

# Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the Child Refugees of the 1930s in the UK: **History Informing the Future**



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June 2020

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PROFIADAU NIWEIDIOL MEWN PLENTYNDOD  
ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

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# Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the Child Refugees of the 1930s in the UK: History Informing the Future

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## 1 Summary of Report

In response to recent studies and discussions on the social and psychological support being made available to young refugees today, this study will investigate the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) of child refugees who fled from National Socialist Europe to the UK in the late 1930s. Many of these refugees settled in the UK after the Second World War and have lived here ever since. This cohort provides us with the opportunity to look at the long-term consequences of their childhood experiences.

This report will examine the impact of this forced dislocation on their adult lives, as well as identify the protective factors that enabled these children to adjust to life in the UK, which, in turn, minimised the likelihood of long-term harmful behaviours associated with ACEs. This study aims to provide enlightening historic context that will aid contemporary research and hopes to inform future strategies which are being developed to support young sanctuary seekers today.

A significant proportion of child refugees who reached the UK in the 1930s (both with and without other family members) have recorded their experiences either in interviews or in written form. This study will take advantage of these sources to investigate the impact of ACEs on this group of children and to identify the protective factors that encouraged resilience during this challenging and formative period. Several factors that promote resilience have been noted in a recent 2020 report by Public Health Wales: individual factors (the ability to think positively); family factors (positive attachment); and community factors (friendships, school, good community resources).<sup>1</sup>

This report shows that there are several common factors that made a positive difference to the child refugees, although it is crucial to remember that each experience was unique. For example, in an educational environment, relationships with supportive teachers who had a good understanding of the refugee experience is shown to enable acceptance from peers. In the case of unaccompanied child refugees, our research points to the importance of different types of placements to be chosen bearing in mind the age, situation, religion and cultural background of the individual child refugee. Many benefitted from a connection with other refugees whilst finding their own feet in British society, as this connection helped combat isolation and alienation. Our research shows that stability during this acculturation process is important.

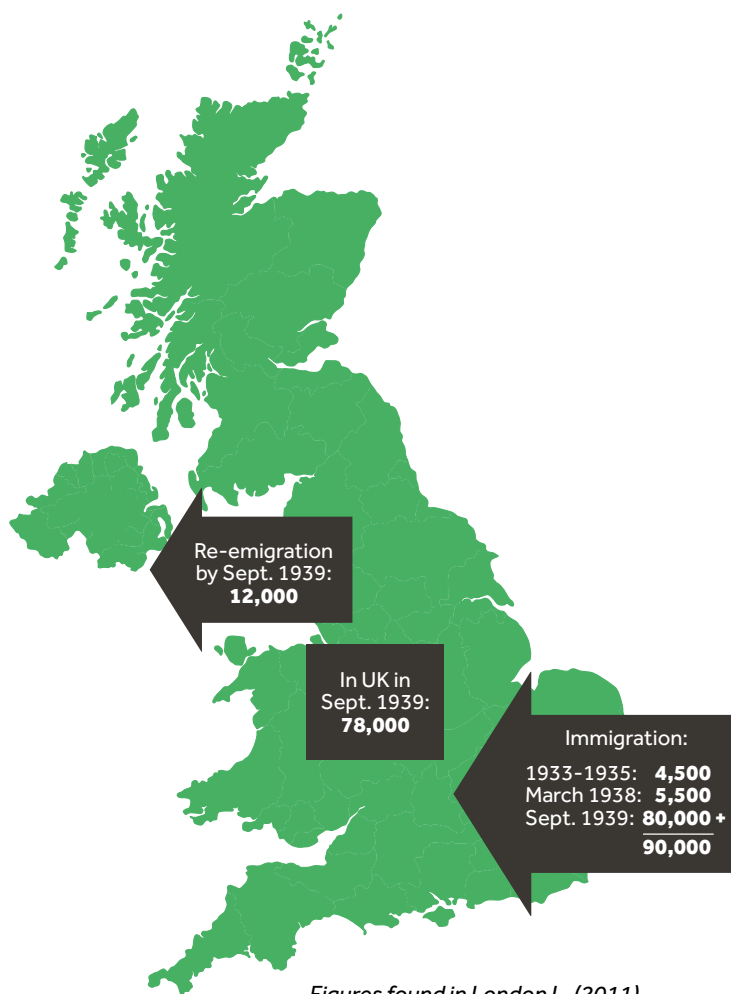
Our study also suggests that the most positive outcomes in mitigating the effects of ACEs in child refugees is to aim for "supported independence" and open communication regarding traumatic experiences. The refugees need to be given safe spaces to discuss their experiences at the time as children, and also later in life, as adults. This points to the crucial role of active, preventative mental health support, even if no actual mental illness has manifested itself.



## 2 Historical Context

Following the National Socialist Party's assumption of power in January 1933, when Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany, refugees from Germany to Britain started to arrive in larger numbers. The pace of emigration was essentially driven by National Socialist government policy.<sup>2</sup> Members of the political opposition, as well as journalists or writers who had previously spoken out against National Socialism doctrine, immediately found themselves in a dangerous position and many sought to escape. Those who were considered "non-Aryan" were no longer allowed to practice law or medicine and were excluded from the civil service. The threat toward the Jewish population was made even more obvious after the passing of the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, in which citizens were classified according to ancestry, and those considered Jewish were given an inferior legal status in society. Such policies also meant that adults and children of Jewish descent were excluded from most public places such as parks, cinemas and swimming pools.

