

On the Move: Stolen and Hidden Children under Allied Occupation in Postwar Germany (1945-1949)

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On May 16, 1950, the BBC Home Service aired a broadcast called “The Greatest Detective Story in History”, an hour-long special that featured the search for displaced, orphaned, abandoned, stolen and hidden children in Europe after the war.¹ But the broadcast, which generated an overwhelming response from listeners, was hardly news. Children’s displacement was, and would continue to be, a constant reality between 1933 and 1945, where children of all backgrounds were moved from place to place. Some were moved clandestinely to safe havens and places of refuge while others were hoarded onto trains and deported to institutions and camps. This certainly did not change in the aftermath of war. From domestic uprooting to forced evacuations, and from repatriation convoys to resettlement schemes, children were constantly on the move. This was especially true of children who were forcibly uprooted, racially screened and Germanised by the Nazis for the purposes of *Lebensraum*. These children, who were considered ‘racially valuable’, came to be known as the ‘stolen’ and ‘hidden’ children of postwar Europe. Since they were often hiding in plain sight in the Germany community, they were among the most difficult to locate and return home.

The size and scope of the stolen and hidden child problem posed a serious challenge for the military authorities and international organisations mandated to assist young people in need during the postwar period. The interaction between the military authorities in Germany– the French, British, Americans, and Soviets– and the United Nations agencies in operation on the ground– the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA, 1943-1947) and the International Refugee Organisation (IRO, 1947-1950)– led to one of the greatest child recovery schemes in history designed to carry out the search and tracing of stolen and hidden children.

Building upon extensive research from the International Tracing Service (Bad Arolsen, Germany), the *Archives Nationales* (Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, France), the *Ministère des Affaires étrangères et européennes* (La Courneuve, France), the National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom), the Wiener Library (London, United Kingdom), this paper will chart the search and tracing efforts of the UN agencies and military authorities in postwar Germany during one of the twentieth century’s most significant watershed moments. It will examine key policy challenges that emerged in the field that will in turn inform us about the nature of child migrants and humanitarian intervention in post-conflict contexts.

About the speaker:

Katherine Rossy is a PhD candidate in modern European history at Queen Mary University of London and is working under the supervision of Professor Julian Jackson. She is a recipient of the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Doctoral Scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Her research interests include the history of children and childhood, war and military occupation, and humanitarian intervention in conflict and post-conflict contexts.

¹“Statement for BBC”, undated, Archives pour l’Organisation Internationale pour les réfugiés, Archives nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, France, AJ/43/302.