



Into the Arms of Strangers

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Film Guide **Alicia McGivern**

Into the Arms of Strangers

Director Mark Jonathan Harris
UK-USA/B&W, Colour/122 mins/2000

Crew

Original Music Lee Holdridge
Cinematography Don Lenzer
Editor Kate Amend
Producer Deborah Oppenheimer
Director Mark Jonathan Harris

About the Director

Mark Jonathan Harris worked as a crime reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau then as an investigative journalist before he began making films. He was co-director of *The Redwoods*, a short documentary which won the 1967 Academy Award for Documentary Short Subject. He then went on to direct three films which he refers to as his 'Jewish trilogy': *The Long Way Home* (1997) dealt with the experience of Jewish refugees after World War II and won the 1998 Oscar for Documentary, despite condemnation by Spike Lee who alleged that the second half of the film was propaganda for the state of Israel; *A Dream no More*, portrayed Israel more negatively but was never shown; *Into the Arms of Strangers* (2000) was the third film in the trilogy and it won the Academy Award for Documentary Feature in 2000. Harris also won an Emmy for writing *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives*.

Harris's approach to casting his films is to first interview many people, and then to choose from those whose stories come across well on camera. He and producer Oppenheimer used this approach for *Into the Arms of Strangers* and selected twelve subjects from the many people they interviewed. The director has also written children's books and lectures at the University of Southern California. Recent projects include *The Cutting Edge: The Magic of Movie Editing* (2004) and a TV documentary, *The Boomer Century* (2007).

Introduction

Into the Arms of Strangers – Stories of the Kindertransport is a documentary film about the transportation of Jewish children from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland to Britain. This took place during the nine months before the Second World War (1939-45) as part of a rescue operation known as the Kindertransport (*Kind* = child in German).

The story began with producer Deborah Oppenheimer's own mother who had been transported but who had never spoken about her experiences in Great Britain and then the United States. When she died in 1993, Oppenheimer went in search of her story. Having seen Harris' Academy award-winning documentary *The Long Way Home* about Jewish refugees, she approached him with this project.

She and Harris interviewed survivors, read testimonies, diaries and other written documents located in Holocaust institutions around the world. Realising that they couldn't tell all of the 10,000 *Kinder* (plural of *Kind*) stories, they decided to show representative accounts. Focussing on the experiences of twelve survivors, they create the documentary around these survivors' memories of leaving their families, living in Britain and surviving the war. The film was completed in two years and released in US in September 2002. In Germany, it has been distributed to every school in the country as part of its compulsory Holocaust education programme.

There have been many films based on the Holocaust, but in recent times there has been a shift from describing the horrors of camps to telling heartfelt stories of survivors or of those who took great risks to rescue people. Such films include *Life is Beautiful/La Vita è Bella*, Roman Polanski's *The Pianist* and *Schindler's List*. *Into the Arms of Strangers* has no particular heroes but Oppenheimer and Harris have created a moving and powerful documentary about this largely unknown subject.

The Interviewees The 'Kinder'

Lorraine Allard from Bavaria; transported aged 14. Lived with same foster family until 18 when she joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service to serve during the war. Both parents died at Auschwitz, she died aged 76.



Lory Cahn from Breslau; had boarded the train to leave but was pulled off by her father. Deported with her parents to Theresianstadt, then she was sent to Auschwitz. Moved to different camps but released from Bergen-Belsen weighing 56 pounds. Her mother died in Auschwitz but her father survived. Lives in US.

Hedy Epstein from Germany; sent to London at 14, lived with two different families. Returned to Germany after the war to search for her parents and found out they had died at Auschwitz. Lives in US. Published a memoir in Germany about her experiences.

Kurt Fuchel from Vienna; lived there till seven and then transported to Norwich where he lived with the Cohen family until he was sixteen. Parents escaped to south of France. Family reunited in 1947 and lived together in France until 1956 when

they emigrated to US. Lives in New York and was past president of the KTA¹.

Alexander Gordon from Germany; lived in an orphanage from age of seven to sixteen. Farmworker – planned to move to Palestine but instead he went on the Kindertransport, but because of age, he was arrested and interned in June 1940. Shipped to Australia on Dunera, interned for a year then returned to Britain to join the Pioneer Corps and served until 1947. Lives in US.

