The theme of ‘children and war’ emerged in the early 1990s in Holocaust historiography and continues apace with attention to their diary writing, participation in resistance activities, and most sentimentally, as innocent victims of war. As Joanna Michlic pointed out, the accounts of those who survived the Holocaust as children and today form the majority of survivors still alive and physically able and willing to speak about their experiences have now gained recognition as essential (and not just auxiliary) data for historical reconstruction. Each of these accounts offers a voice to hidden histories which collectively form the narrative history of the Holocaust.

In New Zealand, the narratives of ‘survival’ associated with the relocation to the antipodes of 25 young Jews who escaped from Europe on the ‘Kindertransports’ and the ‘Deckston transports’ have recently entered public consciousness with the initiatives of the Wellington Holocaust Research Centre The Nicholas Winton New Zealand Project (co-ordinated by Vera Egermeyer in 2010) and the Deckston Children Exhibition (co-ordinated by Lisa Silestean in 2011-12). Their near ‘escape’ from historical attention, to some extent explained by the small number of the relocated children and the relative obscurity of their sponsors, exemplifies the need for further interpretive pathways into the histories and immigrant geographies of Second World War refugee children and youth.

This paper uses the personal histories of Walter Freitag, one of the ‘Kinder’, born 1929 in Königsberg, and David Benge (birth name Dawid Banczewski), one of the ‘Deckston children’, born 1925 in Bialystok, to examine the biographical implications of flight, and to illustrate how juvenile exiles were able to utilise the social capital
within community networks as a resource in identity articulation and self-determination.

We will argue that a socio-culturally oriented biographical method that ties in with sociological migration studies and employs theoretical concepts such as social capital, i.e. norms, values, and social networks generated through transnational family and kinship,⁴ is especially suitable for the analysis of the life history of refugees who were relocated from Europe to transatlantic and transpacific countries, and could not return home after 1945. This approach breaks with the prevailing view of exile as a temporary phase with political implications. Researchers in Exile Studies such as Theo Stammen and Patrick Farges have recently pointed out that we can speak in this respect of a problem of the theoretical comprehension of exile, because the exile of 1933 represents a striking example of a forced migration of diasporic nature, which leads away from a homeland to multiple locations, yet the sociological aspects of flight and exile have received little academic attention.⁵ It is therefore necessary to expand the definitions of flight and exile in order to focus the discussion on both biographical and collective experiences of Second World War refugees. Our approach aims to highlight the process-oriented, multidirectional dimension of exile; it can be said to belong to the family of “relational” approaches, in the manner of Michael Werner und Benedicte Zimmermann’s histoire croisée (an entangled everyday- and micro-history of exile) which provides a guide to examining phenomena of acculturation and social environment appropriation involving a variety of directions and multiple effects rather than simple linear transfer processes from one culture to another.

**Solidarities and Exile-Networks**

The attitude of the New Zealand government towards the fate of Jews in the years 1933-’46, a time frame that encompasses the height of European ethnic, political and social upheaval in the twentieth century, was primarily based on a restrictive immigration policy reinforced by the Immigration Restriction Amendment Act of 1920.⁶ The more restrictive a receiving country’s immigration policy, the more stringent the necessity for refugees and evacuees to
have the right connections – this was especially true for New Zealand that regarded itself as the most remote British outpost in the South Pacific.

Among the estimated 1,100 refugees and post-war displaced persons, who gained sanctuary in New Zealand between 1933 and 1946, were five ‘Kinder’ who migrated from Britain in 1939 and 1946, and twenty orphaned Polish children from Bialystok, brought out in two groups in 1935 and 1937. The relocation of the ‘Kinder’ involved travel costs and the required landing money of £200, and was mainly based on family sponsorship and organisational support from the Refugee Children’s Movement. The resettlement of the Polish children at the Deckston Home in Wellington was entirely sponsored by Annie and Max Deckston, a childless couple from Lachowicze, Poland, who had settled in New Zealand in 1900. Although few obstacles were encountered for the first group of eight children, the second group of twelve was costly, with a £2,000 guarantee required for each child. The stories of these children and adolescents give access to entangled lives reflecting that exile trajectories were facilitated by ethnic or religious sources of solidarity, family and kinship relationships.

