WE HAD TO BE BRAVE

Escaping the Nazis on the Kindertransport
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Escaping the Nazis on the Kindertransport
ALSO BY
DEBORAH HOPKINSON

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Two Jewish refugee children, part of a Kindertransport, upon arrival in Harwich, England, on December 12, 1938.
WE HAD TO BE BRAVE

Escaping the Nazis on the Kindertransport

Deborah Hopkinson
We had to be brave: escaping the Nazis on the Kindertransport
Deborah Hopkinson

Ruth David was growing up in a small village in Germany when Adolf Hitler rose to power in the 1930s. Under the Nazi Party, Jewish families like Ruth’s experienced rising anti-Semitic restrictions and attacks. Just going to school became dangerous. By November 1938, anti-Semitism erupted into Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, and unleashed a wave of violence and forced arrests. Days later, desperate volunteers sprang into action to organize the Kindertransport, a rescue effort to bring Jewish children to England. Young people like Ruth David had to say good-bye to their families, unsure if they’d ever be reunited. Miles from home, the Kindertransport refugees entered unrecognizable lives, where food, clothes—and, for many of them, language and religion—were startlingly new. Meanwhile, the onset of war and the Holocaust visited unimaginable horrors on loved ones left behind. Somehow, these rescued children had to learn to look forward, to hope. Through the moving and often heart-wrenching personal accounts of Kindertransport survivors, critically acclaimed and award-winning author Deborah Hopkinson paints the timely and devastating story of how the rise of Hitler and the Nazis tore apart the lives of so many families and what they were forced to give up in order to save these children”—Provided by publisher.
For
Lisa, Liel, Lily, and Hudson

and

for all children who must wander
January 1939
Berlin, Germany

Tears kept welling up in my eyes.

*Dear mother, I don’t want to leave you, I don’t want to lose you.*

I did not know then that I would have pathetic letters from my father, written in an unsteady handwriting, his hands shaking from forced labor of building roads, and later still twenty word messages through the Red Cross from a concentration camp. I didn’t know all that then, and it was just as well . . .

The day of my journey came, a gray cold early morning in January 1939. . . . The taxi we ordered did not turn up, so we went to the station by tram. Awful scenes of children and parents, little children, adolescent boys and girls, about two hundred of us. Sandwiches, cases, last minute advice, last hugs and kisses. Then we were lined up and marched to a waiting train.

*Goodbye, darling parents, goodbye . . .

I never saw them again.

——MARIANNE JOSEPHY ELSLEY

Nazi propaganda postcard featuring Adolf Hitler, a swastika flag, and a member of the Sturmabteilung (SA), or storm troopers, in Munich, Germany, about 1932.
I know very well that there are millions of stories just like mine, or much more interesting than mine . . . Why do I sit down and put it on paper?

I feel that this story should stay alive, that the younger generation should know a bit about the details of this part of Jewish history and Jewish suffering and the great urge to go on, as best you can, no matter what happens.

Just as there are Jewish families in the United States who have lived here now in peace and prosperity for three or four generations, so there were four or more generations of Jews in Germany who had lived there in peace until Hitler came along and started to destroy their lives bit by bit and in the end murdered millions of them.

—RUTH SASS GLASER
Think of us.
—From the last letter of Franz Josephy, father of Marianne Elsley, August 1944
Imagine getting on a train and leaving your parents and your family behind. Imagine arriving in a new place, where you don’t speak the language and where everything is different. People wear clothes that seem strange; the food is different too. Imagine feeling that great danger looms and threatens those you love most, yet you have no idea what might be happening to your family back home.

This is what happened to ten thousand children who escaped Nazi-occupied countries on the Kindertransport, a rescue effort that took place in 1938–1939. Kinder is the German word for “children,” which you probably can guess from our imported word kindergarten, or “children’s garden.” In this book, Kindertransport refers both to the overall rescue effort as well as to individual transports that carried refugees. Most of the children escaped by train, although there were several transports by plane.

When Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, life changed for Jewish children and their families. The Nazis persecuted Jewish people, creating numerous barriers to education and earning a living. In 1935, the Nazis took away their citizenship. In 1938,
Jewish children were expelled from all state-run schools in Germany. When Germany annexed Austria in March 1938, Jews there fell under Nazi power and suffered the same hardships.

At first, the Nazis’ goal was to make life so unbearable that Jews would leave. But it wasn’t easy to emigrate, and not everyone could do so in time. By 1941, after the start of World War II, Hitler’s “Final Solution” meant that Jews were deported to concentration camps to face almost certain death. Six million Jewish men, women, and children were murdered by the time the war ended in Europe in May 1945. Historians estimate about one million Jewish children were killed. The Nazis also targeted LGBTQ people, political prisoners, people with disabilities, and other “non-Aryan” minorities, such as those of Romany heritage.

The Kindertransport effort spared ten thousand children, primarily from Germany and Austria, from this fate. While some Kindertransport survivors have passed away, others are now in their eighties or nineties. They are active and curious citizens of the world who greet each day as a gift. Today, many continue to educate others about the Holocaust and speak out about the plight of refugees in the twenty-first century.

In putting together this book, I was inspired by many people, including Kindertransport survivor
Alfred “Freddie” Traum, who grew up in Vienna, Austria, where he sang in a Jewish boys’ choir. He described his last Hanukkah performance before he and his sister left for England on the Kindertransport. He wrote: “All those present joined in the song, and we forgot about the harsh world outside. Naturally, as on all such occasions, this was followed with festive food and drink. We all went home with hope in our hearts.”

Books take on a form or shape of their own; this one has come together a bit like the concert Freddie described, or perhaps simply like a group of people gathered together to tell their stories. We’ll primarily follow the lives of three people: Professor Leslie Baruch Brent, Ruth Oppenheimer David, and Marianne Josephy Elsley. You might think of them as soloists. Added to their experiences is a chorus of others who chime in, sometimes alone and other times as part of the Voices sections. There are, of course, thousands of stories like those told here, and I encourage you to explore books listed in the bibliography as well as websites provided in the resources section.

Learning about the resilience and courage of these children, parents, and rescuers has been humbling. I am only able to share these stories thanks to the generosity of Kindertransport survivors and their families. I am also indebted to those museums and organizations
dedicated to preserving the testimonies of those who have borne witness to the Holocaust. We may think that the atrocities of the Holocaust are part of the distant past. But it was not so long ago. And there are still people who commit hate crimes, treat refugees harshly, and speak and act violently against others. I am writing these words in October 2018, a day after the worst anti-Semitic violence in United States history, when eleven people were killed at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

I once had the chance to meet Niels Skov, a resistance fighter in World War II, who helped rescue Jewish families in Denmark who were about to be deported by the Germans. He wasn’t part of an organized group. He and a friend, like thousands of other Danes, simply found their own way to help and take action to do what was right. Niels has since passed away. He was ninety-four when we met. When I asked what advice he would give to young people today, Niels said, “Swim against the stream. Don’t do what everyone else does.”

I think it’s up to each of us to take a stand against anti-Semitism, genocide, and discrimination, and to commit ourselves to justice, fairness, and kindness. We may not be able to change the entire world. But what
we do matters. We can be brave and raise our voices to make sure others are not silenced, hurt, or bullied.

Think of them.

Here are the main voices in this book. A list of other Kindertransport survivors, as well as rescuers and historians, can be found in About the People in This Book (page 259).
PROFESSOR LESLIE BARUCH BRENT is a distinguished immunologist and the author of *Sunday’s Child? A Memoir*. He was born in Germany in 1925 and escaped in December 1938 on the first Kindertransport. He lives in London. In November 2018 he spoke at the eightieth reunion of the Kindertransport.

RUTH OPPENHEIMER DAVID was born in Frankfurt, Germany, on March 17, 1929, and grew up in a small town. She escaped on the Kindertransport in June 1939. A retired teacher and author of a memoir entitled *Child of Our Time: A Young Girl’s Flight from the Holocaust*, Ruth lives in Leicester, England, where she still speaks about her experience as a refugee.