During this time, the UK continued to limit the number of immigrants that were allowed to gain admittance. In early 1938 an estimated 10,000 Jewish refugees from Continental Europe lived in Britain.<sup>3</sup> This number increased significantly after the annexation of Austria in March 1938 and of parts of Czechoslovakia in September 1938. It further increased after the violent pogroms in November 1938 across Germany and Austria. There are no definite numbers for all groups but we know that, for example, 30,850 Austrian Jews found refuge in Britain by September 1939, when war broke out.<sup>4</sup> Amongst these arrivals was the Viennese psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud who arrived in London on 6 June 1938 with eleven members of his family. For the less well known it was not easy to gain admittance, and there were strict criteria. The British immigration policy was not overly generous, but between 1933 and the outbreak of war in September 1939, approximately 90,000 Central European refugees were admitted to the UK, of which approximately 80,000 were identified as Jewish.<sup>5</sup> One special case was the arrival of approximately 10,000 unaccompanied child refugees between December 1938 and September 1939, who arrived on what later became known as the Kindertransport. The British government decided to only admit unaccompanied minors through this scheme, despite the fact that most of them had lived with their parents and other members of their families before their flight. The reasons for this decision by the UK government are widely debated: fears of a negative effect on the labour market in the UK, and the higher cost of supporting more refugees if adults were to be admitted as well, played a part in the government's decision-making, as did anxieties surrounding security, and possibly a latent antisemitism in British society.



Figures found in London L. (2011).  
Image credit: Siem van Limpt (2020).

### 3 Experience of ACEs

All child refugees coming to the UK in the late 1930s faced many challenges and had to deal with a new country, language and culture. Unaccompanied child refugees additionally had to cope with the challenge of communicating with new guardians in alien surroundings without the support of family members. The psychological impact of the parental separation and physical dislocation has been investigated by several scholars who note that “reports of bed-wetting, nightmares and running away were not uncommon”. A number of child refugees suffered mental health problems and there are reports of some that took their own lives.<sup>6</sup> Of those fortunate to escape with siblings (approximately 31%), many were separated upon arrival in the UK which caused additional trauma.

Child refugees of the 1930s faced further distress when, at the outbreak of war, the correspondence with remaining family on the Continent was disrupted and, in some cases, ceased altogether. Some children faced further physical upheaval with repeated dislocation: a number were forced to evacuate London or other large cities, and others had to move foster or hostel placements. Some of the older ones – those over 16 years of age – experienced additional trauma when they were interned as “enemy aliens” in 1940.

There were around half a million applicants that were denied admission.<sup>7</sup> Many of those who were unable to escape perished in the Holocaust.

#### Pre-migration

The majority of former child refugees reported traumatic experiences pre-migration. Antisemitic laws and restrictive policies influenced their experiences of everyday life in the outside world and encouraged others to behave in an aggressive and discriminatory manner towards them. Many experienced violence or witnessed violent incidents. The experience of the pogrom in November 1938 is remembered vividly. One girl describes the terror she and her sister felt when a violent mob broke into their house:

*“We jumped in the car and covered together in the back. I cannot say how long we remained in our hiding place; it seemed like many hours of shivering of cold and panic. I know that what I experienced there, at the age of nine, was the greatest fear that I have ever known.”<sup>8</sup>*

Another girl describes how she felt after discovering her injured father:

*“[T]here were his clothes, all blood-drenched. [...] It was a few days before my 8th birthday and I think that was the biggest shock of my life that had hit me up till then. [...] I remember going back to my bed, lying flat on my back and looking at the ceiling and everything was blank. You know it was as if, it's difficult to explain, I know exactly how I felt – sort of like I was there but it was nothingness. [...] I was very aware, so 'numb' wouldn't be proper. Everything, all my senses were awake, but there was nothing I could do.”<sup>9</sup>*

Most child refugees reported that their education was disrupted and that they lost their friendship circles. Stressful domestic situations and family trauma was experienced by all during the pre-migration period. Some of the children who later became unaccompanied child refugees had already been separated from their parents in their home countries. Ellen Davis, who resettled near Swansea, experienced this repeated dislocation even before her flight to the UK when she was placed in an orphanage after her family became homeless and destitute due to persecution.<sup>10</sup>

## Migration Journey

Many migration journeys between Central Europe and the UK were relatively quick (three days) and were undertaken mainly by train and ferry. Child refugees arriving in the UK with their parents or guardians were included in the principal applicant's visa and not counted separately at the time. Of those unaccompanied minors who fled on one of the Kindertransports, some, such as Eli Fachler, remember their relief at being able to leave National Socialist Germany behind: "the train eased itself over to the Dutch Border [...] and the cry for joy that arose from everybody there, such a sense of release, was spontaneous, overwhelming. I will never forget it".<sup>11</sup> Some even saw the journey as an adventure. However, there were many others who felt under threat by border guards and immigration officials. Not all children had prior experience of travelling. Ellen Davis describes never having seen a station or a train before her departure.<sup>12</sup> There are cases where children had undergone several re-adjustments before arriving in the UK. One example of this type of migration journey is the experience of Judith Kerr, who was to become a successful British children's author: she fled with her parents and her brother first to Switzerland, then to France, and eventually to the UK, each of the places of temporary settlement required a difficult re-adjustment from both the adults and the children of the family. Each time Kerr had to adapt to a new school and learn a new language.

