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Children of the Martyr Race: Yesterday's Refugees as Today's
Parents, 1966.

#183

Children of the Martyr Race
Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver
December 11, 1966

Some ten thousand children were brought from Central Europe to England in the year that preceded the outbreak of the second world war. Three quarters of these children were Jews or had been classified as Jews under the German racial laws. One in ten came with one or both parents, usually a mother who had indentured herself to an English home as a maid in order to receive a visa. Nine in ten came alone. The last they saw of their parents was a waving hand and a clenched handkerchief at the railroad station in Berlin or Vienna. They did not know it, but they were already orphans.

"I left home with several hundred other children in December 1938. My mother insisted on kissing me over and over again, and I got impatient with her demonstrativeness, not realising of course that this was to be the final parting. I have often wondered since what she must have felt as the result of my impatience. I was eleven years old."

"My mother took me to Berlin; when I left home my father was lying in bed ill, the concentration camp had damaged his health. He held me close and bade me look after my mother when she got to England in case he did not make it. I was then just ten years old. We got to Berlin to learn that I was too late for the first transport, but would be able to go on the

second. There was of course no money for me to go back home, so my mother took me to friends in Berlin, who kindly put me up for a fortnight or so. My mother had to leave me there, and the last I ever saw of her was in the Berlin street, outside the friends' house, walking backward along the pavement to get a last look at me, until she rounded the corner and we were parted."

Seventy-five hundred were saved. Two million were not. This year one of those who came in these child transports published a collective autobiography of their experience in England as children and adults. We like to think of a saga of rescue and succor as noble and heroic. The truth does not always match our expectation. The history of these children is both glorious and sad. Some found a warm welcome, understanding, foster parents who became their real parents. Others were deliberately abused, and consciously or unconsciously mistreated.

"These people were simply marvelous--if standards of human decency and ordinary down-to-earth kindness are the measurements by which we judge them. These relatively simple people did not allow their traditional doubt about Jews or their current hate of Germans to deter them from taking into their modest homes us foreign-speaking and strangely dressed youngsters."

"I was taken by a Jewish family in London, and my sister went to another Jewish family; she was seven and I was eight years old. We were both treated extremely well and with great kindness. Both families saw to it that we were able to be together as often as possible."

"About Felicia:

We thought that if her mother was coming, we ought not to let her forget her, and so we said that if Mummy came, Mummy would take her away, but nobody else would take her away, she didn't want to go, she didn't like strangers, and so we said, well, nobody else would take her, only Mummy, There was a photograph, a little snapshot we had of Mummy, we kept that in her bedroom, we tried to keep her mother in her mind, thinking that would be the best thing to do, but of course when eventually the news came that they were all killed, we thought we'd better tell her. So I told her one night.

She said: 'All my family? My mother and my father and my brother and my grandmother and my cousins and my aunts-- everybody?'

And I said: 'Yes, Felicia, I'm afraid so.'

She said: 'Oh, now I can stay with you.'

She put her mother's photograph in a drawer and she has never looked at it since. I leave it there. She says there is no point in having that now. The tragedy was that she heard the news with relief. There is no question about that. She was afraid that her mother was coming and now that she knew her mother wasn't coming, she was relieved.

For nights after that she used to cry, after she'd gone to bed. She wouldn't tell us, she never does talk to you, she didn't tell us at all what was wrong. Until eventually I said: 'Look here, what is the matter?'

And she said: 'I don't want you to die.'

She was then nine years old."

Felicia's foster mother was a true heroine and so was Trevor Chadwick. This English prep school don, was a hero in the classic mode. He and another master went to Prague in 1938 to select the two boys their school had agreed to sponsor. He found he could not play God and choose who shall live and who shall die. He brought two boys back to England and then returned to Prague where he spent eight months organizing children's transports, prodding the Home Office to speed up documentation and saving all those he could. Anna Essinger was a heroine; a Jewish refugee herself, she had

organized a school for these children as early as 1933. As the war approached, she worked day and night, took in as many as she could, cajoled English Jews into opening their homes, found money and supplies and saw to the schooling of her charges. But these were the few. The many sad to say went their way--lived their lives--perhaps gave shillings but not much more.

