

Jews, Quakers and the Holocaust: The Struggle to Save the lives of Twenty-Thousand Children

By Ira Zornberg

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By spring of 1939, after the Night of the Broken Glass (more commonly referred to as Kristallnacht), German Jews were desperate to escape what they had considered their Fatherland. Unable to find nations willing to accept them, many parents begged for the assistance of those who would help in transporting their children to safety. Other children who could have been saved were those of fathers in concentration camps or those who parents had taken their own lives. Because of the special role in feeding German children at the end of World War I, Quakers commanded a level of respect and trust which allowed them to assume the leadership in an effort to save Jewish children. At least a third of those identified, in Nazi Germany, as Jewish children by race (having on Jewish grandparent) may have been of mixed religious backgrounds. In Europe, Quaker groups assumed leadership in what came to be called the Kindertransport. They removed and provided homes for nearly 10,000 children. On the day after Kristallnacht, a Quaker fact-finding mission from the U.S. flew to Germany. An effort to replicate the Kindertransport in the U.S. depended upon the passage of the Wagner-Rogers Bill. That Bill, introduced in Congress in February 1939, provided for the admission of 20,000 "unaccompanied children" (outside of the quota of 27,000 per year from Germany) under the age of fourteen, over a two-year period, and at no cost to the United States. The struggle to enact the Wagner-Rogers Bill introduces us to people in the United States who assumed leadership roles in that effort. It identifies virulent opponents, and allows us to speculate as to what best explains the failure of the Bill to become law.

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- Rank: #1195801 in Books
- Brand: Ira Zornberg
- Published on: 2016-09-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .75" w x 6.00" l,
- Binding: Paperback
- 332 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Ira Zornberg considers himself fortunate to have been born in Brooklyn, NY, in the same year as the crisis in Europe about which he writes. A graduate of Brooklyn College, he taught history and served as assistant principal in charge of social studies in New York City high schools. He was part of a U.S. Department of Education panel to study social studies curricula across the country and develop units for inclusion about the Holocaust. He worked with students to create the "John Dewey Holocaust Center and Center for the Study of Humanity." He is author of "Classroom Strategies for Teaching About the Holocaust" (10 lessons for classroom use) and "Forty-Eight Years in the Trenches" (his personal history as an educator in the City of New York).

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