## Post-migration: Initial Period

Hardly any of the child refugees were prepared for their migration or their arrival. Very few spoke any English, had much knowledge about their host country, or understood what would happen to them after they arrived. In general, the vast majority describe feeling the culture shock of a different country with different customs and traditions and a different language. Of those who did not live with relatives or friends or other Continental refugees after their arrival, the differences in habits surrounding food was remarked on most often, as were differences in climate and housing.

*"I was taken apart from my brothers. I didn't know what happened to them. On the railway station at Harwich I was met by a gaunt gentleman who turned out to be a headmaster. I didn't speak English and he didn't speak German. It was all done by motion. Half an hour later I was in school, dressed in school uniform, like the other boys, totally disoriented."<sup>13</sup>*

Little effort was made to help the young refugees adjust to their new environments. On top of the ACEs experienced pre-migration, almost all experienced ACEs post-migration.

Physical illnesses are described frequently. Mental health problems were less commonly discussed in the 1930s and 1940s but this does not mean they were not recognised, and they affected both children and adults. One of the child refugees in a hostel in London was placed there because both parents suffered from mental health problems.<sup>14</sup>

Looking back to their early years, some unaccompanied child refugees describe how they witnessed or experienced physical and sexual abuse: one child describes other refugee children in her children's home being beaten by a support worker, who in this case was also a refugee from Continental Europe.<sup>15</sup> Some describe emotional and physical abuse at the hands of unsuitable foster parents.<sup>16</sup> One unaccompanied refugee girl describes being sexually abused by her foster father.<sup>17</sup> Bearing in mind that the former child refugees of the 1930s are of a generation that was less used to opening up about negative personal experiences, we have to accept that these ACEs were experienced by more child refugees and that instances of abuse are not limited to the available, recorded cases.

## Post-migration: Medium and Long Term

Of those child refugees who arrived unaccompanied, the majority were placed in a foster family. Around 10,000 placements had to be found between December 1938 and September 1939. This meant that very little vetting of either foster parents or communal settings took place, nor were the placements and child refugees matched according to criteria of religious backgrounds, educational expectations, or any other criteria. Little or no training was given to the foster parents or the support workers for the arrival of the often traumatised children. The outcome ranged from those willing to learn and adapt, to those who were unable to reach a minimum understanding between carers/guardians and the child refugees. Many placements did not last very long, and the child refugees often moved from one placement or setting to another in a matter of weeks or months. This often led to a re-traumatisation of the children and had a negative effect on the carers as well.

*"When we arrived it was a lottery. People just picked us. It was only going to be temporary. I remember everything being so strange. It was bitter cold. I'd never been in the house before. I started crying. [...] They didn't know what to do with me. But we survived. My younger sister and I were separated. She was very unhappy there. When she was 14 she went to London to my older sister."<sup>18</sup>*

In a family setting, foster siblings also had to be taken into account. The family of the well-known Attenborough brothers, David and Richard, took in two German refugee girls, and the late Richard Attenborough often spoke movingly about how their parents prepared them for their arrival and how they developed a very loving bond that lasted a lifetime. But, in many cases, sibling relationships were less harmonious. Ann Chadwick writes about her mother's recollection of the arrival of her new foster sister:

*"She highlights it was me rather than Suzie who was traumatized by our coming together and that once I recommenced bed-wetting and exhibited jealous tantrums and withdrawal symptoms, she had to resort to help from the Child Guidance Clinic to help me readjust. It is not surprising. Both of us had been only children, adored and spoilt by our respective parents [...]. We did fight too."<sup>19</sup>*

This foster mother had the knowledge and resources to seek guidance, but this was often not the case, which caused trauma on both sides and contributed to the adverse childhood experiences of the child refugees such as family tension, further loss of relationships, and further separation and dislocation.

Most former child refugees express a lot of gratitude towards the British people who facilitated their resettlement as it saved their lives, but over the years many have found the space to talk about the negative effect their flight and unsteady resettlement had on their mental and physical health. Some describe how these difficulties manifested themselves during their childhood: "The teachers didn't know how to deal with us. Once again [...] we were very screwed up of course."<sup>20</sup> In other cases, the former child refugees recognise the long-term effect their ACEs had on their physical and mental health:

*"Do you think your experiences have affected you psychologically? Yes. For a long time I was suffering with anxiety in the process and I have times that I don't feel so good. There isn't a day I don't think about it."<sup>21</sup>*

## 4 Coping, Adaptation and Protective Factors

Despite suffering a number of ACEs in their early lives, most former child refugees of the 1930s managed to lead productive lives. Here, we will investigate what had a positive impact on the refugees' lives and what, therefore, may be considered to be positive protective factors or coping strategies.

### School Environment and Education

In the narratives provided by child refugees from National Socialism, the child's time at school – and the various relationships built in this educational environment – are frequently reflected upon. Both personal stories and recent studies show how schools (including state schools, private boarding schools and schools specifically for refugees) have the potential to be supportive environments; they offer stability and a sense of normality, helping the child refugee to settle into life in a new country. Examining the psychological wellbeing of refugee children, Deveci suggests: "School or college offers a structured environment in which they can begin the process of rebuilding their lives. Time spent in a classroom setting, focusing on education in the company of peers, helps to return a sense of normality to daily life".<sup>22</sup>

A school environment can be beneficial to a child refugee in several ways. Practically speaking, schools allow the refugee to get to grips with a new language and culture, supporting their adaptation to their host country, and consequently reducing their sense of alienation or confusion. Yet, the social aspect of this educational environment has proved to be equally, if not more, beneficial. Hek's 2005 study of children who have recently come to the UK, suggests how refugee children in two UK schools identified the positive attitude of teachers, friends, and peer support as important aspects in their adjustment to their host country.<sup>23</sup> The social and practical benefits of an educational environment – the fostering of strong relationships with adults and peers, and the development of skills, which provide the refugee with direction and purpose – arguably reduce the negative, long-term impact of ACEs.