Eva Hayman from Czechoslovakia; left aged fifteen with her younger sister and spent two years in boarding school before taking up nursing. Wrote wartime memorial, *By the Moon and the Stars* telling her story up to 1945, the day she learnt her parents had died. Lives in New Zealand.

Jack Hellman from Germany; was sent to boarding school aged nine and the housemother wrote to Baron de Rothschild asking him if he would take in twenty-six children, her husband, herself and two daughters. Jack persuaded de Rothschild to provide a work permit for his father and they spent two years in Britain before emigrating to US. Died August 2001.

Bertha Leverton from Germany; the oldest of a Polish Jewish family. Went on Kindertransport with brother at aged sixteen. Was taken in by family to be a maid along with her brother and younger sister. Organised the 50th and 60th Anniversary Reunion of the Kindertransport. She compiled a collection of 250 memoirs of the transport entitled, *I came alone*. Lives in London.

¹ Kindertransport Association Inc



Ursula Rosenfeld from Germany; father died at Buchenwald. Lived in orphanage in Hamburg and then transported with her sister. Taken in by widow in Brighton, her mother did not survive the war. She remained in England.

Inge Sadan from Germany; transported to Coventry aged nine after her elder sister had persuaded a foster family to sponsor her. Five difficult years with foster family, sister and brother, till parents arrived. Lives in Jerusalem, edited a book of Israeli Kinder memories. Organised reunion.

Lore Segal - Austrian; aged ten during Anschluss and transported to Dovercourt Camp where she wrote letters to relatives. Eventually her parents got a domestic service visa. Came to Liverpool. Wrote a novel, *Other People's Houses* about living with five different British families during the war. Lives in New York in same building as her mother.

Robert Sugar from Austria; left aged eight and sent to Jewish refugee hostel in Belfast and then to refugee farming settlement in Millisle,

County Down. Both parents survived the war. He emigrated to New York after the war to join his mother. Has written extensive educational material on Jewish history, serves on KTA Board.

Parents

Mariam Cohen, foster mother to Kurt Fuchel; has a son John. Husband died 1963. Still lives in Norwich where Kurt visits regularly.

Franzi Grossman, mother of Lore Segal. She and husband joined Lore in England in 1939, worked as domestic couple during the war. Lives in same apartment building as daughter and has breakfast with her every day.

Rescuers

Nicholas Winton, stockbroker from London. Aged 29 when he visited refugee camps in Prague full of refugees from the annexed Sudetenland. This prompted him to try to save children. Brought 664 Czech children over in nine months before war. Awarded MBE, Freedom of City of Prague, Rotary Service above Self Award.

Norbert Wollheim from Germany, began organising Kindertransport in Berlin at aged 25. Escorted several, but returned to Germany each time. Deported to Auschwitz with wife and son. He alone survived his family of 70. Sued German manufacturer IG Farben for forced labour in camp. Settlement established fund of 6.43m to compensate other forced labourers. Died November 1998 aged 85, five weeks after interview for film.

Historical Context

The Kindertransport took place during the nine months leading up to the outbreak of World War Two. Europe at this time was an unstable place, still suffering the effects of World War One. Germany was particularly unsettled, having to abide by the Treaty of Versailles. The country's economy had begun to recover during the 1920s, only to be hit again by the 1929 Depression. It was in this climate that the Nazi Party (National Socialist German Workers' Party), which Adolf Hitler joined in 1919, began to gather a following. In their rhetoric they promised to rebuild Germany, blaming ethnic minorities, particularly the Jews, for the nation's ills. When Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, he began to dismantle democracy and proclaimed himself 'Führer' of an authoritarian new regime.

The Jewish population became a target for this intolerant government. They represented one percent of the population in Germany but they were German citizens and enjoyed equal rights. Many of them served in the army during WWI. Yet despite this, anti-Semitism was prevalent in Germany and in Poland where over 3 million Jews lived. Then the government passed a series of laws that would restrict Jewish people from equal participation in society. Limits were placed on the number of Jewish children who could attend German

schools (1933). The Nuremberg laws (1935) followed and affected citizenship, employment, relationships, marriage and the biological designation of Jewish people. Between July and December 1938, a series of discriminatory laws were passed, all of which restricted rights and access for Jewish people. These included: compulsory identity cards for over 15's (1938), naming of children (1938) from a government list, a ban on attendance of theatre, cinema, concerts and forced payment for damages caused during Kristallnacht². Jewish children were expelled from public schools and forbidden entrance to German universities. These laws contributed to the degradation of the Jewish population and their systematic and legalised abuse.

