The Little-Known Story of the First Viennese Kindertransport and Why it Matters

By Frank Miller-Small

Dedicated to my mother, participant of the first transport, who recently passed away.

"…one person of integrity, of courage, can make a difference, a difference of life and death."

-Elie Wiesel, Nobel Prize acceptance speech, 1986

My mother rarely talked about her life in Vienna during the Holocaust, saying only "You can't imagine how horrible it was." To my disappointment, she never explained what "horrible" meant. Averse to talking about it, Mom kept her memories private, as if locked in a black box for which she alone had the key.

Although I've studied the Holocaust for many years, I've discovered very little detailed description of the plight of Viennese Jews or the various efforts to help this community. I have not found much to help me understand my mother's experience and the events that influenced it. Fortunately, with the help of an enlightening historical novel, *The Last Train to London*, by Meg Waite Clayton, I've filled in some of those gaps.

The novel tells the story of two teenagers, one Jewish and one Christian, who are living in Vienna in the 1930's, following them as they face the Nazi invasion in 1938 and then are sent by their families to England for safety. At the same time, it reveals an account of heroic individuals and communities who resisted Nazi persecution. For me, it highlights a little-known aspect of the Holocaust and suggests the importance of the events in Vienna in 1938.

With evident skill the author begins the novel by juggling two main plot lines which she weaves together during the anxiety-ridden weeks before the first Kindertransport departs. One centers on Stephan Neumann, a fifteen-year-old aspiring playwright from an assimilated wealthy Jewish family who forms a romantic friendship with Zofie-Helene, a Christian teenage math prodigy. Eventually, their families also forge close ties and assist each other during troubled times. The other plot line relates the recent backstory of real-life upstander Truus Wijsmuller, a devoted Christian Dutch woman, who demonstrates courage and cleverness as she smuggles Jewish children out of Nazi–occupied lands.

A cast of minor characters enrich the novel's texture and expand its perspective. Stephen's best friend Dieter, for instance, is a Christian who struggles between his loyalty to Stephan and the allure of Nazism. There is also Michael, a Christian married to Stephan's aunt Lisl, who gets a divorce to save her family's lucrative business and arranges for her safe passage to Shanghai.

As the noose of Nazi occupation tightens around the necks of Austrian Jews, Clayton conveys the violence along with their own shock, humiliation and sense of betrayal. We become privy to Stephan and Zofie-Helene's thoughts of disbelief: "Were **these** the good people of Vienna? These same boys who might have been looking in the store window to see the model trains at Christmastime?" At a later point in the Nazi takeover, Zofie-Helene's mother, Kathe, who edits the sole anti-fascist Viennese newspaper, bemoans, "How could the world have changed so drastically in so little time? At the start of

the year, Austria had been a free country, its leaders and its people resolved to remain such. And how could she have been so impossibly wrong about her neighbors?"

Clayton reports many instances of Nazi cruelty but epitomizes the dire situation with an incident at the Prater Park, Vienna's equivalent to Coney Island. When a group of Nazi storm troopers notices Stephan squabbling with his brother, they determine Stephan's Jewishness, harass him, demand he perform ludicrous acts, and then beat him up. All the while Stephan watches his "friend" Dieter jeering along with the gathered crowd.

To capture the opposition to this terror, Clayton focuses on several reactions. She describes, for example, how within a week of Kristallnacht (the November Pogrom), several citizen committees in England presented Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain with a plan to rescue Jewish children. Due to his support, the committees' skillful advocacy, and empathic governmental leadership, Parliament approved a plan for the Kindertransport, a temporary resettlement in England of an unspecified number of children from the German Reich. Once the plan passed, many English people donated money and volunteered to host the refugee children, establishing the only national pre-war refugee assistance program.

Soon after the plan's adoption, Germany agreed to cooperate, but Eichmann, then in charge of Austrian Jewry, refused. Clayton chronicles how Truus, through perseverance, savvy and charm, surmounting daunting obstacles, changes Eichmann's mind. Overcoming seemingly impossible requirements on the transport imposed by Eichmann, Truus, with the help of Desider Friedmann, a leader of the Jewish community, arranges this for six hundred children in only one week.

In the course of exploring the efforts to deal with life-threatening situations during this period, the author shows how ordinary people cared for each other in extraordinary ways. At great inconvenience and risk, Kathe delivers a message to Stephan about the fate of his father. Zofie-Helene and her father brave multiple dangers to facilitate Stephan's passage on the refugee train. Stephan's mother, suffering from bone cancer and unable to emigrate, exhibits fortitude and self-sacrifice to ensure safe passage for her two sons.

The novel offers value to those interested in preserving the legacy of the Holocaust and teaching its lessons. Through this story's honoring of a nation, a community and individuals, it provides inspirational role-models and road maps for action. From England's quick, compassionate handling of a humanitarian crisis, we learn the efficacy of grass-roots activism, sensitive governmental leadership, and generous public support. From the Viennese Jewish Community's focused coordination to meet the urgency at hand, we learn how a community can unify and effect a positive course for its own destiny.

In both of these undertakings, leaders played a crucial role. Their actions deserve to be highlighted and emulated. Nevertheless, one particular leader, Truus Weijsmuller, who is given a high profile in this novel, should be singled out for her frequent rescue of Jewish children before the Anschluss, successful persuasion of Eichmann, and supervision of the first Kindertransport. Although Yad Vashem pays tribute to her as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations," she remains largely unknown, even among those well-schooled in the Holocaust. Considering her formidable contributions, Truus deserves greater recognition.

This novel and the history of what happened in Vienna also offers a way to increase our ethical intelligence by highlighting how ordinary people behaved in desperate times. When we identify with these characters, who are forced to make very difficult decisions, we can challenge ourselves by asking, “How would I have acted in this situation? Can this character’s choice shape the way I might act in a similar situation?” We can learn from them, using their examples as springboards to set our own moral compass.

By witnessing this novel’s nuanced depictions of the oppression of Vienna’s Jews by the Nazis and the efforts to counter those actions, we can gain an emotional and intellectual grasp of an often forgotten, yet vital, chapter of the Shoah. In addition, Meg Clayton’s work underscores the valiant actions of those who struggled against tyranny, preserving their memories, heralding them as role models, and providing an empowering message to us all.

Personally, although I never got the key to unlock my mother’s black box of undisclosed memories, I now have some idea of what she meant by “horrible.” I have a greater sense of what she endured and more fully appreciate her deliverance.