Walter Freitag’s story demonstrates the importance of parental guidance and open dialogue before his flight from Germany and of communal bonds with fellow refugees after his separation from his parents. The son of a middle-class family – his father was a lawyer –, Walter had enjoyed a sheltered life in a stable home before November 1938; after that, the frantic search for an escape from Germany pervaded his family’s lives. Walter recalls his father explaining that it was best for them to join his maternal aunt who had settled in New Zealand in the mid-1930s. Such imparting of knowledge about other diasporic exile stories influenced the ten-year-old boy’s attitude toward emigration and a place in the antipodes.

However, his journey turned out to be much longer and painful, as his family was denied an entry permit to New Zealand, and he was sent on a Kindertransport to Britain in July 1939, together with his 6-years-old sister Leonora. Walter recounts his memory of his preparation for departure from his home in Königsberg:

I remember the train journey from Königsberg to Berlin and think that it was a time of closeness that I had with my father. Maybe at that time he was trying to explain to me what was going on, but without worrying me in any sense, by assuring me that “We’ll join you in England and we’ll travel to New Zealand.” […] He asked me to conduct
myself, to be orderly and not to cause burdens for other people – his last lesson. It stuck with me for all my life.\(^9\)

The conversation with his father on the way to the Kindertransport departure point in Berlin was the most important thing that the ten years old boy took with him into exile. Laden with meaning through the farewell scene, the conversation preoccupied the boy during the trip on the Kindertransport train, upon his arrival to England, after his relocation to New Zealand in 1946, and up to the time that he spoke about it in his autobiographical interviews of 1997 and 2011. In his retrospective account, Walter recalls his father preparing him “for a better life elsewhere”\(^{10}\) and sending him off on the train “like it was an adventure, an opportunity to travel with other children.”\(^{11}\) Thus, with the idea of an adventure, the young boy developed his first thoughts of flight.

After arrival in Britain, Walter and his sister were split up between foster-homes in Newcastle. Repeated separation from family as well as repeated adjustments to new locations due to evacuation procedures during the war can be seen as reasons for Walter’s pressing need to be with others of a similar background after migrating on at the end of the war. When in December 1946 he was relocated to New Zealand to be reunited with his closest surviving relatives, he experienced his journey and settlement in the new place as another adventure and a new beginning. His account provides numerous examples of care, support and reciprocal trust – all vital components of social capital – coming from family and native kin networks.

Upon his arrival in Wellington, Walter boarded with his parents’ close friend, the former Königsberg lawyer Walter Eichelbaum and his family. The Eichelbaums’ neighbours, German-speaking Jews themselves, re-introduced Walter to Jewish life. Through them he met another refugee family who had known his maternal grandparents, and he married their daughter Ruth. The contacts that emerged through family bonds were crucial to Walter achieving participation in the labour market, because New Zealand had a strong culture of securing employment through ‘word of mouth.’ With the support of the Eichelbaums, Walter found work as assistant chemist, and completed his academic education at Victoria University. This became a major factor in achieving social mobility, in Walter’s words “they gave me a step up and a step up,”\(^{12}\) but also in articulating his identity – along with chemistry, Walter studied German. His education helped him connect some of the broken links to his past and gain stability in the present. Involvement in cultural activities such as
private chamber-music evenings was another source of connection, enabling social contacts with refugee musicians, founding members of the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra.

Walter’s account provides strong evidence to suggest that the refugee circles used cultural activities, customs around food and household rituals as a social resource to sustain the young people’s emotional attachment to the family homeland and maintain group identity:

Dr. and Mrs. Lemchen epitomised my parents. I saw in them the values that my own father and mother had […] Their Seder tables reminded me of my own. There were the grandparents like my grandparents, and the father explaining to the children like my father would have explained. It was wonderful, as if we had been back home in Germany.¹³

Interestingly, at the end of the interview, Walter once again articulates the significance of his father’s values and expectations, which he considers to be binding:

And the values […] even in my career: […] the German Gründlichkeit stood me in good stead in my work. And when I see now examples of German workmanship, […] this is done absolutely efficiently, correctly, that is what my father would have wanted me to do.¹⁴

With this closing statement Walter re-enacts a key moment in his life that was evoked at the beginning of his narrative – the farewell from his father –, and his father’s ‘last lesson’. At this point, it becomes apparent how memories of parents’ values are internalised, especially when the parents are lost, and how such memories may become the fragile backbone of an entire life history.¹⁵ It therefore seems justifiable to conclude that persistent memory of loss and persecution, as well as survivor quilt were part of Walter’s and his fellow refugees’ emotional reality. Nevertheless, they remained bound in their remote geographical location by strong nostalgic links to their German homeland. Nostalgia for one’s place of origin is essential to exilic experience. In Walter’s case, it also came to represent a form of capital in itself, because it sustained his return to Germany as a ‘return home’, and it allowed him to access memories of his place of birth in a more reconciled way. The following quotation reflects Walter’s own interpretation of his roots and the importance of ‘knowing where you come from’ for the understanding of self:
Going back to the forests and various places, I realised this is my homeland; these were the mountains where my father took me bird-watching. [...] New Zealand is my adoptive land that has given me sustenance, [...] it’s a land to which I have contributed significantly [...]. But I know that I still have some roots in Germany. And I’m glad I preserved those roots as I stayed in the circle [of refugees].