Not only Jews were persecuted. Groups including Roma, homosexuals, communists, political dissidents and Sinti were also targeted. The Nazi Party's goal of achieving a 'pure' Aryan race meant that groups such as these and Jews were perceived to weaken the race.

The appeasement policy of other European countries enabled Hitler to build up the army again, in breach of the Treaty of Versailles, to annex Austria³ and then to march into Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland. Jewish people in these countries were then subject to the same anti-semitic laws. Although forced emigration did offer a way of escape, many did not want to leave their homes and families. They weren't allowed bring any valuables with them and it was difficult to find a country willing to take them in. At an international conference to discuss the problem, only the Dominican Republic offered to accept more refugees from all the countries present, many of which were still suffering the effects of WWI. Despite the brutal events of Kristallnacht which were reported internationally, most countries including Ireland did not open their doors.

The Kindertransport

After a Cabinet debate following an appeal by a group of British Jewish leaders some days after Kristallnacht, it was agreed Britain would accept unaccompanied children under the age of 17. The movement of children was organised and funded by a non-denominational organisation called the Movement for the Care of Children who had to ensure that children could not become a financial burden on the state. The Movement, later known as the Refugee Children's Movement set up systems in Germany and Austria for organising the transport. Later trains left from Prague and Poland too. A call went out for foster homes in

Britain and lists were made of those children who were deemed most vulnerable such as children in camps, Polish children, children in orphanages etc. The first transport departed from Berlin on December 1st, 1938 and from Vienna on December 10th. The last group left the Netherlands on May 14th, 1940. In 1939 Senator Robert Wagner and Edith Rogers proposed a bill that would allow 20,000 children emigrate from Germany to the US. However, the bill was resisted strongly by different representatives and groups and was not passed. In total, approximately 10,000 children were transported to Britain in the *Kindertransport*.



² Brutal anti-Jewish pogrom on night of November 9-10, 1938

³ The 'Anschluss', 1938

Separated Children in Ireland

For several years now, people escaping persecution, torture, war and other situations have been coming to Ireland to seek asylum. Over 4,500 separated children have arrived here⁴ from many countries including Nigeria, Somalia, Afghanistan, DR Congo. Separated children are officially defined⁵ as children under 18 years of age who are outside their country of origin and separated from both parents or their previous legal/customary primary caregiver. They are entitled to international protection. Despite Ireland's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child irrespective of their status, reports have shown that separated children are often invisible and not in receipt of care equal to that of children who are regarded as citizens. Since 2001, some 316 separated children seeking asylum have gone missing from state care⁶, showing how easily they could fall between the cracks in residential institutions. Now, new safety standards have been introduced in centres housing asylum-seeking children. In their report on Separated Children, the Irish Refugee Council, which is the focal point for SCEP in Ireland, points out that Ireland has an obligation to cherish all children equally.

Documentary

Into the Arms of Strangers can be categorised as a documentary film. Typically, a documentary film would get a small release and be shown on the arthouse and film festival circuit. In recent years, however, several documentary films such as *Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Touching the Void* have enjoyed major box office success.



There has been a huge resurgence in the popularity of non-fiction filmmaking and what was often considered an outmoded and minority interest is now recognised as a viable product for producers and distributors. This current enthusiasm for non-fiction stands in contrast with ratings-conscious TV channels who are producing less serious documentary but are churning out more of what is termed 'reality tv'. Yet what is documentary if it is not 'real'? Traditionally regarded as the difference between depiction of the 'real' ie. truth as opposed to the 'unreal' ie. fiction, it is difficult to reach a clear definition of the form when we look at today's 'reality' e.g. *Big Brother* or *I'm a Celebrity* with their staged environments and financial incentives or today's fiction e.g. *The Queen*.