There was the slow processing of papers by the Home Office--Englishmen must have their tea--in the various ministries men went home at the regular hour. Not enough Jewish homes were made available. Each child had to be sponsored. There were not enough Jewish sponsors. Consider the testimony for social worker at Dover Court where the children were received and processed. "It was a melancholy heart-breaking experience. I was offered financial assistance but rarely a home. Many more children could have been rescued if more Jewish homes had been placed at our disposal."

Newly-orphaned of their parents, the children were transported in the dead of winter to an unheated summer camp where they waited until they were claimed by relatives or placed in a foster home or sent to a hostel.

"It was bitterly cold. I remember a large central hall, something like a hangar at an aerodrome with loudspeakers broadcasting messages mainly in English. Here the many children wandered about or crowded round the stoves. We slept in small cabins outside the main building. The beds were awfully cold and there were not enough of them. I shared one with a boy who probably had scarlet fever; I caught it three weeks later. I did not see much of my sister."

"We were told that we must always remember that other children might have come out in our stead and that they might have been more worthwhile people than we. Since then I have always been obsessed with the thought that I must justify my survival."

"Prospective foster-parents were usually shown round at mealtimes, when we sat, boys and girls separately, according to age. The people walked down the rows of children, picking out this one or that, rather like a cattle market."

"In Germany I had never planned my future because everything was so uncertain, I had never dared to hope for a career--my schooling had been interrupted when I was thirteen. When I came to England I thought that now I would be like everyone else, that my life would be normal. When I was asked what I wanted to be, I said a doctor. The woman who was filling the form in said: 'I can't put that down--you must remember that you are a refugee.'

In 1939 was a year of mobilization and an acute labor shortage in England. Many who came were brought over, not out of compassion, but to replace a domestic or to fill in as an extra farm hand.

"I was in a foster home for a time as a boy of sixteen. What I have never been able to forget or forgive was the discrimination. I was given margarine when the rest of the family ate butter, on only one slice of bread was I allowed to put jam--the very jam for which I had collected the brambles. When visitors came I was banished to the kitchen where I also had my meals. My position was somewhere between that of a poor relative and a domestic servant, without the privileges of the one or the rights of the other."

At fifteen or sixteen, most of these youngsters were sent out to earn their own living. Not only was their education stopped during the year of migration, but in England, few were given an opportunity to go to the university. Not only were foster parents unwilling or unable to spend the money, but few within the Jewish community had the vision or the charity to establish scholarships for them. There were exceptions. The Jewish community of Glasgow had a hostel for boys, all of whom were given a university opportunity. These were the fortunate few. Most seemed to have been overlooked, forgotten. Out of sight is out of mind and even sometime when in sight, little interest was shown.

"As a girl of fifteen, I went into a non-Jewish foster home together with my brother, aged twelve, and my little sister, aged eight. We came from an orthodox background. I can still hear the taunts of 'Your own don't want you, so we took you in.' They received payment for our keep. I did not work, and later worked full time, handing in my wages intact, as did my brother at fourteen. The Refugee Committee did, on rare occasions, come to see us. 'Well, how are you, my dear? (This in their presence, in a nice comfortable room.) 'I can see you are well looked after

here. Do you need any clothes? No, I can see they keep you all well dressed.' The thought never seemed to occur to the visitor that we paid for all our clothes. And so she went happily on her way, unaware of the silent heartbreak. Sometimes we did have contact with a Jewish family, as, for example, when the Jewish Refugee Committee remembered us on Pesah, and we were asked to join in the Seder celebrations with a Jewish family. I remember the rare occasions when we were allowed to go to Shul. Not one of the congregation ever took an interest in us or asked us home."