Moreover, in Walter’s account there is also evidence of a socially committed attitude and engagement in building cross-cultural and transnational relations, which suggests that his exile experience cannot be dismissed as only backward-looking, fixed to a family homeland. Aware of the need for economic development in the region, Walter regarded his thirty-two years of activity as chief chemist and technical manager of BP New Zealand as a vehicle through which to ‘give back’ to society:

We were in the laboratory like the GPs in medicine. [...] The job entailed diagnostic work. [...] I had at my fingertips metallurgists, biologists, physicists. [...] And I had the privilege of a vast network that was built up throughout the country, including Australia.

The cultural continuity sustained by socialisation in refugee circles, as well as the egalitarian, informal attitude of New Zealanders, supported his integration in the wider business community. Thus, Walter was able to act as go-between during his work as exchange researcher at the London BP Research Centre which provided me with a range of experiences in various departments in Switzerland, Germany, Denmark and France. [...] In some places I learnt, in other I was able to contribute something. I made new colleagues, new friends.

David Benge’s experiences of family life and community both corroborate and differ to those of Walter. He experienced separation from a very young age, having been placed in an orphanage due to his father’s ill health. In 1935, at age ten, he was brought to New Zealand by the Deckstons, but did not really understand the departure at the time. His daughter recalls:

Dad had told us some stories about his childhood and the image of leaving Bialystok station on an adventure, always believing he would return to see his family.
Although the story of the Deckston children is firmly planted in the Wellington Jewish community as a narrative of rescue, the motivations of the Deckstons to sponsor the children’s resettlement are difficult to ascertain. Their gesture could be interpreted as an attempt to alleviate the cultural isolation the couple felt as Polish Jews in Wellington. But it could also be seen as an attempt to import progressive views to the care of orphaned Jewish children – in interwar Poland Jewish orphanages had undergone a shift from “pre-modern communal charity” to “scientific philanthropy” and “national welfare,” a transformation which aspired to recover the Jewish people from massacres, pogroms and expulsions. The Deckstons were undoubtedly aware of the intense bouts of anti-Semitism in Poland from newspaper reports and also witnessed them in first-hand in several return visits.

David’s experiences of anti-Semitism appeared to remain in Bialystok, reinforcing the perception of Wellington as a place of refuge:

“It was strange because we went to school so quickly, but we very quickly found our feet. There was no anti-Semitism […]. In Bialystok, as a child, I was conscious of it.”

The Deckston children attended South Wellington Primary School and they found settling in with their classmates difficult; they looked different, spoke with an accent, and were “teased as Poles, not Jews.” Although they were in different classes, their teasing by other classmates consolidated the peer-solidarity they fostered in the home. This solidarity was due to age, the disciplinarian regime of Annie Deckston and their isolation from the wider Bialystoker diaspora.

The Home maintained kosher dietary laws and also religious traditions through attendance at the Orthodox synagogue. With other boys in the home, David spent Friday nights listening to Max Deckston’s lectures on religious topics. The children also performed concerts for the Deckstons’ friends, often with David as a featured singer of Yiddish songs. The retention of Yiddish unlike that of Polish was encouraged as was the acquisition of English. Although scholastic achievement was important to the Deckstons, the death of Annie in 1938 and Max a year later may have adversely affected the children’s aspirations. David left high school to study art and trained as a cabinet maker before joining the New Zealand Air Force in 1944. After the war’s end, he returned to cabinet making, and boarded with a Jewish family in Wellington before moving to Melbourne, Australia, at age twenty.
His post-war trajectory also inspired other Deckston children to make the trans-Tasman crossing, as one of David’s peers and friends explained: “Everyone was leaving, coming to Australia; we wanted to be among more Jewish people.”