MARIANNE JOSEPHY ELSLEY was born in Rostock, Germany, in 1923. An only child, she was fifteen when she left Germany in January 1939. She died in 2009. Quotations from her unpublished memoir, “Without Bitterness,” are included here by permission of the Leo Baeck Institute and her daughter, Judith Elsley. Marianne also published a memoir, *A Chance in Six Million*. 
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Part One
WHEN THEY BURN BOOKS
1925–1938
Dort wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man auch am Ende Menschen.
(Where they burn books, they will, in the end, burn human beings too.)

—HEINRICH HEINE, *ALMANSOR*, 1823

Crisis was Hitler’s oxygen. He needed it to survive.

—IAN KERSHAW

When the Nazis proclaimed their war against the Jewish people, beginning with the boycott of April 1, 1933, the German Jews began to understand the writing on the wall, to realize that the foundations of their life were tottering, and that they must prepare themselves and their children for a new and hard struggle in a changed world.

—NORMAN BENTWICH

A family picnic in pre-Nazi Germany. The young woman pictured is the mother of Kindertransport survivor Ruth David. Ruth’s maternal grandfather is on the right, and her grandmother, Feodora, is on the far left. Ruth’s youngest sister was named Feo after this grandmother.
Before they were refugees, before they were victims, before they were survivors, they were ordinary children and teens. They were like you.

These children lived in small towns and big cities. They went to school and did homework. Their parents were shop owners, salespeople, lawyers, nurses, doctors, and teachers. They had brothers and sisters, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, schoolmates, friends.

These children came from a variety of religious backgrounds. Some lived in traditional Orthodox Jewish families, where Judaism was an integral part of daily life. Their families followed Jewish customs and laws governing food and not working on Saturday, the Sabbath.
Some children were half Jewish, with one Jewish parent. Others lived in families that celebrated major Jewish religious holidays but also took part in secular, or nonreligious, aspects of holidays like Christmas and Easter. For instance, they might have a Christmas tree or hunt for Easter eggs, but not go to a Christian church. And there were some children who had one or more grandparents who were Jewish but didn’t identify closely with being Jewish, or with any religion. Religion simply wasn’t a large part of their lives.

No matter what their background, these children definitely liked to have fun. They didn’t have computers or televisions when they were young, but they loved to ice-skate, ride bikes, play ball, and read books. These children, just like you, had dreams of their own. They hoped to grow up, travel, go to college, find work, or perhaps have a family someday.

And then their world turned upside down. Nothing was the same as it had been before.

Before.

Leslie

SUMMERS BY THE SEA

Books take years to research, write, revise, edit, and print. During the time I’ve been working on this one, I’ve had the privilege of getting to know (mostly through
email and phone) several of the people whose stories you will read about here. One is Professor Leslie Baruch Brent, a Kindertransport refugee who grew up to become a renowned scientist.

In the summer of 2018, I sent Professor Brent another book I wrote about World War II. (He kindly said I could call him Leslie, so I will.) Leslie emailed to say he had read it while spending time with his wife, Carol, at a cottage in Brittany, France. I’m not sure if Leslie stayed near the sea, but I wonder if this vacation reminded him of summers long ago, when he was a boy in Germany.

Leslie Brent was born Lothar (Lo-tar) Baruch in Köslin, Germany, a northern town by the Baltic Sea that is now Koszalin, Poland. Later, after he moved to England, Leslie decided at age eighteen to volunteer for the British army. It was still wartime and, as Leslie explained, he wanted “to serve my newly adopted country and to help in the liberation of my family. I was not to know until years later that by the time I enlisted they were already dead.” In the army, he was required to change his name in case he was captured by the Germans. Leslie decided to keep the same initials; he chose Brent as his last name and took his new first name from a popular British actor of the time named Leslie Howard.
Leslie Brent’s birth year, 1925, is an important one in German history, and a good place to start our Kindertransport story. In March of that year, a German war hero named Paul von Hindenburg was elected for a seven-year term as president of Germany’s Weimar Republic. The Weimar Republic was the new democratic government set up in Germany at the end of World War I; Hindenburg was its second president.