### Fostering a Strong Relationship with Adults

For a child arriving unaccompanied in the UK, a stable relationship with an adult can provide a sense of safety: "the most consistent messages from research and experience are that what makes the difference during this difficult journey is the care, kindness, compassion and support of a reliable adult".<sup>24</sup> Understandably then, teachers – as adults that the children see on a daily basis and who, in many cases, support the child with their initial struggles and adaptation to a new language and country – can become important pastoral figures, and not solely educators. Kindertransportee Gideon Behrendt, for example, describes how he and his peers viewed their housemaster, who was also a refugee from Hamburg, as: "a father, friend, educator and choirmaster all in one. We all loved Mr Model deeply. He made us forget our wounds and scars of 'over there' and enabled us to settle down to some sort of normal life".<sup>25</sup> As Behrendt's account suggests, adults in educational environments often took on many supportive roles. These roles, as Gilligan (1999) proposes, include: caregiver, social worker, advocate, counsellor and mentor.<sup>26</sup> Interviews with and memoirs written by child refugees from National Socialism provide a picture of the varied supportive roles assumed by teachers. In one account, Kurt Fuchel explains how his headmaster acted as a safe mediator and advocate after he ended up in a fight with the son of his foster parents: "They took me to see the headmaster of the school, who talked to me and talked them down, told them what I must be feeling."<sup>27</sup>

For many child refugees, the relationships they built with trustworthy and supportive teachers made a deep impression on their own adult lives and were treasured throughout life. Vera Gissing explains how, at the Birkdale Central School which she attended for a short period:



*“the most important person there to me was Mr. Hughes, the headmaster. He took a special interest in me, and though I was there for only a year, we became friends, and I turned to him for advice on many important matters. We remained in touch for the rest of his life.”<sup>28</sup>*

The varied role of teachers recounted in these memoirs and interviews reveal how they offered emotional support, practical advice and encouragement. A positive relationship with an adult can strengthen the child refugee’s resilience, which has been defined as “the ability to overcome and recover from challenges in life, such as experiencing ACEs”.<sup>29</sup> This durable friendship described by Vera Gissing, for instance, is likely to have provided her with support well into her adult life and is a relationship she was able to rely on.



Fig. 1

## Peer Support

Refugee narratives indicate that it is not only the relationship with adults in an educational environment that can act as a protective factor and consequently minimise the post-migration health and wellbeing risks associated with ACEs. Indeed, an understanding amongst, and acceptance from, other children is a crucial factor in the child’s adaptation to a new country. The social aspect of a school environment, of mixing and playing with children of the same age, can be seen as beneficial to the child’s psychological and social development: “the social support gained from friendships prevented social isolation and loneliness and gave children a sense of belonging, especially in school”.<sup>30</sup> Henry Ebner speaks of the loneliness he felt during school holidays as his refugee school provided him with an opportunity to socialise with others of his age: “I was only lonely in the holidays because I didn’t have any friends in the holidays. [...] There were very few youngsters, so I did feel lonely because there were no children of my age there who I could do things with”.<sup>31</sup>

For other young refugees, however, incidents during which they were not accepted by classmates enhanced already existing feelings of alienation and hopelessness as well as aggravated memories of previous episodes of exclusion and discrimination experienced pre-migration. Eva Figes’s experience shows how an unsupportive and unsympathetic educational environment can be damaging:

*“when I started school that became problematic because I was the only foreign child in the class. There was this sort of xenophobic attitude by the staff, not just children. I mean obviously when the war started they’d say ‘Jawohl, Heil Hitler!’ and stuff like that to you because they didn’t know the difference and neither did I. [...] But I also found that the girls were quite nasty to me on occasion. [...] I was being excluded all the time.”<sup>32</sup>*

Eva goes on to describe her start in the new school: “My first day at school was a disaster, because I was suddenly dumped in this classroom by a teacher who said: ‘Can you write your name?’ By this time I could understand what was said to me but I hadn’t yet worked out how to answer back, I hadn’t the confidence yet to do it”. Eva describes how “my first few terms in the English primary school were not very happy because I felt very much an outsider. I was treated as one. I was quite lonely”. It becomes clear when looking at refugee accounts that many British people – children and teachers alike – were often ignorant about the refugee’s background and the reason for their flight to the UK. Especially after war was declared in September 1939, refugees were seen as the German enemy,

despite many having left Germany for being seen first and foremost as Jewish, not German. This lack of understanding led to many upsetting incidents at school and exclusion by peers.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, refugee schools provided a significantly more positive environment as there was an understanding of the upsetting experiences the children (and staff members) may have faced on the Continent before their emigration. Interviews with child refugees attest to the benefits provided by an educational environment in which refugees are taught together, and the potential disadvantage of the child being the only refugee student. Most crucial, however, is the need for a greater awareness amongst staff and students of the difficulties faced by refugees both pre- and post-migration.