On the one hand, many of the so-called reality programmes have borrowed from documentary. On the other, the narrative style of some of the hit documentaries has obviously been influenced by fiction filmmaking. And then there's Michael Moore, director of the award-winning *Bowling*

for Columbine and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, whose tabloid approach combined with his own reputation undoubtedly influenced his film's box office appeal. But just when we thought the brash filmmaker inserted into almost every scene was defining the contemporary documentary, along comes former US presidential hopeful Al Gore with *An Inconvenient Truth* a film that resembles a powerpoint presentation of his global warming lecture. Audiences queue up and the American Academy nominates him for Best Documentary.

It is difficult, therefore, to clearly define the documentary film today. Looking back at the history of film, we can see that filming reality has always been an indefinite science. The earliest films shown in cinema, those of the Lumière Brothers, were of workers leaving a factory or a train arriving at a station. So real did this latter episode appear to the untrained audiences that they allegedly leapt from their seats. In America, the travelogue defined the non-fiction film for some time and perhaps this echoes the

⁴ Report: Irish Refugee Council, December 2006

⁵ The Separated Children in Europe Programme (SCEP) which was established in 1997 in response to the increased arrival of separated children in Western Europe

⁶ The Separated Children in Ireland, www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie/press06

enthusiasm for the nature documentary today. Pioneering filmmaker Robert O’Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Man of Aran* (1935) were regarded as groundbreaking in their use of film for ethnographic and anthropological purposes. Yet the issue of reality arose in relation to his work when it was subsequently revealed that he staged certain events such as seal-hunting with spears, a long-outdated practice among the Inuit, for his documentary *Nanook of the North*. Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov inserted an aesthetic and political sensibility into his filmmaking with *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), again prompting questions about the ‘reality’ that he was showing. The work of British filmmaker John Grierson offered social commentary on life in Britain during the 1930s and 40s and aimed to educate the people in political democracy. In Ireland, the Radharc team created many documentaries for television that offered viewers an insight into various social issues both at home and overseas.

Television channels today are filled with various versions of ‘reality’, which have merged aspects of documentary filmmaking making definition even more difficult. Consider a TV programme such as *The Office*: it may look the same as a docu-soap (documentary soap) on office conditions but it relies on the viewer’s interpretation to identify its mockumentary status. Or take the ubiquitous docudrama, in which real events such as crimes or miscarriages of justice are recreated for the purposes of illustration or argument. In choosing to represent reality, the film and programme makers carefully select what to show, how to edit, and what techniques will contribute to the particular reality they wish to convey.

But despite these variants, as the documentary form continues to evolve we can observe certain methods and styles that prevail in the portrayal and representation of reality:

- (i) **‘Lecture style’** – a disembodied voice directs our attention to what is important, such as Judi Dench in *Into the Arms of Strangers*. Producer Oppenheimer and director Harris wanted a voice that would be recognised as ‘English’ and safe. Dench’s status as a well-known and respected actor adds to the seriousness of the material. Similarly the use of Morgan Freeman’s voice in *The March of the Penguins* brings a certain gravitas to the story of the penguins’ journey as well as adding to the film’s appeal.
- (ii) **‘Observational, ‘fly on the wall’** – the camera observes with as little intrusion as possible. Originating in the 1960s as Direct Cinema, it was facilitated by the development of new lightweight cameras. Nowadays, mobile phone cameras make this a readily available form of documenting.
- (iii) **‘Reflexive’** – The filmmaker makes the audience aware of the actual process of filmmaking – in other words ‘how’ the documentary is constructed. To this definition could be added the performative mode, made familiar to us through the work of Michael Moore and also Nick Broomfield (*Biggie and Tupac, In this World*). Both of these filmmakers insert themselves very obviously into the film and comment directly on the material they are filming or presenting to us.

Ethics

One of the key questions that arise frequently in relation to documentary filmmaking is that of ethics – both in terms of the viewer but also in terms of the interviewees or the presentation of material. RTÉ’s programme series, *Asylum*, received praise but also censure for its representation of the realities of Portrane Hospital in which residents were often depicted in a very vulnerable way. In *Bowling for*

Columbine, Michael Moore was criticised for obviously harassing Charlton Heston to prove his own point, and for manipulatively quoting statistics, often out of context. Yet his films made a powerful impact and raised all kinds of questions about the American gun lobby or the elections, which he continues to tackle on his website.

