

THE MIRACLE OF THE CHILDREN

An address for the second National Holocaust Memorial Day

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Some time ago it was decided that for Holocaust Memorial Day Lecture this year we would make our subject the children of the Kindertransport.. For a very personal reason, I have agreed to deliver it. Some two months ago there died a very dear friend whom I had known for nearly fifty years. You will not know him by name, but his image is very well known, for there is a famous picture associated with a book on those children, *And The Policeman Smiled*, a picture distributed here this evening. He is the boy with the balaclava helmet. And so, this evening, this lecture is dedicated to Peter Morgan, a dear friend and my own personal link to the children rescued in 1938 to 1939, who in his own life taught me a great deal about the significance of this episode.

In the history of all the various catastrophes of the twentieth century, not only the Holocaust but also all the other genocides and strifes, it has been the role played by the children that has always attracted our attention and our heartstrings. Sometimes the children are the victims or even sometimes, much to our incredulity, the perpetrators, it is always to them we turn and about them that we have the deepest emotions. When for example we read of the appalling events in Sierra Leone what I am sure struck most of us as being particularly evil was the way in which many of those guilty of the most appalling injustices and inhumanities and atrocities - such as cutting off children's limbs or even putting people to death - were themselves children. It seems the height of absurdity to be reading only this week in the papers an argument as to whether as part of the process of making the situation there more normal there should be set up war crime trials of thirteen or fourteen year olds for the part they played in those atrocities. Or again, within the history of the Holocaust, think of the number of times when it was the children that were sacrificed. In Lodz for example, one of the biggest and most organised of the ghettos, the head of the

ghetto was faced with the need to reduce the numbers in the ghetto, and was instructed by the Nazis to take away the children. He actually called a meeting at which he asked the parents to hand over their children. *The ghetto has been struck a hard blow. They demand what is most dear to it – children and old people. ...In my old age I am forced to stretch out my hands and beg: Brothers and Sisters, give them to me! – Fathers and Mothers, give me your children. Yesterday I was given the order to send away more than 20,000 from the ghetto, and if I did not they said – we will do it ourselves. I must carry out this difficult and bloody operation. I must cut off limbs in order to save the body! I must take away children, and if I do not, others too will be taken. I cannot give you comfort today. Nor did I come to calm you. I have come like a robber to take from you what is dearest to your heart. I tried to lessen the sentence. Only yesterday I ordered the registration of nine-year old children. I wanted to save at least one year – children from nine to ten. But they would not yield. There are many people in this ghetto who suffer from tuberculosis, whose days or weeks are numbered. I do not know, perhaps this is a satanic plan, but I cannot stop myself from proposing it. Give me these sick people and perhaps it will be possible to save the healthy in their place. Common sense requires us to know that those must be saved who can be saved and who have a chance of being saved and not those whom there is no chance to save in any case.*

And when they refused he took them nevertheless and tried to defend his actions in words which even now make the action more heinous.

There is a description of the deportation of these children: *The little ones who were loaded on the cart behaved quietly in submission, or yelling, according to their ages. The children of the ghetto, boys and girls less than ten years old, are already mature and familiar with poverty and suffering. The young look around them with wide-open*

eyes and do not know what to do. They are on a cart for the first time in their lives, a cart that will be pulled by a real horse, a proper horse. They are looking forward to a gay ride. More than one of the little ones jumps for joy on the floor of the wagon as long as there is space. And at the same time his mother has almost gone out of her mind, twisting about on the ground and tearing her hair from her head in despair. It is difficult to overcome several thousand mothers. It is difficult to persuade them to give up their children to death as a sacrifice. It is difficult to take out the old people who hide in the smallest and most hidden corners.

And this Ghetto leader was not the only one faced with such decisions. In Warsaw his opposite number was faced with the realisation that the orphanages were going to be emptied and committed suicide in despair; in virtually every ghetto when the Germans who controlled life and death wanted to reduce its size their first action was almost inevitably to insist on the removal of the children. It was in many ways a war waged against the children. In the summer of 1944 after the Allies had landed in France and when the German Army was about to try and escape Eichmann realised that there was still an orphanage in Paris that had not been cleared of its Jewish inmates; he overrode all problems and had them deported straight to Auschwitz and extermination.