David’s displacement from his Polish background seems symptomatic of an imposed exile. Immediately after the war, David searched for surviving family members through many organisations, but was led to believe he was all alone. Bialystok to him remained a painful memory, never really worked through. There is a clear sense that David’s period in the Deckston Home and service in the Air Force were formative life experiences, but neither was sufficient to induce a strong cultural or emotional attachment. David’s memories of departure, contact and acculturation suggest that the strict upbringing in the Deckston Home, with its emphasis on Old World religious traditions and New World acculturation practices through language and education was, although often resented at the time, beneficial in the long run. As the Eastern European Jewish family constellation was not limited to the nuclear family, David’s first socialisation was not centred on parents to the same degree as it was in a Central European family such as Walter Freitag’s; David thus developed emotional surrogates, finding identity-creating patterns within his generational group and satisfying the needs for community and orientation. Although it is doubtful that the socially progressive ideal of a national rebirth of the Jewish people was actually realised in the Deckston Home, David, as many other ‘Deckston children’, was deeply appreciative of Annie and Max’s life-saving mitzvah. The ‘homeland’ in his biographical map was finally found in Melbourne:

I have very warm feelings towards Wellington. I was very happy there, but the happiest time of my life was in Melbourne […] this is where I belong.

**Conclusion**

Clearly, the refugee children’s histories reveal that in a world involving vast distances, peer group dynamics, language communities, and chain solidarities were core values on which refugees crucially depended. As Dirk Hoerder argues “decisions were made within networks, information flows, and perceived socioeconomic options and constraints.”

At the same time, the narratives of Walter and David reveal repeated thoughts about ‘a way out’ during different stages of their biography. For example, Walter’s considerations on
realising his individual potential through his career, thus creating a self-determined space and opportunity, reflect his thoughts of flight manifested in a divorce and extensive travels while working at the London BP Research Centre. Similarly, David somewhat frustrated by the small size of the Jewish community and lack of artistic opportunities in New Zealand decided to move to Melbourne, which hosted one of the largest Bialystoker diaspora communities in the world. In fact, the place of his resettlement, with its suburb of St. Kilda was the main location of the Bialystoker community in Australia, resident to 5,000 Bialystoker Jews by 1939.  

Seen in this wider context, the life histories of Walter Freitag and David Benge seem to suggest that despite the formative influence of loss and displacement, flight can at times become an individual problem-solving strategy that may imply latitude and self-determination. The experiences of the refugee children also reflect that exile is an individual experience as much as it is a collective one: hidden behind an individual exile trajectory there are often other histories of family and kinship. We therefore make the case for further research into the sociology of exile and the immigrant geographies of Second World War child refugees.

Notes

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2 The Kindertransport is nowadays regarded as one of the greatest humanitarian events of the 20th century. Nearly 10,000 unaccompanied Jewish children up to the age of 16 were brought to Great Britain under this rescue operation from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia within nine months between the November Pogrom of 1938 and the outbreak of the II WW.

3 In New Zealand, the first humanitarian action aimed at the rescue of young Jews was carried out by the Polish immigrant couple Annie and Max Deckston, who brought out in 1935/1937 twenty unaccompanied Jewish children from Poland.


13-30. Similar emphasis on the need to examine the transnational character of diasporas and to include groups that scatter voluntarily or as a result of fleeing persecution, can be noted in William Safran, “Diasporas in modern societies: myths of homeland and return”, in Diaspora 1 (1)/1991, pp. 83-99; also in Robin Cohen, Global Diasporas: An Introduction (London: UCL Press 1997).

6 Ann Beaglehole notes that ‘The preferred migrant groups were generally those who were regarded as the least different (the British and Northern Europeans) and those others who were expected to assimilate the most readily. Jewish refugees were not generally looked on favourably in this regard.’ Ann Beaglehole, Facing the past: looking back at refugee childhood in New Zealand 1940s-1960s (Wellington: Allen & Unwin 1990), p. 13. In a previous study, Nancy Taylor indicated that the anti-refugee attitudes in the New Zealand public were based on fear of foreigners, the Depression, and anti-Semitism. Nancy M. Taylor, Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 1939–45, Home Front: The New Zealand People at War (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch 1986), pp. 851–52.

7 In Facing the Past, Beaglehole states that it is difficult to establish exactly how many refugees came to New Zealand in the years before World War II and in the immediate post-war period, ‘partly because accurate figures which distinguished refugees from immigrants were not kept’ (p. 8). Accurate figures of Kindertransport children who settled in New Zealand are also difficult to obtain. According to information from the Board of Deputies of British Jews (BOD), 4% of the Kindertransport participants had emigrated to Australia and other countries in 1950. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, RG-59.023M, Board of Deputies of British Jews (BOD), Education Committee, Report on Jewish Refugee Children brought to England, London, May 1950. By our explicit count, nine Kindertransportees settled permanently in New Zealand in the 1940s-1960s.