There appears to be a greater level of understanding arising from a shared experience, amongst the children educated at refugee schools. These schools provided a more compassionate and accepting environment. Henry Ebner describes being taught alongside others who had escaped Hitler's Third Reich: "I suppose they were damaged and they were temperamental and they were excitable [...]. Let's put it that way: it was not noticeable by me, although one did realise that a lot of these children had suffered hardship, considerable hardship". Similarly explaining this unspoken understanding amongst those who had faced comparable adverse experiences, Eva Hayman compared her visit to her sister Vera's Czech refugee school, Hinton Hall, to her own situation: "I was with people who had the same problems. [...] at my school and then in the hospital I was the foreigner – they couldn't understand my feelings even if I tried to explain. At Hinton Hall people just knew"<sup>33</sup>

Likewise, the interview given by Lord (Claus) Moser, who came to Britain in 1936 with his parents, illustrates that a similarly supportive environment can be found in a boarding school environment, not necessarily a school solely for refugees – although he does explain how "there were in fact a lot of refugee children at Frensham Heights School, and that was lovely". Lord Moser speaks highly of his time at this school:

*"I was homesick, but I got better and better. This was a school that showed me that relations between teachers and pupils could be friendly, that they didn't have to be hierarchical and dictatorial. [...] That was a very, very good choice. I had a wonderful headmaster. [...] certainly happiness for me began at Frensham, I would say. Lovely school, very good with refugee children, very understanding, and us refugee children all became friends. We didn't become a clique, but we had common problems. I was very, very lucky, really."<sup>34</sup>*

Lord Moser's account suggests an atmosphere of safety and unity at this boarding school, which his brother, who went to Dulwich public school, did not have. He felt that if there had been any discrimination and bullying of the refugee children at Frensham, the headmaster would have stopped it: "For me, knowledge of tolerance and of understanding and of 'live and let live' and all that started at school here."<sup>35</sup>

## Direction and Purpose

As Fazel et al. (2005) note, effective schools and teachers have the ability to "promote resilience in refugee children by becoming the focal point for educational, social and emotional development"<sup>36</sup>. The refugee's education itself also equipped them with new language skills and provided an opportunity for the child to find their feet in their host country. This, in turn, is seen to enhance the refugee's resilience, supplying them with a sense of purpose, agency and direction. Former Kindertransportee and psychotherapist Ruth Barnett explains, "as attachment to carers and new relationships developed, they experienced achievements at school, skills, and acceptance by their peers. This restored their self-confidence and gave them a sense of 'agency', of autonomy and of

making an impact on their new world. This was therapeutic and could be regarded as the first step towards 'readiness' to address the past".<sup>37</sup>

Education and academic attainment play a significant role in building resilience as these arguably contribute to "a certain level of self-confidence, trust, sense of achievement and agency" which are "prerequisite[s] for 'readiness' to address repressed trauma".<sup>38</sup> One Kindertransportee, Ursula Gilbert, sees her educational achievements as something to value: "I managed to study so I've got something I can say I can be proud of".<sup>39</sup> The pride and self-worth that comes from educational attainment is likely to minimise the negative consequence of ACEs as well as uphold those who may face adversity at a later point in life.

Interestingly, particularly in the Kindertransport context, a post-traumatic growth in respect to education can be observed, whereby their ACEs appear to have had positive effect and spurred a number of these children on to succeed academically. A surprising number of child refugees excelled in their education, received scholarships and continued onto university. According to the AJR Kindertransport Survey, approximately 22% achieved some sort of higher education.<sup>40</sup> There is therefore evidence to suggest that adverse experiences may encourage educational resilience, defined as "achievement in schools, despite difficult circumstances".<sup>41</sup> Kindertransportee, Martha Blend, for instance, gained a place at a grammar school where she excelled in her subjects and even won a prize for a poetry recital.<sup>42</sup> She did well in her Higher School Certificate and gained a distinction in English Literature, was awarded a State Scholarship and Intercollegiate Scholarship, and went to study at Queen Mary College.<sup>43</sup> She states: "I had achieved so much against all the odds" and gives credit to her supportive foster parents, whilst also mentioning several encouraging and caring teachers.<sup>44</sup> Another Kindertransportee, Hannah Steinberg, was provided a place at a private girls' school while living with one of her friends from the school. This gave her the grounding to continue her university education and eventually become a renowned psychopharmacologist.<sup>45</sup>

Following the initial years of settling-in to life in a new country and going through the process of acculturation, many child refugees appear to seek a sense of purpose and control over their future. A large number of child refugees from National Socialism attended evening courses, learned practical skills, trained in a profession such as nursing, or contributed in some other way to the war effort. Interestingly, for some child refugees, the chance to learn a practical profession and to exercise some autonomy over their future was more important than the stability offered by a caring foster family. For Lisa Golabek Roberts, finding a place and purpose was her priority. Although her guardians were "very kind" to her, she ran away and "begged the Jewish Family Service to help me learn a profession. They put me into a hostel and I went to work in a factory. My type of work was millinery, dressmaking, shorthand and typing".<sup>46</sup> Following this, she was awarded a four-year scholarship to study at the Royal Academy of Music. Thus, both education in a school environment and the honing of practical skills instil a sense of achievement, pride and autonomy in the refugee, making them more resilient and giving them the confidence to take the next steps into adulthood.