That same year also saw the publication of the first volume of Mein Kampf, a book by a thirty-six-year-old World War I veteran from Austria named Adolf Hitler. In 1921, Hitler had become chairman of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, also known as the Nazi Party. He riled up audiences, exploiting people’s fear and anger, and blaming all of Germany’s problems on Jews. Early on, Hitler created a personal protection guard, an army of storm troopers called the Sturmabteilung, or SA. Their nickname was “brownshirts,” because of the color of their uniforms. Jewish children like those whose stories are in this book soon got used to seeing the brownshirts on the streets and came to fear them.

Leslie Brent was still a young boy during the years Hitler was consolidating his power. Leslie and his
family lived peacefully in their small town of Köslin, far from the center of politics.

Leslie’s father was a traveling salesman, and one of Leslie’s earliest memories was meeting his father when he returned from a work trip. “Carrying in each hand a heavy suitcase containing not only his clothes but also his many samples, he was invariably the first to emerge from the platform and was proudly escorted home by me.”

When home, the family enjoyed Sunday-afternoon walks in the nearby forest with close friends. Afterward, while the adults relaxed at a café, Leslie and his older sister, Eva Susanne, liked to roam through the woods. They tried not to get their toy planes stuck in the branches of trees. The children also learned to whistle the bars of a song to let the adults know where they were. Leslie never forgot that family whistle and later taught it to his children.

Va, as Leslie called his father, loved music and sang in a men’s choir; he was fond of composing poems for special occasions.

“He had been a soldier during the First World War and had served as a medical orderly. Having rescued an injured soldier under fire he was awarded the Iron Cross,” Leslie wrote of his father. “I am pretty certain that he later felt this would afford him some protection
during the Nazi regime. It must have added to his false sense of security, and it certainly failed to save him and his family, in common with many others who had served their country during that war.”

Leslie’s older sister, Eva, was a skilled pianist. “To this day I have feelings of guilt towards her . . . on a sweltering summer’s day I stole ten pennies from her purse so that I could buy myself an ice cream. I must have been six or seven at the time.”

Leslie remembers a childhood full of make-believe games, spinning wooden tops, and reading adventure stories. On the way to school on a Monday morning, he liked to stop at the confectioner’s shop and for ten pennies get a small bag of leftover cakes and candies.

“We made our own yoghurt by leaving bowls of unpasteurized milk in the open until it set and a skin formed—delicious with sugar, or when available, bilberries [a European berry related to blueberries] that we had picked in the woods. In the winter we baked apples on the shelf of our tiled oven, which also provided the flat [apartment] with heat.”

For a summer vacation, Leslie’s parents rented a small seaside cottage from a farmer. Since Köslin was only about seven miles from the Baltic Sea, they could travel to the shore by train. At that time, many of the farmhouses had thatched roofs. As the train chugged
along, Leslie liked to count the stork nests in the chimneys.

At the beach, Leslie ran across the hot sand to keep his feet from blistering. He built sandcastles and swam, using the closest sandbank from shore as a landmark. He watched in awe as his father ventured far out into the water, swimming to the third sandbank.

“It was indeed a simple and innocent life.”

Marianne

COLD BLUEBERRY SOUP

Marianne Josephy Elsley loved summers too. Marianne was born on June 23, 1923, in the town of Rostock, Germany. She passed away in 2009, but I’ve been in touch with her daughter, Judy, who helps to keep her mother’s story alive. Marianne self-published a book about her life, entitled *A Chance in Six Million*; she also donated a memoir she wrote, “Without Bitterness,” to the Leo Baeck Institute to help others understand the Holocaust. Marianne’s home of Rostock, like Leslie Brent’s town, is located north of Berlin, near the Baltic Sea. Today, their birthplaces are only about a five-hour car ride apart.

Marianne was an only child, but she had wonderful memories of her extended family. Summers were the time when her grandmother Josephy made her delicious fruit soups. “These were eaten cold and made
of red currants, blackberries, or, most prized of all, local blueberries picked by us in the nearby forest or bought in the market,” Marianne remembered. Since such dark, rich fruit could stain the tablecloth, these summer treats were ladled out and eaten very carefully.

