



The Holocaust and Wales

Kindertransport 4

Life in Wales

Created by the Centre for the Movement of People (CMOP) at Aberystwyth University



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This is resource 4 of 4 on the topic of the Kindertransport and can be used alongside the other 3 resources. The resources explore the stories of child refugees who came on the Kindertransport to Wales.

This fourth resource explores a range of locations across Wales where child refugees lived and the impact of the Kindertransport on local history in Wales. It is also an opportunity to reflect on the knowledge gained in the previous three Kindertransport resources.

It contains:

- Background information about the Kindertransport and where to find out more
- Useful definition: 'local history'
- Blank Map of Wales
- Information 'sheets on child refugees:
 - Renate Collins
 - Lia Lesser
 - Heinz Lichtwitz
 - Gwrych Castle
 - Czechoslovak State School

The resource assumes a basic understanding of the Holocaust. You may wish to cover the Holocaust Educational Trust's (HET) worksheet ['Defining the Holocaust'](#) before exploring these resources. See also the HET's ['General Principles for Teaching the Holocaust'](#).

Background information about the Kindertransport

From the moment Adolf Hitler and the Nazis took power in Germany in January 1933, they started to persecute their political opponents and Jewish citizens. Many tried to escape this persecution by fleeing, but few countries around the world were willing to admit them. The situation escalated following the November pogrom (Kristallnacht) and Germany's annexation of Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938 and 1939. For many, this marked the 'writing on the wall'. From 1933-39, 400,000 refugees fled from the Third Reich.

There were strict rules on entry to the UK. Visas were only granted to those refugees with the prospect of permanent emigration elsewhere or whose presence was considered advantageous to the UK. Some were allowed to enter through help from relatives, friends or charities. By September 1939, around 78,000 refugees from Central Europe were living in the UK, and a further 12,000 had arrived and re-emigrated. Approximately 90% of these refugees were Jewish, and some 2,000 refugees probably came to Wales. With the outbreak of war, immigration from the German Reich effectively ended.

Fleeing across Europe to escape the Nazis, about 10,000 Jewish children arrived in Britain between December 1938 and September 1939 on the Kindertransport (children's transport). This was a visa waiver scheme for children persecuted as Jewish in the German Reich and was a response to public pressure after the November pogrom. Children had to be guaranteed by a £50 deposit from a sponsor (e.g. individuals, the Jewish community, church groups, workers' co-operatives), which covered their maintenance up until the age of eighteen – over £4,000 in today's money.



The British government only admitted unaccompanied minors through this scheme, even though most of them had lived with their parents and other members of their families before their flight. Most travelled from the German Reich by train and then boat (usually leaving from the Netherlands and arriving in Harwich in Essex), but others flew by plane.

The transports were organised by organisations on the Continent and by the Refugee Children's Movement, an umbrella organisation in the UK. Some children were supported by non-Jewish groups like the Society of Friends (Quakers). The British government did not fund or organise the transports. They were organised by hundreds of volunteers. Nicholas Winton, a British banker, is one of the most well-known, but there were many others. Winton helped save 669 children by organising transports from Prague, Czechoslovakia.

Several children ended up in Wales. Some stayed with relatives, others were fostered by Welsh families. Between 1939 and 1941, around 200 Jewish child refugees were housed at Gwrych Castle in Abergele, as well as at Llandough Castle in Glamorgan. During the war, many refugees were evacuated to Wales from other areas, like London, or the Czechoslovak State School in Llanwrtyd Wells, which was located at the Abernant Lake Hotel from 1943-5.

For more information on the Kindertransport, see:

- <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kindertransport-1938-40>
- <https://wp-research.aber.ac.uk/nsrefugeeswales/history/kindertransportees/>



Books: Andrea Hammel, The Kindertransport: What Really Happened (Polity, 2024); Jennifer Craig-Norton, The Kindertransport: Contesting Memory (Indiana University Press, 2019); Vera K. Fast, Children's Exodus: A History of the Kindertransport (I.B. Taurus, 2011); Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, Never Look Back: The Jewish Refugee Children in Great Britain, 1938-1945 (Purdue University Press, 2012)