## Communal Living

The type of placement of unaccompanied child refugees in 1939 was a political and logistical consideration prior to the commencement of the Kindertransport scheme. Both individual foster families and communal settings were considered, but the Refugee Children's Movement (RCM), the non-governmental body responsible for the scheme, decided that the best method for the transient child refugees to integrate was through foster care.<sup>47</sup>

Living with family members was preferred by many child refugees but often this was not possible. Of those arriving on a Kindertransport most had to leave their parents behind on the Continent. In some cases, the parents also managed to escape to the UK before the outbreak of the Second World War, yet this did not mean that family members were able to live together. William Dieneman, who fled

from Berlin aged nine together with his sister, was in the lucky position to see his parents arrive in the UK a few months after their own arrival. However, he was given a place in a boarding school, while his sister was allocated a different placement and the parents were not able to create a home for all of them due to war-related restrictions, and also for economic reasons.

The guidelines issued by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR, 1994) emphasise the importance of continuous, loving and nurturing care. It suggests that children should be placed in “the context of the family and the community” and every effort should be made “to place children in foster families or groups of similar ethnic, culture, linguistic and religious background” (UNHCR, 1994, article 20). However, under the time-pressured circumstances and paucity of funds in 1939 and during wartime, none of these criteria for foster parents could be ascertained or assured by the Refugee Committee.

Recent guidelines recognise that each child has different placement needs and that “for some children family care will be the best option whilst for others group care may be more appropriate”.<sup>48</sup> The study of refugee narratives shows that the nature of these placements could vary significantly and there were both benefits and drawbacks to specific situations and types of accommodation. Kindertransportees often had a number of placements (foster homes, hostels or camps) before reaching adulthood. A placement with a foster family appeared more successful in situations where the child became integrated into, and treated as one of, the family and their needs and interests were considered important. For many this was not the case.

It has been suggested that “[a] successful foster parent [...] will understand a child’s behaviour ‘from a trauma-informed lens as opposed to what’s right in front of their face.’ Furthermore, having an ‘open dialogue,’ acknowledging the child’s ‘need to be understood and loved,’ and being ‘an ambassador’ for the child in the community are key to helping the child integrate into their foster home and community.”<sup>49</sup> One child refugee, Lore Robinson, reflects on her successful foster placement and on how her guardians met her emotional, practical and physical needs:

*“I came to Cambridge and this house was wonderful. [...] And they thought I was worth educating, luckily for me, and kept me and sent me to school. [...] I was in a way an adopted daughter. And I did what I could to thank them. [...] They were, in a way, parents to me and grandparents to my children. Wonderful.”<sup>50</sup>*

Another child explained how he initially communicated through languages that had some common links, helping him to adjust and be understood. His foster father’s parenting skills also made it possible for him and the family’s son to get along and become lifelong friends.

Critically, it must be appreciated that not all refugees have the same issues or needs – they are not necessarily a homogenous group, even if they originate from the same country.<sup>51</sup> The only common condition that can be guaranteed to be shared is that they all have a loss of home and came to Britain without their families. Hence, for some children fostering in a home environment might be ideal, but for others it might be more harmful and not ameliorate the traumas. In some cases, Kindertransportees benefitted from a mixture or change of accommodation type. One 11-year-old girl, for instance, felt that initially staying in a group on arrival in England was a significant benefit for her before she was placed in a foster home and then eventually placed in a group home with other refugees.

*“In London a lot of the children were met individually. But this group I belonged to, we were taken off as a group and we stayed outside London for a week for a sort of climatization. [...] It was like a youth hostel. [...] It was nice to be together with the group there.”<sup>52</sup>*



In the foster home, however, she was “upset and isolated” and, following this, was taken to a group home where she remembers “feeling more at home there because people understood about the different backgrounds.”<sup>53</sup>

One of the surprising results of research on underage refugees from National Socialism is the realisation that many older ones preferred to live in communal settings rather than experience the more intimate care of a foster family. This was largely due to the difficulties created by different religious and cultural backgrounds and resulting misunderstandings between foster families and child refugees. The following quote illustrates the case in which a child refugee is placed in a family that adheres strictly to religious tradition that the child was not used to: “The husband criticised me a lot. For example, telling me ‘You are like an animal – like a horse ... you know who sits down and eats breakfast and doesn’t say a prayer and you don’t ever pray, etc.’ I talked to the Irish maid because she was more interested in me. I couldn’t understand the behaviour of their children. I complained to my father. Soon after I was taken to a hostel in Willesden Lane. There I was quite happy. But we were bombed out. I was then placed in another hostel. It wasn’t run as well. I made good friends.”<sup>54</sup> Clearly this child refugee preferred the communal setting of the hostel.

By examining interviews and written narratives provided by this group of refugees, we also see how frequent movement between placements (particularly foster families) caused additional upheaval and was detrimental to the child’s sense of stability and identity, as well disrupting their education. Placement stability, on the other hand, promotes positive development of children.<sup>55</sup> One child refugee said that she held the record for staying in one place (5 years) – a group foster home with other refugees after leaving a family foster home. But she realised this was rare and acknowledged: “[a] lot of kids were moved around and so on, if it didn’t work out.”<sup>56</sup>

To be in a country without familiarity of language, culture or friends, a secure placement becomes more important as an opportunity to acclimatise, acculturate and develop a secure base. Some child refugees had to live with a feelings of rootlessness and a sense of being “other” even later in life, which may have resulted from this frequent movement between placements. Indeed, one refugee describes his life as being “like a jigsaw with lots of pieces”.<sup>57</sup>