And even when the horrors were over there still remain pictures that we have to remember; think of the images of those children of Auschwitz who had managed to survive being shepherded along the barbed wire corridors and displaying the numbers which had been tattooed on their arms. Later this evening we will hear music particularly associated with the Ghetto of Theresienstadt, Terezin, the so-called City given by Hitler to the Jews. The inhabitants of that ghetto tried to shelter and nurture their children. They tried to create for them some imitation of ordinary life, to give

them the illusion of childhood. Many of us have seen the drawings which these children created, or have heard and read the poems which those children composed. Many of us have heard of and read **The Butterfly Poem**, the child's realisation that butterflies can come into and leave the ghetto and comparing it with their fate. But there is another, written by a child of twelve, entitled **FEAR**. I give you a translation:

*Today the ghetto knows a different fear,
Close in its grip, Death wields an icy scythe
An evil sickness spreads a terror in its wake,
The victims of its shadow weep and writhe.*

*Today a father's heartbeat tells his fright
And mothers bend their heads into their hands.
Now children choke and die with typhus here,
A bitter tax is taken from their bands.*

*My heart still beats inside my breast
While friends depart for other worlds.
Perhaps it's better - who can say? -
Than watching this, to die today?*

*No, no, my God, we want to live
Not watch our numbers melt away.
We want to have a better world,
We want to work - we must not die.*

Eva Pickova was born on 15 May 1929, taken to Terezin in April 1942, deported to Auschwitz and gassed there on 18 December 1943, aged fourteen and a half. The children in the ghetto performed an opera, Brundibar. It was given fifty-five performances before virtually all the participants were in their turn deported to Auschwitz, mostly to their deaths.

It has been estimated that over a million and a half children were put to death in Europe during these years to say nothing of those who 'merely' died of starvation or of diseases caused by the appalling living conditions. If you go to Yad Vashem one of the most telling and moving sections is that dedicated to the children. You enter a hall of darkness in which there seem to be a myriad of tiny blinking lights. It is in fact a single candle reflected in an enormous number of mirrors; and as you make your way through the corridors in the darkness you hear a disembodied voice reading out names and ages and places of residence. These are the children; not all the children, because for some of those children the phrase must parallel the wording on the memorials to unknown soldiers, known only to God. And in addition to the obvious tragedy of their deaths is that none of them had the chance of developing the talents with which they had been endowed. We will never know which of them would have been mathematicians or artists, poets or musicians, scientists or doctors. And equally obviously we have lost not only them but their possible children and grand-children. For that also is an aspect of the loss of these children - the future generations. For all these missing children represent not only themselves but all the children whom they in turn might have had, the millions of their own lost children.

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The literature that has now been released for this year's National Holocaust Memorial Day asks us to say something especially about Great Britain and the Holocaust. In fact we had independently determined to do precisely that, for we had already decided to talk about the rescued children, those who were on the so-called Kindertransport. Between November 1938 and September 1939 a series of trains brought in all nearly ten thousand children, rescued from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia as a direct result of the inter-action of the British government and ordinary people, Jew and non-Jew alike. It was a remarkable episode and one of great significance. In telling this story I would not wish to imply that more could not have been done. The Nazis were only too willing to allow the children to go, and in fact there were thousands more left in the pipeline when the war broke out and the process was brought to an abrupt end. Even during the ten months that the scheme was in operation many more might have been brought into the country. I would not wish to argue that Britain did as much during these dreadful years as might possibly have been done, nor am I on the other hand trying to argue that there were not people who did try in one way or another to impede the possible rescue of Jewish victims. There was clearly antisemitism even in some of the highest levels of the British government. The fact does remain however that the story of these children represents a bright candle in a very nasty world, and that its impact is as moving in its way as the image of the single light in the memorial to the children at Yad Vashem.