These youngsters were not easy to raise. Many rejected the love that was offered. Many felt that they had been abandoned by their parents and became silent and sullen. Some reacted to their separation by rejecting their background and their parents and all that Germany stood for. They refused to speak German. They set about becoming English with a vengeance. Their accents and European clothes became an acute embarrassment to them. Not surprisingly, many rejected the religious label which associated them to their past and their home. Karen Gershon who collected these reminiscences of exile and refugee life its loneliness, capsuled its bitterness in a moving poem that she has entitled "The Children's Exodus."

"It was an ordinary train
traveling across Germany
which gathered and took us away
those who saw it may have thought
that it was for a holiday
not being exiles being taught
to hate what we had loved in vain
brought us lasting injury

Our parents let us go
knowing that who stayed must die
but kept the truth from us although
they gave us to reality
did they consider what it meant
to become orphaned and not know
to be emotionally freed
when our childhood seeds were spent

as if we were not German Jews
but sometimes were a market-place
when sudden visitors could choose
although we were not orphaned yet
a son or daughter by their face

When we went out of Germany
carrying six million lives
that was Jewish history
but each child was one refugee
we unlike the Egyptian slaves
were exiled individually
and each in desolation has
created his own wilderness

This race-hatred was personal
we were condemned for what we were
no one escaped the ritual
from which we rose inferior
the blood-guilt entered every home
till daily life was a progom
we who were there are not the same
as those who have no wreck to share

Home is where some know who you are
the rescue was impersonal
it was no one's concern what use
we made of the years given us
one should not ask of children who
find their survival natural
gratitude for being where
ten thousand other have come too

At Dovercourt the winter sea
was like God's mercy vast and wild
a fever to a land-locked child
it seemed fire and cloud to me
the world's blood and my blood were cold
the exiled Jew in me was old
and thoughts of death appalled me less
than knowledge of my loneliness

My mother sold my bed and chair
while I expected to return
yet she had kept me close to her
till I saw our temple burn
it was not for her sake but mine
she knew that I was unripe fruit
and that exile was a blight
against which one prepared in vain

People at Dovercourt were gay
as if they thought we could forget
our homes in alien play
as if we were not German Jews
but mealtimes were a market-place
when sudden visitors could choose
although we were not orphaned yet
a son or daughter by their face

My childhood smoulders in the name
of the town which was my home
all we were became no more
than answers on each questionnaire
at Dovercourt we were taught that
our share of the Jewish fate
had not been left behind but was
the refugee life facing us."

I cite this material not to rake over old coals or to point any finger of guilt
what is done is done, but to suggest that in this world where
men are as they are--self-involved, yet aware and capable of decency--it re-
quires a great deal of courage and conviction to do the decent thing. Not
enough were saved--not enough came to teach or to care for those who were
saved. The good that was done, and it was substantial, was done by a few
against a background of indifference and apathy.

There is a remarkable parallel here to the history of Chanukah. The
victory of the Maccabees is a victory of the few. When Antiochus ordered
a statue of his God set up in the Temple in Jerusalem, there was grumbling
and complaining, but the Jerusalemites accommodated themselves. They had
businesses to think of, and families. Only in the little village of Modim
did a man rise up in righteous anger and strike down the Syrian who ordered
a sacrifice to Zeus and the coward Israelite who was willing to offer that
sacrifice. Mattathias and his sons fled to the hills to organize a revolt
for freedom. They were joined only by a few. Some sympathized but most
did not try to leave their homes and their stores and their farms. Many
complained that this revolt would only bring down the wrath of the Syrians
and unsettle all their lives. For two years, the few fought on. Their

encouragement and training to those whose lives are dismal. The tragedy of
life is not our ignorance of what must be done but our cowardice--our fear to
do it.

Judaism can be proud of the nobility of its teachings. Our teachings have

sacrifice was great. Their land was expropriated. Their homes were razed. They were branded as criminals. Four of the five sons of Mattathias died in battle.