Grandmother Josephy was a dignified, imposing matriarch. Each week, she hosted a family gathering, serving a delicious Sunday dinner. Sometimes there was even homemade ice cream, “a crunchy, creamy chocolate mixture.” This was indeed a special treat, Marianne recalled, because although in those days you could buy ice cream at some restaurants, not everyone had refrigerators, so ice cream wasn’t available in stores the way it is now.

Grandmother Josephy’s well-stocked, grand kitchen was a wonder to a young child. “I remember being allowed to inspect her storeroom and larders with her, and being surprised at the quantities of eggs, hams, sausages and all sorts of things to which we did not aspire at home,” Marianne said. “My father, her youngest son, always claimed that he could manage to survive on potatoes for the week as long as he had that Sunday meal, and he looked forward to it. I have mental glimpses of the splendid dining room, my uncles, aunts and cousins seated round an enormous table.”
Marianne would have to hold on to that picture for the rest of her life. It would be all she had. Her family, like millions of others, would be broken apart forever.

**Ruth**

**FAIRY-TALE FORESTS**

Ruth Oppenheimer David grew up in the village of Fränkisch-Crumbach, in the Odenwald region of southwest Germany. Ruth was born in 1929. When she was young, not many people in her town owned cars; farmers used ox-drawn wagons for farmwork, or drove a horse and cart. Her picturesque village boasted red-roofed houses with gardens and an array of small shops. It was an easy walk to meadows full of flowers, hills, orchards, and the woods, which were rich in legends.

“The Odenwald forests for me were closely interwoven with the fairy tales of the brothers Grimm,” remembered Ruth. “I even thought I knew where Little Red Riding Hood may have met her wolf and where the Sleeping Beauty might be hidden. I would not have been surprised to have encountered the Hansel and Gretel gingerbread house on one of our walks through the dense, scented, silent dark green woods.”

Although there were few Jewish families in town,
Ruth and her family felt comfortable in their community. Her grandfather had grown up there, and his grandfather had arrived years before. “I knew that my family was Jewish but did not at the time understand how this made us different from other people. We were part of the village. As children we played with the village children.”

Ruth’s father, Moritz Oppenheimer, was a successful businessman who ran a cigar factory. His first wife died, leaving him with three young children; the eldest was Anni, and there were also two boys, Ernst and Werner. His second wife, Grete, Ruth’s mother, was from the city of Frankfurt, where she’d studied mathematics at the university. Ruth was never sure how her parents met, but she thought the move must have been a big change for her mother. After all, she’d been able to attend opera and theater performances
in Frankfurt. Her husband’s village didn’t even have a library.

Ruth’s mother also had to adjust to caring for three motherless children. Anni became ill with tuberculosis and, despite the family’s efforts, later died. Ruth looked up to her older half brothers, Ernst and Werner. Ruth’s mother and father added to the family and had four children together. First there was Hannah, then Ruth, and Michael. The baby of the family was Ruth’s little sister, Feo, who was born in 1934 and named for their grandmother Feodora.

Baby Feo brought laughter and fun into the family. Ruth recalled Feo following her older siblings everywhere and cheerfully taking part in games like hide-and-seek. But Feo usually spoiled the surprise: “She always joyfully revealed hiding places by squealing in her puppy-dog way.”

Although Michael and Feo Oppenheimer could not know it then, their lives would depend on their ability to stay hidden.
While I haven’t met Ruth David in person, I almost feel as if I know her. When I discovered her wonderful book, *Child of Our Time: A Young Girl’s Flight from the Holocaust*, I learned she’d volunteered with the National Holocaust Centre and Museum in London; the staff there kindly connected us. I love when I wake up to find a delightful email message from her. She lives in Leicester, England, eight hours ahead of my home in Oregon. She keeps in touch with her sister Feo, who lives in Paris. The two sisters speak in French together. On Ruth’s ninetieth birthday, on March 17, 2019, Feo and Michael traveled from France to celebrate with their older sister. What a wonderful reunion!

At ninety, Ruth still uses her voice to speak out to help others. Recently she spoke at an event in Leicester about the plight of Syrian refugees. Several years ago, Ruth received Germany’s prestigious Order of Merit award recognizing her efforts visiting German schools and talking to young people about her family’s
experiences during the Holocaust. As you read here about her life as a girl in Nazi Germany, you might want to “meet” her too by following the link below.