## Shared Experience

Hostels or group homes were set up to accommodate children who: were not selected for a foster placement, who did not have a specific sponsor, or who were considered too old for a family placement (and were older than 14 and so beyond the age for schooling). In addition, some organisations or groups, such as the Youth Aliya and Bunce Court School, were interested in keeping the children they sponsored in groups. For example, the Youth Aliyah set up training camps around the country, called *Hachsharas*, where the children would be trained and prepared for emigration to Palestine. One such *Hachshara* group settled in Gwrych Castle, Abergele, North Wales, in 1939 with 200 Kindertransportees.<sup>58</sup>

Many older children found invaluable support from other refugees in a hostel setting, there was a sense of shared experience and a feeling of being “in the same boat”. Historian Anthony Grenville argues that hostels could provide “a happy environment where a supportive communal spirit developed”.<sup>59</sup> Placement in a hostel or group setting might have slowed the adaptation to British language and life, but for many it made the transition easier.<sup>60</sup> In a group setting or hostel, the language spoken may well have been the dominant one of the group, such as German.



Fig. 2

Lisa Golabek Roberts, a 13-year-old Kindertransportee, chose to leave her foster home where she felt she was safe and fed but “wanted to be with others like her”<sup>61</sup> and moved to a hostel in London.

***“She looked around the table at the others and saw her own sadness mirrored in their faces. They shared a terrible anxiety. It was odd, she thought, how being with others like herself made her fears easier to endure. Part of the weight of the great loneliness she had felt since her arrival in England was lifting.”<sup>62</sup>***

For those in a hostel setting, there was an unspoken understanding with each other based on shared traumatic experiences. Many studies on young refugees suggest that there are benefits to them sustaining links with their own communities and that this enables them to maintain a sense of identity, build self-esteem and confidence and combat feelings of isolation.<sup>63</sup> Fazel et al.’s (2012) study found that when child refugees live and socialise alongside people of the same ethnic origin, this provides psychological protection.<sup>64</sup>

Years later during a Kindertransport Reunion in 1993, one Kindertransportee reflected on the long-term beneficial impact of being in a community/group environment:

***“I feel very close to people that I met in 1939 on Hachshara, where we worked together. And I’ve kept up friendships with them and tried to maintain contacts with them. And I feel quite strongly about that.”<sup>65</sup>***

Many of the young refugees who lived in hostels with other refugees stepped into the outside world of work and integrated well into British society during the day. Some of the reports reflect on the positive nature of working with the English in a job, despite delayed, or having lost the opportunity of receiving, further education. There are many positive comments about the work environment: “The people we worked with were so kind and so nice”<sup>66</sup> and “I got a position as a secretary. [...] I got on with everybody.”<sup>67</sup>

The combination of a secure cultural base and shared experience when in contact with other refugees from a similar background, and the daily contact with British work, characters, and values, enabled these refugees to be connected to both their Continental background and simultaneously establish a new independent adult life in Britain.

Living in a group environment also seemed to be a natural step into the wider world of both work and further skills-based education. One guardian wrote to boys of the ages 14 and 16 while they were at a *Hachshara*: “I entirely sympathise with your wish to look for a real job now”,<sup>68</sup> after which the two boys left farming work to attend Loughborough College to learn a trade. If one was not able to pursue an education, employment was essential. Another Kindertransportee who eventually ended up in a hostel and made good friends, said “it was always a question of you know, going to stand on your own two feet, earning your living.”<sup>69</sup>

Meeting with others who shared the refugee experience is described as extremely important by many. In the few instances where British refugee organisations realised this and put facilities at the disposal of refugees to enable them to meet and socialise with others from a similar background, it increased the participants’ wellbeing:

***“I mean the Quakers were extremely helpful to the refugees – particularly in Guildford. For example, [...] they hired a hall and placed that at the disposal of the refugees and called themselves the International Club. They met there every Sunday, to play cards, Tarok, bridge, and other games and had refreshments. My father was the first chairman of this so-called International Club.”<sup>70</sup>***

Using the confidence gained from working through shared experiences, many child refugees found the confidence to contribute to the wider society. Ellen Davis describes being part of Swansea Youth Council as a transformative experience as she made friends outside her former social circle:

*"Whilst being part of the Jewish Youth Club, I was elected to represent the Club at the Swansea Youth Council because I had learnt shorthand and typing which was deemed useful for a secretary. The day I joined the Council was the luckiest day of my life."<sup>71</sup>*

## Open Communication

The life stories of many former refugees who fled to the UK in the 1930s did not come to light for many years after the end of the Second World War. Academic research did not investigate the lives of less-prominent refugees until late into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the subject has only gained more public attention from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Some researchers have argued that this is due to the fact the former child refugees did not wish to speak about their experience and were concentrating on building their lives rather than reflecting on the past. In many cases, there was little communication about these past events even within families. When asked if the child refugee had asked her parents about the horrific incident involving her father being beaten, she said "[No,] because I realized they didn't want to talk about it, so I respected their need for that [...] It wasn't until years, years and years later. My little mum died in 1970 and my dad, who lived until he was 97, used to come and visit us every other year here, and it was then we talked and talked and talked."<sup>72</sup>

Some former child refugees feel very strongly that their children needed to learn about their early childhood experiences, even if these include painful recollections:

*"[... E]verybody tried to protect me from finding out what actually happened. [...] I get invited to talk to school children sometimes [...] and I tell them, 'please when you are parents, tell your children everything, because what you invent is sometimes worse.'"<sup>73</sup>*

*"I seriously believe to try and protect your children by not telling them everything is a terrible thing. It makes them imagine things that could be worse than reality."<sup>74</sup>*

This would point towards the need to foster open communication within families, but also within communities, and the wider society.