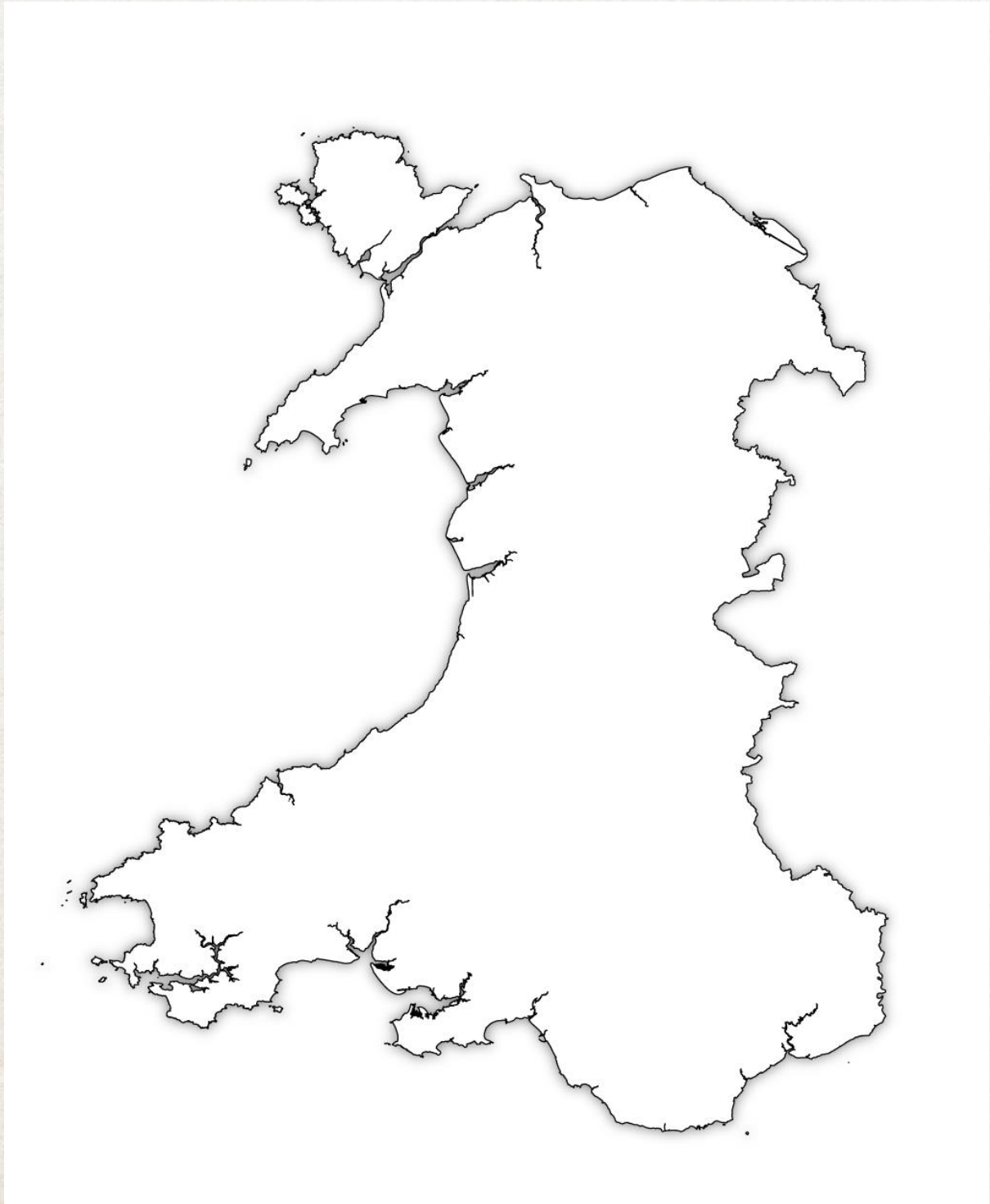
What is 'local history'?

Local history is defined by Carol Kammen as 'the study of past events, or of people or groups, in a given geographical area – a study based on a wide variety of documentary evidence and placed in a comparative context that should be both regional and national ... Local history is, despite its limited geographical focus, a broad field of inquiry: it is the political, social, and economic history of a community and its religious and intellectual history too. It is a place to look for individual reactions to historical events ...'

Source: Carol Kammen, On Doing Local History (Altamira, 2003), p. 4

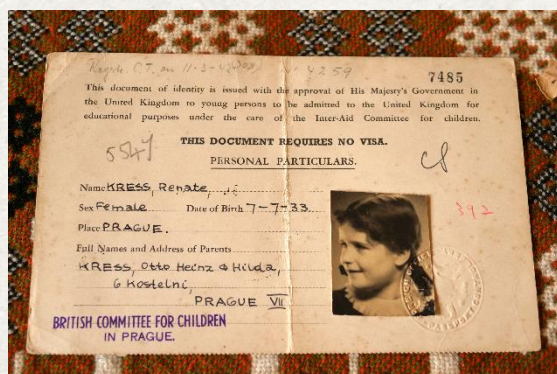


Blank Map of Wales



Information Sheet: Renate Collins

Renate Collins was born in 1933 in Prague. The only child of Otto (a banker) and Hilda (a nurse), Renate was brought up in a Jewish household. Otto was originally from Germany, so Renate spoke both Czech and German at home.