**LOOK, LISTEN, REMEMBER:** You can listen to Ruth David speak about her life in a September 18, 2012, BBC News interview. To find it, use these search terms: Leicester Woman Honoured by Germany for Holocaust Work BBC. (Please note the British spell *honor* with a *u*—honour.) The URL address is: https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-england-leicestershire-19641062/leicester-woman-honoured-by-germany-for-holocaust-work.
JUDAISM

Judaism is a religion that dates back to the ancient Hebrews, who lived thousands of years ago. Jews were the first to believe in one God, and they follow the practices, laws, and traditions written in the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Jews believe God dictated the Torah to the prophet Moses on Mount Sinai after their exodus from slavery in Egypt. The Torah contains commandments that guide Jewish life.

Like all religions, Judaism has special holidays and traditions. Shabbat, or Sabbath, is a day of rest observed each week. Shabbat begins at sundown on Friday and ends at nightfall Saturday. There are prayer services, songs, and special meals and blessings, and many Jewish families attend services at a synagogue.

Another important holiday is Passover, which commemorates the liberation of the Israelite slaves from Egypt. It is marked by services and eating unleavened food for a week. Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year; Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, is the holiest day of the year. Hanukkah, celebrated every winter, is an eight-day festival of lights commemorating the ancient Jews’ miraculous victory over the mighty Seleucid Empire that was oppressing them.

Today, there are fewer than fifteen million Jews in the world. Although they are a small minority,
comprising less than 0.2 percent of the overall population, Jews have been persecuted throughout history. Christianity has had a long and complicated relationship with Judaism. Throughout the centuries, many people wrongly accused Jews of killing Jesus Christ, and many more argued that Jesus’s teachings make Judaism obsolete. As a result, malicious conspiracy theories have been spread to malign Jewish people. Through the ages, Jews have been forced to convert. Many more have been discriminated against, expelled, or even murdered. Only in 1879, however, was a word finally coined to describe this hatred of Jews: anti-Semitism.

In many ways, the anti-Semitism promoted by the Nazis had a lot in common with the ancient, religious-based kind. But Hitler and his followers advanced poisonous new theories and ideas. They argued that Jews were subhuman, while people of Aryan, or Nordic, heritage were superior. Even though Jews had lived peacefully in Germany for generations and had become prominent leaders in the arts, industry, and academia, the Nazis used pseudoscience to claim that Jews were inferior. At the same time, Nazi newspapers, radio broadcasts, and films argued that the nation’s Jews were conspiring against their non-Jewish neighbors and were behind all of Germany’s troubles, from war to economic hardships.

To address what they called “the Jewish problem,”
WE HAD TO BE BRAVE

the Nazis passed laws that made Jewish lives progressively more difficult. Jews were initially forbidden from attending most schools, working in most professions, or owning property. They were later deported to crowded ghettos, where many died of illness or hunger, and later still to concentration or death camps, resulting in the murder of six million Jewish men, women, and children.

The Catholic Church officially declared in 1965 that neither the Jews of Jesus’s time nor their descendants were responsible for the death of Christ—a belief strongly shared by nearly all churches today. Nevertheless, like other kinds of racism and religious discrimination, anti-Semitism still exists. Some people continue to spread ancient conspiracy theories about the Jews. Others even claim, against overwhelming historical evidence, that the Holocaust never happened.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in 2018, anti-Semitic attacks soared to the highest level in two decades. If you see or hear anti-Semitic comments or are a target yourself, please find a trusted adult to tell. Look for a helper who can guide you in finding ways to respond safely.
LOOK, LISTEN, REMEMBER: If you are not Jewish yourself, you can learn more about Judaism by reading or asking questions of a Jewish friend. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) has a learning site for students here: https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/project/the-holocaust-a-learning-site-for-students. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), an organization established to protect the Jewish people and secure justice and fair treatment for all, provides resources to help prevent bullying and promote ally behavior. Find out more about ADL at: https://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families.
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