I have given you the harrowing story of the deportation of the children from the Ghetto of Lodz and of the reactions of the parents. In a curious way the story of the Kindertransport is also a story of the separation of children from their parents, albeit with a much more kindly set of intentions. In all the tales of missed opportunities associated with the Western powers' attitude to Hitler and his developing plans after

1933 this is the episode which does stand out, the rescue of a number of children. Once it became clear that there was no future for Jews under the Nazis many tried desperately to leave Germany and go elsewhere. But it was a time of great unemployment, and no country wished to receive large numbers of refugees who often enough had little to bring with themselves except what was on their backs and the skills in their brains and hands. They were even unhappy at the possibilities of allowing children to come in. The German Government would not allow them to take out capital and no-one wanted many more thousands of competitors for whatever jobs were available in the countries into which they wished to go. Some few came, and we in Leicester have reasons to be grateful for their arrival into our community. But in all cases the arguments to allow the immigration of individuals were fought desperately and in all cases there had to be assurances that none of them were ever likely to be a charge upon public funds. In November 1938, however, after a particularly vicious series of attacks upon the Jewish communities in Germany the plea was made at least to allow into the country, as a place of refuge, a number of the children. Assurances were given to the Government that the children would not become a charge upon public money, that all expenses involving these children would be met privately, and that eventually all the children given admission would be encouraged to move on elsewhere, to other countries. They were very clearly not to be immigrants but transmigrants. The Government was by now coming under very heavy pressure from Jews and Gentiles alike. One of the glories of Britain is the way in which private individuals, once they are convinced of the justice of a cause, will band together in all sorts of organisations to pressurise the authorities. Quakers, Inter-Aid, many organisations set up specifically to try and care for children in Germany eventually persuaded the Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, himself from a Quaker

background, to allow a number of unaccompanied children under the age of 17, to enter the country. Detailed individual immigration papers would not be required, and for each child a bond of £50 would have to be deposited. It was undoubtedly a great humanitarian gesture, although it was difficult to object to helping children and they could hardly be accused of taking away the jobs of Englishmen. And there was by now no doubt about the privations with which they would be faced in Germany. At the same time there was the hope that this would persuade other countries, such as the USA, to take similar action. Unfortunately they did not.

Nobody was under any illusion about the expense that would be involved and the degree of commitment that would be necessary. A public appeal had to be issued and Lord Baldwin, a former Prime Minister, made this appeal on the radio. We are accustomed nowadays to a stream of such appeals; the weeks' good causes are never ending. But at that time this was something new, and the words he used are still striking:

I ask you to come to the aid of victims not of any catastrophe in the natural world, not of earthquake nor of flood nor of famine, but of the explosion of man's inhumanity to man.

After this appeal offers of hospitality poured in from people all over the country, at last aware of what Nazi persecution really meant and anxious to help the more helpless and innocent of its victims. All areas and classes, from all kinds of homes; from well-known figures of everyday life and from artisans, from the wealthiest homes and from the unemployed.

In December 1938 the first of the trains arrived in London. They came through Holland and the children arrived in Harwich. In all some ten thousand came,

approximately a thousand each month. There was a reunion of many of the survivors held in 1989, repeated in 1999, and there have been a number of publications, each of which contains the moving stories of many of these children. Many of the details of how the individual children came to be selected have never been told. Many of the details of the work of individual volunteers who went to Germany to help bring out as many as possible have not been told. There is the story of a London stockbroker who went to Prague in the early spring and came back determined to do something about rescuing them on an individual basis. And there are the stories of the despair in which these children were brought by their parents in an attempt to have them included. I spoke earlier about the despair with which parents in Lodz saw their children taken from them to be deported. In many ways that parallels the despair with which parents in Germany and Austria and Czechoslovakia handed over their children. And if you say but there is a difference, that at least these were going to safety, there is still the realisation of giving up a child without any hope of ever seeing that child again. There were children who were actually taken down to the trains and at the last minute their parents could not bear to part with them and took them back. One hardly dares to try and imagine their eventual fate and the dreadful despair of the parents who had the additional guilt of have failed to save them. And what of the trauma facing the children. ‘What have I done wrong? Why are my parents rejecting me? I promise not to do it again, whatever it might have been, if you don’t get rid of me.’ Those feelings of rejection, either conscious or sub-conscious, were to remain with many of those children for the rest of their lives.

