for All,’” <http://ow.ly/4ScF50AYPtp>.