8 To a large extent, New Zealand did not differ in its attitudes from its neighbour, Australia, which also grappled with the prospect of its own ‘Kindertransport’ of Polish Jewish children. As Michael Blakeney noted on the prospect of Polish immigration: “When, in September 1937, the Polish Jewish Refugee Fund proposed a scheme to bring twenty young Polish orphans out to Australia, a Department of the Interior memorandum, referring to the 1925 letter of the British Passport Central Officer in Warsaw, advised that ‘Polish Jews have never been favourably regarded as immigrants’ […] ‘those who have come to Australia have not proved altogether satisfactory.’” The scheme was eventually permitted, though with limited conditions attached. The fund selected its orphans from Polish Jews born or resident in Germany, or those Jews having been deprived of Polish citizenship by the Polish denaturalisation decree of March 1938. The Fund had to agree that the orphans would not become a charge on the community for at least five years. Michael Blakeney, Australia and the Jewish Refugees 1933-1948 (Sydney: Croom Helm 1985), pp. 38-39.

9 Interview with Walter Freitag, 4 November, 2011, Turangi, New Zealand, Interviewer: Monica Tempian.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.


14 Ibid.

15 As I have argued in The Culture of Memory in a Kindertransport Child (paper presented at the 14th New Zealand Jewish Studies Conference, Auckland 29-30 August 2011), one of the outstanding features of child survivor autobiographical interviews is that they occur many years after the events, placing the emphasis not only on the variety of individual experiences, but also on how they are remembered, retrospectively interpreted and narrated. This means that there is a privileged place for the ‘telling’ of the story, and generally for the kind of work on language and thought that produces the autobiographical narrative. The socio-linguist Anne Betten observes that passages extensively expanded on by survivors represent problematic points in the process of self-understanding and personal construction of meaning (Anne Betten, “Rechtfertigungsdiskurse: Zur argumentativen Funktion von Belegerzählungen in narrativen Interviews”, in Redder, Angelika (ed.), Diskurse und Texte. Festschrift für Konrad Ehlich zum 65. Geburtstag (Tübingen: Staffenburg Verlag 2007), pp. 106-109). Stories with argumentative functions in this sense can be viewed as an expression of trauma-related guilt; they are developed by the narrator in order to argue against a latent voice of dissent or to raise consciousness and understanding. Despite the repeated emphasis on how ‘lucky’ he was to escape Nazi persecution, the effort of coming to terms with survivor guilt and working through the past is clearly evident in Walter’s narrative.

16 Interview with Walter Freitag, 4 November, 2011, Turangi, New Zealand, Interviewer: Monica Tempian.

17 Ibid.
19 Interview with David Benge, 1 May, 2001, Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre, Melbourne, Australia, Interviewer: Jeri Kras. Importantly, David’s family appears to have been part of the Bialystoker exodus to the United States; his father had two brothers and two sisters who had emigrated to New York in the late 1920s and David’s father made several visits there to investigate the possibility of emigration. The father was compelled to abandon those plans because of his wife’s illness.

20 Linda Bourke, daughter of David Benge in a letter to the author, dated 2 January 2012.


22 Interview with David Benge.

23 Ibid.

24 Interview with Shirley Rose (Beder), 15 March, 2009, Melbourne, Australia, Interviewer: Lisa Silestean.

25 David had known that one of his uncles had migrated to New York before the war and wrote a letter to him, but he never received an answer. In the early 80’s he received a phone call from a female Rabbi in America who was looking for him. He was told that the uncle had in fact received his letter, but remained suspicious and did not respond. It was after his death that his children discovered the letter and tried to find David. At that point, David discovered that he had many relatives in America and Israel. He and his wife, Minnie, travelled to both places to meet the relatives. His daughter Linda explains: “This was an amazing experience for a man who thought he was all alone in the world.” (Linda Bourke, daughter of David Benge in a letter to the author, dated 12 January 2012).

26 Ibid.


28 The Bialystoker Jews had formed in Melbourne a thriving Landsmanshaft, promoted Yiddish culture, press such as Oystralisher idishe lebn (Australian Jewish Life), social organisations, and established a meeting house, the Bialystoker Centre.

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