The journeys were not easy, and there are many accounts of the ways in which the trainloads were tormented by the various officials in Germany through whose hands they were passed, of the humiliations, petty or major , which were inflicted upon the

children. And not only were many of the children really too young to be travelling by themselves but they also found themselves having to look after other children smaller, younger, and even more helpless than they themselves were, - children who were being sick, wetting themselves, having no real idea of what was happening to them. And when they arrived in this country they had problems in understanding their new environment. One of them wrote of arriving at Harwich and actually seeing a policeman who smiled. *'It was then that I made up my mind that I would never leave England. A country where a policeman smiled had to be a good place to settle.'*

Nor was the story over once they had arrived in this country. There had been two basic problems facing these groups. One was the choice out of the 60,000 or more children whose parents were all too anxious to secure for their children safety and a refuge. But there was also the problem of checking the suitability of the homes offered in this country. Not all were appropriate. Nobody envisaged then those things about which we now know far more than we used to think possible, of sadistic parents and foster-parents, of people who offered to take on children because they wanted cheap labour. Not all the foster-homes found for these children were suitable, and even when there was no evil intent not all of the hosts were really able to understand the particular needs or problems of each of those children. The stories that were later told do not always reflect favourably upon all those involved. I have been reading a large number of the stories of these children, and sometimes even sixty years later they would make you weep.

But yet in all the accounts I have read, and I have quite a library now relating to the Kinder of these kindertransports, and I have heard a great deal about them thanks to my late dear friend Peter, there is a constant stream of gratitude, a feeling of great thankfulness to this country that at a crucial time a hand of assistance was offered, not

only to them but in turn and as a consequence to their own future children. Peter was rescued and through him were preserved his own five children and thirteen grandchildren, and he was but one of those innocents rescued from suffering. But the greatest gratitude was for those individuals who put themselves out to look after these children. When you think about the need to find so many households, so many foster-parents, you begin to realise the magnitude of the gesture. There was a wide range of homes that offered hospitality. Not all of those who volunteered as foster-parents were Jewish, and they were faced with the problems of how to cope with children of a different religion. Not all the children did well; there are some very sad stories of children who turned out badly.

There is a moral to the story. There has to be a moral to such a story today. On the one hand it is possible to look at this episode and to pat ourselves on our backs, to say how wonderful it was that these were saved, and in addition to say, 'see how this country has benefited from all that they contributed to the life and wealth of this country.' And from that it is very easy to use these arguments in relation to more modern waves of would-be immigrants. But if we do that, then we are betraying the impulses which gave rise to those actions. We do not, we must never try to justify doing right because we gain advantages from doing so. We must do what is right because it is the right thing to do.

So if, in the light of the Holocaust, we need to try and understand what happened, to try and draw together have been called the lessons of the Holocaust, let us add this thought. If we give refuge to refugees, if we look to the children and try to help them, let us do so because it is right and proper and necessary to help them and all others. If we say and think *never again* let us at the same time remember what happened to the children, whether it be the children who were seized in Lodz and sent straight off to

the gas chambers or the children who were given a chance, who were rescued and brought here.

We have been asked to bear in mind Britain's associations with the Holocaust. I am not going to argue whether Britain could have done more to help; I am not going to try and throw into the balance the heroism which was displayed during the war to destroy those who were in turn trying to destroy Jews, any more than I am going to pay tribute to those selfless individuals who after the fighting was ended went out to such camps as Belsen to try and rescue those who in too many cases were already beyond rescue. Rather I want to remember this one episode. There is a saying that he who saves a single life has saved an entire world. If the saving of a single life, a single child is something meritorious how much worthy is the saving of ten thousand lives.