

Program Notes for
Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the
Kindertransport
Mark Jonathan Harris

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In the fall of 1998 Deborah Oppenheimer approached me to collaborate with her in making a film about the Kindertransport, the remarkable British rescue mission which saved 10,000 (mainly Jewish) children from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia in the nine months prior to World War II. A few years before I had written and directed *The Long Way Home*, an Oscar-winning documentary about the aftermath of the Holocaust, but I knew almost nothing about the Kindertransport. Deborah, on the other hand, had known about the subject from childhood. Her mother had been one of the children rescued by the British.

In 1939, in a desperate effort to save their eleven-year-old daughter from Hitler’s murderous intentions, Deborah’s grandparents put their daughter on a train in Chemnitz, Germany, and sent her to England, a country whose language she did not speak, to live with strangers. Growing up in Long Island, New York, Deborah and her brother and sister knew fragments of their mother’s history, but whenever they questioned her about the Kindertransport, she would begin to cry. The children understood that the subject was too painful to discuss and tacitly agreed not to bring it up. Deborah’s mother died without ever imparting to her the full story of her separation from her parents, whom she never saw again after leaving Germany, and her life as a heart-broken refugee in England.

It was a story I could personally relate to. My grandfather also left home as a child. At the age of twelve he sailed alone to America from Hungary, speaking no English and knowing no one in this country. Sadly, he died when I was only six and most of what I know about his history has come to me second hand. I never had the chance to ask him directly what it was like to leave your family behind for an unknown land. This gap, this emotional lacuna, in both our family’s histories was one of the principal reasons Deborah and I set out to make this film. We both wanted to know more about the seminal experiences that had shaped our families.

What people remember about the past and what they forget is one of the central motifs of the film. As one of the adult Kinder recalls: “I can reach back to London, January the 12th, 1939, but I can’t reach back to Vienna, January the 11th. I don’t want to fully remember it because it’s too painful.” Another of the Kinder arrived at England at age 7. He learned English from an elderly German man who lived down the street from the boy’s foster family and who terrified him. He was so frightened that six weeks later he wrote to his parents in Austria, “I no longer speak German,” and, in fact, he was never able to relearn it. Gone with his first language were many of the memories of his childhood.

This repression, this denial of the past, has consequences. Many of the child survivors do not remember much about their traumatic experiences. The novelist Lore Segal, who left Vienna on the Kindertransport at the age of 10, vividly remembers the tram ride on the way to the railroad station with her parents. Another little girl was sitting across the aisle with her parents. Lore could tell she was going to same place, because the girl also had a rucksack and a little suitcase. And she was howling. Lore remembers turning to her

mother and saying, “I’m not crying like that little girl.” Her mother said, “No, you’re being very brave. You’re being just wonderful.”

Lore says she wanted to believe she was being brave, but even then she had her doubts. “Cut yourself off at age ten from feelings that can’t otherwise be mastered and it takes decades to be reattached.” Her father died in 1945, but she could not grieve for his loss until over 20 years later when she returned to Vienna for the first time since leaving it at 10. Finally, she was able to shed tears for her father.

As suspect and as elusive as memory may be, it is still vitally important to collect these eyewitness accounts of survivors. Since making *Into the Arms of Strangers*, four of the central subjects of our film have died. Our film has enabled us to preserve their experiences for future generations to study and interpret. The opportunity to tell their stories, to bear witness to their sufferings, was also healing for the witnesses.

One of the women we interviewed had not talked about her traumatic childhood experiences at any length to anyone. She agreed to speak to us only after a great deal of coaxing. Her childhood had been truly harrowing. She grew up as one of a few dozen Jewish children in a small town in north-west Germany and her early years were marked by isolation and anti-Semitism. On *Kristallnacht*, her father was arrested and murdered. She and her sister were later placed in an orphanage by their mother. Eventually, the two teenage girls were sent to England on the Kindertransport. Their wrenching parting with their mother at the train station was the last time they would ever see her. When she finally told her story to the camera, she was surprised at how emotional she became. Although the interview was difficult for her, the experience was extremely beneficial. For

years she had been plagued by nightmares of her childhood. After the interview for our documentary, her nightmares finally stopped.

As the noted psychologist Bruno Bettelheim stated: “What cannot be talked about can also not be put to rest. And if it is not, the wounds continue to fester from generation to generation.” If we are to learn at all from the mistakes of the past, we must make an effort to record the traumas of those who have lived through them. Bearing witness, in itself, will not heal all the wounds of the past, but it is a beginning.

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