Renate's ID Card, issued by the British Committee for Children in Prague
Image: Centre for the Movement of People (CMOP): <https://wp-research.aber.ac.uk/nsrefugeeswales/history/background-of-refugees/refugee-profiles/renate-collins/>
Image courtesy of Renate Collins

When the Germans marched into Prague in March 1939, Renate's parents made the decision to send her to Wales. She escaped on the last Kindertransport train to leave Czechoslovakia before the Second World War broke out. She remembers that 'The German soldiers were on the platform and when the train was due to go out, they caught hands to make a line so that the parents couldn't jump on the train.'

Renate Collins as a young girl
Image: CMOP: <https://wp-research.aber.ac.uk/nsrefugeeswales/history/background-of-refugees/refugee-profiles/renate-collins/>
Image courtesy of Renate Collins



She was only five years old when she left Prague. Boarding the train was the last time she saw her parents. Her parents and grandparents were murdered in the Holocaust. In total, she lost 64 members of her family during the Holocaust.

Renate was fostered by a Welsh family in Porth, South Wales. Renate quickly learned English and settled into life in her local school and community. She was a keen hockey player, and also enjoyed gardening. Her foster parents, Sidney and Arianwen Coplestone, adopted her after she became naturalised in 1947.

After leaving school, she studied accountancy, typing and shorthand at college, and worked for BOAC, the forerunner of British Airways. She later married her husband, David, and moved to Cornwall, and has two children and five grandchildren. She returned to Wales in 2001, although has now moved back to Cornwall. 'I'm only sad that the rest of my family weren't here to have enjoyed life as well,' she says.



Information Sheet: Lia Lesser

Lia Lesser was a child refugee who left from Prague, Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1939. Her family had already moved three times in the previous six months due to growing antisemitism in the country, before her parents decided to send her to Britain. She was fostered by a Christian woman from Bull Bay, Ynys Môn/Anglesey, who was able to converse with Lia in German.

Lia remembers her arrival in North Wales:

‘We went to Bull Bay, which is a tiny, little village. It just had a post office, nothing more than that ... And my memory, when I actually got into the bungalow, on the kitchen table sat a cat. And I knew straightaway, I knew I was going to be all right because I loved cats. I had a little cat in Czechoslovakia. And so, I thought, ‘It’s going to be alright.’”



Bull Bay, Ynys Môn/Anglesey

Image: Wikimedia Commons

Image author: Geoff Barber:

<https://www.geograph.org.uk/profile/3900>

Image source: Geograph project collection:

<https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/91248>

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She attended the local school, where she discovered that she was the only refugee on the island, but later joined the Czechoslovak School in Shropshire and then Llanwrtyd Wells. She returned to Anglesey and completed her schooling after the closure of the Czechoslovak School. Like many Kindertransportees, the rest of Lia’s family were not so fortunate. Her mother died in the Theresienstadt Ghetto in Czechoslovakia, while her father died of starvation in Auschwitz. She later became a nurse in Birmingham.

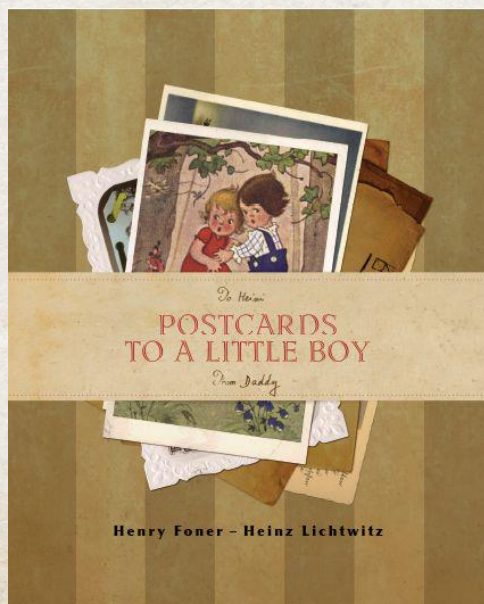


Information Sheet: Heinz Lichtwitz

Heinz Lichtwitz was a Kindertransportee who left Berlin in early 1939 and arrived in Swansea in February, aged six. He stayed with a Jewish couple named Morris and Winifred Foner. Heinz's father, Max, sent constant postcards to him from Germany to keep up his spirits. Heinz learned English very quickly, though, and when his father phoned him wishing him a happy birthday in June, Heinz realised he had forgotten most of his German.