## 5 Conclusion: Learning from the Past for the Future

Our research has shown that young refugees from National Socialism experienced a range of ACEs before, during and after their flight to the UK. This is not surprising. However, examining the post-migration experiences of these child refugees gives us an illuminating insight into aspects of their lives that made a positive difference and reduced the likelihood of re-traumatisation or long-term impacts of ACEs. Thus, looking at the child refugees of the past allows us to make suggestions for the future: we have been able to research historical material and life histories in oral and written form and find out about the experiences of child refugees 80 years ago. This new understanding can inform the support of young sanctuary seekers today.

There are several common factors that made a positive difference to the child refugees, although it is crucial to remember that each experience was unique. In an educational setting, supportive teaching staff who have an understanding of the refugee's experiences will have a greater chance to foster acceptance from the children's peers. An awareness of the young refugee's situation should be encouraged and developed in both adults and children.

*"The [schoolchildren] were all very kind. They had been told who we were. There were about three [refugee] children who arrived in school and they helped us all they could."<sup>75</sup>*

Where possible, a connection with other refugees helped combat isolation and alienation. This helped the young refugees to establish a secure foundation and make plans for the future.

For unaccompanied child refugees it seems important that a range of placement options is offered and that care is taken to find a suitable individual or communal placement, taking into account age and religion, as well as individual, cultural and other circumstances. Many of the child refugees from the 1930s benefitted from a connection with other refugees whilst also being included in leisure and work activities of their new country. Finding a balance between connecting to their background and immersion into the new country through work and education seems to be beneficial to many child refugees. Some elements that remain a constant (connection to their past lives on the Continent through other refugees in a hostel setting, or connection through religion) help provide stability during the acculturation process.

Our study suggests that a programme of "supported independence" works best for young refugees – whether they arrived with or without family support. This can be seen in relation to education, individual and communal living support, and in relation to work environments. It is important for young refugees to develop a sense of purpose and independence, and to establish ways of making a difference to their new culture by finding their own place in their new society.

It is now recognised that child refugee children may have difficulties opening up about their feelings or sharing their experiences, especially when beginning to establish a new life in the UK. It is also important that the distress experienced by the child refugees and inability to express this or share it with strangers is not considered unusual and is a part of the growing process. Nevertheless, it is important that a safe space for the expression of such feelings is created and that mental health support is given. With the benefit of hindsight, we can learn what was missing in the case of child refugees from National Socialism: there was not enough support to discuss and reflect on their experiences early on in their lives, and there was no room for open communication about trauma and ACEs within families and communities.



Fig. 3



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**Front cover:** Photo 1934. William and Ursula Dieneman in Berlin, 1934. Private Collection Rachel Dieneman.  
Photo Wilsonovo nádraží, Prague from the series „Stuke after Sebalds Austerlitz“ ©Karen Stuke

**Fig.1** Photo June 1939. Czech refugee girls (ages 8-17) from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia with Matron, Hilda Joseph & staff, as well as Mr (Brother) Segolov from the Grand Order Sons of Jacob at the opening of the converted Wyberlye Ladies Convalescent Home in Burgess Hill, West Sussex. Permission from Lesley Urbach.

**Fig.2** Photo June 1939. Kindertransportee, Karel Gross (age 13) working on a farm in Warborough after arriving in England. Grosz Private Collection.

**Fig.3** Photo 1947. William Dieneman University matriculation 1947. Private Collection Rachel Dieneman.

**Fig. 4** 18th April 1939. Kindertransportee Karel Gross' ticket on the Steamer Prague from Hook of Holland to Harwich. Grosz Private Collection.

**Back cover:** Photo Wilsonovo nádraží, Prague from the series „Stuke after Sebalds Austerlitz“ ©Karen Stuke  
Photo 23rd October 2008. Sir Nicholas Winton with Kindertransportees Sir Alf Dubs and Lady Milena Grenfell-Baines at a reception at Devin Castle, Bratislava, Slovakia for HRH Queen Elizabeth II. Permission from Sir Nicholas Winton Memorial Trust.

**LONDON & NORTH EASTERN RAILWAY.**

**Service Hook of Holland—**  
**HARWICH**  
**DIENST HOEK VAN HOLLAND—HARWICH**  
**Steamship Accommodation Reserved**  
**Gereserveerde Bedden**

**SECOND CLASS**  
**TWEEDE KLASSE**

Name of Passenger } \_\_\_\_\_  
Naam v/d Passagier } \_\_\_\_\_

Date Sailing } **18 APR. 1939**  
Datum van Vertrek } \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Steamer } **PRAGUE**  
Naam v/h Schip } \_\_\_\_\_

DECK—DEK	BERTH—BED
<b>B</b>	
<b>C</b>	<b>91</b>

The Baggage Porter should be informed the number of the Berth, and it will help if hand baggage bears a label shewing name of passenger, name of steamer and number of Berth.

\_\_\_\_\_

Gelieve den drager van Uw bagage het nummer van Uw bed op te geven en Uw handbagage te voorzien van een label, aangevende den naam van den passagier, en van het stoomschip en het nummer van het bed.

Fig. 4





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