When reality TV programme, *Big Brother*, provokes race questions in Westminster, we might rightfully question the nature of the ‘reality’ which such programmes purport to represent. Technology has made it possible for us to film or see all aspects of life – ‘live’. Filming the ‘real’ has never been so easy or accessible but it has also never been so potentially abusive of privacy and human rights. Perhaps in these days of ‘reality’ overkill, the job of the documentary filmmaker to reveal truth has never been more crucial.

Kindertransport as Documentary

Unlike some of the highly successful documentaries mentioned, *Into the Arms of Strangers* is a fairly conventional film, combining news footage and photography with interviews. Harris and Oppenheimer’s aim was to reflect the full range of *Kinder* experience. Obviously with limited time, they had to make choices from among the many people they spoke to for their film so they endeavoured to select stories that would be representative. They used no actors. The film is logically sequenced around interviews that follow a ‘before’ ‘during’ and ‘after’ transportation of the *Kinder*. However, compiling the series of interviews with footage and documentation was not just a matter of editing them together. Through skilful editing and the use of voiceover and soundtrack, they create a certain mood and atmosphere which may evoke feelings in the viewer. They also add some cutaways and digital video to illustrate particular points.



Style

Opening Scene

From the opening scene of the film, which is in colour, it is clear that this is a film of memory, from a child's point of view. The camera tracks over artefacts from a German childhood: books and toys that evoke a sense of nostalgia. Piano music plays in the background. An adult voice speaks: 'I still have dreams and certain things come back' which reinforces the idea that we are seeing and hearing recollections. When a train is shown pulling into a station, it changes to black and white. Children's voices can be heard singing above a montage of childhood photos. A voiceover then interjects commentary about the period. Then, to confirm this, the first interviewee appears, speaking to camera against a blue background. The filmmakers' intention with the background was that it would appear

like the sky one might see from a train window – each interviewee is shown against a different shade of blue. The film continues to cut between interviews and footage creating the effect of a window onto their childhood. When the third interviewee tells us that she did not know what she and her father were protecting their other family members from, the film cuts to footage of Hitler, accompanied by a roaring crowd.

This combination of footage, stills, colour photography merging with black and white, voiceover, orchestral and choral soundtrack and to camera interviews all combine to establish the mood of memory and nostalgia that underlies the complete film. The sequence is fast-paced, we are offered glimpses of memory just as they might crop up. Despite the quantity and range of images, however, the sequence is carefully structured so that the 'beginning' of the documentary and the Kindertransport is firmly established.

Kristallnacht

This scene begins with the voiceover telling us about the Nazi pogrom against a background of marching Nazis and street scenes, on which buildings are covered in Nazi flags and banners. Sound is distorted and sound effects exaggerate the marching and crashing of glass. Footage is slowed down to create a more ominous impression, then with use of digital video, the camera swirls around a spiral staircase moving upstairs to reveal a skylight. A voice over reveals 'I had a dream' and recollections of fathers' actions are narrated against photographs of different men, desperate to save their families from the Nazi's brutality. In this, one of the more stylised scenes of the film, a sense of the chaotic and

horrific nature of events of that night, November 9th 1938, is conveyed. Actions such as marching are shown, but incompletely. Certain subjective items such as stairs, boots, clock are picked out as the camera moves around the rooms. A photo of synagogue objects reminds viewers who the victims were. To add to the power of this scene, colour footage of looted shops destroyed with the 'Jude' sign is added and the voiceover recounts the worldwide revulsion that was felt following newspaper reports, revealed through headlines.

Final Note

Into the Arms of Strangers is a powerful film that delves into the collective memory of a group of children spared the horrors of the Second World War due to the far-sighted intervention of some well-meaning adults. Individual eyewitness accounts in this documentary build up a picture of the initial difficulties facing Jewish families in Germany and Nazi-controlled Europe, the journey to sanctuary in another country and the time spent in these host countries. The film allows us to question our own attitudes to refugees, our responsibilities to children and young people and to all vulnerable group fleeing persecution at home.

Further Information

Into the Arms of Strangers:

Stories of the Kindertransport:

www.intothearmsofstrangers.com

Kindertransport Association:

www.kindertransport.org

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

www.ushmm.org