Max was a lawyer in Berlin who organised for other Jews to escape the country, but he was tragically unable to save himself. He was sent to Auschwitz in December 1942 and murdered a week later. Heinz later received a letter that Max had sent to Heinz's brother before he died:

'I think my Heini has found a good home and that the Foners will look after him as well as any parents could. Please convey to them, one day when it will be possible, my deepest gratitude for making it possible for my child to escape the fate that will soon overtake me ... Please tell him one day that it was only out of deep love and concern for his future that I have let him go, but that on the other hand I miss him most painfully day by day and that my life would lose all meaning if there were not at least the possibility of seeing him again someday.'



Heinz later compiled a book made from postcards his father had sent him, called Postcards to a Little Boy: A Kindertransport Story.

Book cover
Henry Foner (Heinz Lichtwitz), Postcards to a Little Boy: A Kindertransport Story (Yad Vashem Publications, 2013):
<https://store.yadvashem.org/en/postcards-to-a-little-boy-16>



Information Sheet: Gwrych Castle

Between 1939 and 1941, Gwrych Castle in Abergele, Denbighshire, hosted around 200 Jewish refugee children who had fled from Nazi-occupied Europe. The castle was organised into a hachshara (agricultural training centre), which were originally set up in Germany by Zionist organisations such as Youth Aliyah and Bachad to prepare young people for agricultural work in the British Mandate of Palestine.



Gwrych Castle, 2020.

Image: Wikimedia Commons.

Image author: Gwrychcastle

Link:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gwrych_Castle%E2%80%99s_east_front.jpg

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Use of the castle was offered for free by the owner Lord Dundonald but it was in very poor condition. Only a few rooms were able to be used and they had to dig holes outside for toilets. The very old stove used for cooking smoked all the time leading to some cases of carbon dioxide poisoning. The water pump, which used water from the Abergele supply, wasn't powerful enough to provide for 200 people, meaning children had to run down to the kitchen and carry buckets of water back up to their bathrooms.

Children at Gwrych Castle divided their time between agricultural work and religious study, alongside working for local businesses and farms. Sometimes there were also leisure pursuits, including football, table tennis, and parties.

Herman Rothman was a child refugee at Gwrych Castle. He remembers: 'to start with I worked only until 1 or 2 o'clock...and later on we thought – this friend of mine and I – we would qualify for special food if we worked longer, so we decided [that] although we stop at 2 o'clock we'll tell them that we worked till 5 or 6 so we got extra rations of sandwiches'.



Information Sheet: Czechoslovak State School

Between 1943 and 1945, the Czechoslovak government created a secondary school for refugees at the Abernant Lake Hotel in Llanwrtyd Wells. The school had previously been located in Surrey and Shropshire, before being evacuated to Wales. Around 140 pupils, mostly from Jewish backgrounds, were taught at the Czechoslovak State School.

Lessons at the school were in Czech and all expenses (including the teachers' salaries and children's board) were paid for by the Czechoslovak government-in-exile.



Pencil Drawing of Abernant Lake Hotel,
1940

Image: Centre for the Movement of People,
Aberystwyth University: <https://wp-research.aber.ac.uk/nsrefugeeswales/history/kindertransportees/czechoslovak-school/>
Original item held by Bromsgrove School
Archive

Marilyn Yalom, a former pupil, said that 'It was clear that we all needed both to speak and to feel Czech, as the aim of the school was to prepare us to rebuild the republic devastated by the Nazis.'

Ruth Hálová was another student at the school and remembers her time there as 'full of friendship':

We were a varied group: most of the students were children from the children's transports, whose lives, like mine, had been saved by Nicholas Winton. Part of us were also children of soldiers and airmen who were serving in the British armed forces, or children of civil servants and high officials of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile. After two beautiful years, I graduated from there. It was May 1945, the end of the war.



At one concert held at the school, the children sang Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau (Land of My Fathers), which endeared them to the local community. Vera Gissing was a Kindertransportee from Prague who came to Britain in May 1939. She was a student at the school and remembers that, at the concert, there 'wasn't a dry eye in the audience'. She later wrote a book about her experiences entitled Pearls of Childhood.

Former student Frank Schwelb also remembered 'with particular affection the Welsh people who welcomed' him and his classmates 'so warmly during [their] time of need'. The town of Llanwrtyd Wells later twinned with the Czech town of Český Krumlov, further developing ties between the two communities.