We celebrate this week their victory. The victory of the few against the many. The victory of conviction over indifference. We light our lights and happily draw our children around us to sing a confident verse--Rock of Ages. But I wonder if we are truly prepared to share their struggle and pay their price. There is a certain pious sentimentality in most of our citizenship. We respond to a noble cause. We are energetically in favor of civil rights as long as it is a question of voter registration and the proper education of the Southern negro. Our instincts are noble. Our courage--that is another matter. Let civil rights be a struggle for political power in Cleveland and a demand for open occupancy in Pepper Pike, and many a self-styled Maccabbeean withdraws to the anonymous safety of his home and hearth. We are champions of peace. We are proud to advocate international law and the strengthening of the United Nations and happy with our government's record of Foreign Aid, but when our own government becomes belligerent, our voices are reduced to a whisper and like the Jerusalemite of old, we find a dozen justifications for remaining silent. The issue is poverty and destitution. We respond to the United Appeal and are prepared to to give some of our super-abundance, but it is only the few who find time each week to teach those who do not find learning in their homes--to bring counsel and scholarship whose schooling is narrow and limited--to walk into the dark, gray streets of our slums and by their presence build healthy and useful groups which give encouragement and training to those whose lives are dismal. The tragedy of life is not our ignorance of what must be done but our cowardice--our fear to do it.

Judaism can be proud of the nobility of its teachings. Our teachings have

fashioned the conscience of Western man but the words alone are not enough. They must be matched to deeds. Morality is the good enlivened by courage. Morality is conviction re-enforced by determination. Moral men are stubborn men. Moral men are indefatigable and indomitable. The Maccabees were the few, but few can achieve greatness. We Jews are the few and we too have achieved greatness. But if we wish to rally as children of a proud nation, as descendants of the Maccabees, then surely as we stand our children around these lights, surely we must tell them not only of the happy history of our faith and the happiness of our home, but of their responsibility to these lights, to the courage they stand for, to the sacrifice that they mirror. Surely we must be able to look them in the eyes and say; 'I, too, have responded to the call. I not only voice and verbalize the moralities of my people, but I accept my responsibilities and I do them.' I am willing to risk security, advancement, abundance, whatever I may need to risk in order that these lights may be kindled next year and the next.'

The children's exodus revealed the whole range of human emotions and human reactions. Here is need. Here is responsibility. Here is duty. How many of us would respond by giving of ourselves, by opening our homes, by taking in a child needing love? How many of us would respond simply with a pledge card and would go about our business of earning our abundance? And so it is in life. Those who are of the mettle of the Maccabees live lives which bring blessing into our world. Those who lack that mettle wrap themselves in the mantle of our historic tradition, dress themselves in goodness, but their deeds bely their protestations.

On this Chanukah holiday may each of us recognize and admit the demands of sacrifice made upon us and meet them, fulfill them with a willing heart.

Kaddish

Friday

Sunday

Dec 9 1966
Dec 11 1966

Those who passed away this week

WILLIAM GOODSTEIN

CHARLES R. BERNE

Yahrzeit

ABRAM KOVAL

JESS C. FISHMAN

HYMAN H. MANDELZWEIG

LOUIS LITTMAN

LOUIS K. SUGARMAN

BERNARD FIELDS

ERNESTINE BLUME DEGROOT

JEROME SANFORD ROSE

LEOPOLD ARNSTEIN

DAVID C. HABER

DR. EDWARD J. GREENE

ROSA KOBLITZ

LESLIE JOYCE HAAS

LINDA JOAN HAAS

FLORA ROSENBERG

JOSEPH LEHMAN WITTE

BEN ROSENWATER

RACHEL SEIDMAN UNGER

READ ON FRI. DEC. 9 ONLY

HAROLD M. THORMAN

READ ON SUN. DEC. 11 ONLY

SOL R. BING