

Rethinking the “child victim” paradigm: Central European child refugees and their transnational networks, 1939-1945

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A small group of about 300-400 Jewish children were evacuated from Central Europe to France in 1938-39 in a little known Kindertransport initiative. Some of these children were then sent from France to the United States in 1941-42 on transports organized by the US Committee for the Care of European Children, the American Friends Service Committee and the OSE. My research on these children represents a case study that allows us to rethink the “child-victim” paradigm that dominates the current historiography on children in the Holocaust, as well as on the postwar experiences of child survivors (D. Dwork, 1991, Stargardt, 2007; Michlic, 2010; B. Cohen, 2007; 2018). While the Jewish children I am studying certainly were victims of Nazi persecution and of the social policies designed to rapidly assimilate them in American society, the study of their networks shows that they were also actors, and thus sheds new light on children’s agency. Using children’s contemporaneous and retrospective sources (correspondence, diaries, memoirs, oral history interviews), I will argue that children became refugees in collective contexts and actively created and maintained networks with other children. Some children’s networks pre-date emigration to France, originating in German Jewish orphanages, while others developed in France, in Jewish children’s homes. The children who were evacuated to the United States were placed in individual foster families, throughout the country. Studying the children’s reactions to the separation of their networks, and their attempts to maintain group ties after their displacement, both transnationally and in their new host country, allows us to rethink the “child-victim” trope, showing a more complex picture of child survivors. Furthermore, this research also leads to new conclusions on survival: if contemporary Holocaust testimonial practices have emphasized how *individuals* survived the Holocaust, this research shows the importance of considering survival in *groups*.