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What the Kindertransportees tell us about the acquisition of English

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In the first collection of voices of Kindertransportees, *We came as Children: A Collective Autobiography*, Karen Gershon put together about 250 testimonies in the early 1960s (on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Kindertransport).¹ She interviewed “about thirty” people and added short written outlines of their lives as refugees. The testimonies are anonymous, something which maybe at that time meant that the participants felt freer and could express themselves as they wanted. The outstanding value of the memories gathered in *We came as Children* is due to the fact that the book conveys the painful nature of the children’s experience with a sort of raw directness that is not to be found in other volumes, as Anthony Grenville remarked in 2012.²

Although Gershon’s book has no specific section dedicated to the acquisition of English on the part of the Kindertransportees, this matter is dealt with and indeed crops up quite frequently throughout the book. It opens with the description of a letter about “one case”³ in which a boy is presented to the Worthing Refugee Committee in Vienna for consideration for inclusion in a Kindertransport: “Paul is very intelligent and learns at home from books. His English is quite good.” The fact that a child already knew some English was evidently regarded as a distinguishing feature, one which could improve his or her chances of being chosen for a Kindertransport. If we look at the two sentences from a more narrowly linguistic point of view, it is striking that on the text level the information that the English of the boy is “quite good” follows directly on a general remark about him being “very intelligent”. Intelligence and language competence are often seen as directly interlinked.

Gershon’s book also contains a number of recollections of those

1 Karen Gershon, *We came as Children: A Collective Autobiography* (1966; London: Papermac, 1989).

2 Anthony Grenville, “The Kindertransports: An Introduction”, in *The Kindertransport to Britain 1938/39: New Perspectives*, ed. Andrea Hammel and Bea Lewkowicz, *Yearbook of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies* 13 (London: Brill, 2012), 2.

3 Gershon, *We came as Children*, 17.

who in various roles took care of the Kinder, and they too touch on the language theme in several ways, for example: “These boys all spoke fairly good English, but they made us laugh at times by the terms they used.”⁴ This comment has two sides: the language competence is evaluated as “good” but at the same time there is said to be something “funny” about it, probably because “the terms they used” were in some way inappropriate, perhaps associated more with written than with spoken language, which meant that their “good English” sounded at the same time somehow foreign.

Of course, language played an important role in the contact that the Kinder had with the foster families. In the section “New Homes” the recollections show us different points of view:

(i) “We sat in the back, my sister and I, clutching hands, tired with all that had gone before, and confused with all the babble of English that we had heard of which we could understand not a word.”⁵

(ii) “On our way from Harwich to Norwich we were being taught to say ‘How do you do?’. We had great difficulty in saying, ‘Quite well, thank you’. Only one of these ladies could speak German, and she was bewildered, I expect, by our volubility and Viennese accent.”⁶

(iii) “We have a governess, an English Miss (like in a book). Mr. and Mrs. Roberts are very upset because she told them that I am lazy and don’t learn English as well as I could.”⁷

For those children who did not know English, the new language seemed incomprehensible, “a babble” and created mental confusion (i). The person who teaches the language judges the efforts of the children and the results of the learning process (ii). Nevertheless, the Kinder also notice the behaviour of one foster person, because she seemed “bewildered” by their language. The three examples show how language performance leads to reciprocal judgements on both sides of the communication (sender/speaker–recipient/listener).

It is in the section entitled “Early Schooldays and Internment” that language acquisition becomes the core subject.⁸ Language learning happened in several ways: when the Kinder were in the hostels, since many of them were beginners, they had lessons there; unfortunately, we are

4 Ibid., 34.

5 Ibid., 47.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 57.

8 Ibid., 86–91.

not given much information about the organization of these lessons. In the foster families, the language was transmitted mainly by the families themselves, who were left to their own devices and sometimes struggled with this difficult task. Once the Kinder were at school, the learning of English speeded up. The predominant recollection, then, is of a quick process, sometimes with few difficulties, but certain problems recur over several accounts – the feeling of being laughed at because of mistakes but most of all accent, which made them feel different or even inferior.

The price of learning English so quickly was often that German was forgotten, a price which many seem to have paid willingly enough. At the beginning, of course, their language competence was heavily weighted in favour of German (in many cases their English was rudimentary) but over their lives the balance tipped just as heavily in favour of English. Indeed, in some cases the result was English monolingualism with German forgotten or somehow hidden away. The following two examples represent widely differing experiences from the initial phase, while most of the individual experiences fall somewhere between the two: “I fought against the need to learn English for years – I think because the German language was all that was left to me of my childhood and I did not want to give it up.”⁹ And: “I appeared to learn English fairly quickly. This was probably due to necessity rather than skill as I knew absolutely no one who could understand German and I became desperate to make myself understood.”¹⁰

How much light does *We came as Children* throw on the language learning process? Since the testimonies are anonymous, it is often difficult to establish how old the Kinder were at the time. On the basis of the answers it is equally difficult to glean more precise information about their experience of language learning either in the hostels or in the families. This is all in all not surprising because language learning appears to have been perceived by most of them as an automatic process, and indeed language on the whole was seen as instrumental, not as an end in itself.

What comes out clearly instead are descriptions of the feelings that the language learning process aroused in the Kinder. These were usually mixed: feelings of insecurity are commonly reported, as well as feelings of shame. But in some there is also the determination to resist losing their first language, German, which in a way was their last bond with their parents and their previous childhood. On an individual level many of the

⁹ Ibid., 86.

¹⁰ Ibid.

children were too young at the time to have retained any memory of what happened in this period; the process of assimilation had been completed quickly; looking back in hindsight they talked of it mainly as a success.

The other early main work that attempts to document what happened to the Kinder is *I came Alone*.¹¹ Published fifty years after the events and the direct result of the First Reunion of the Kindertransportees in 1989, which was organized largely by Berta Leverton, the book assembles 240 testimonies, which are individually written and signed by their authors. Some examples: “Since we were living with an English non-Jewish family, and I was forbidden to speak German with my sister, I soon learned English and began to accept their strange ways” (Inge Sadan).¹² “Learning English was next on the agenda. For this purpose an elderly German who lived down the block was hired. He wore thick glasses, had a brusque manner and I was terrified of him. Perhaps spurred on by my distaste for the man I learned English in record time. Six weeks later I wrote to my parents in English: ‘I no longer speak German’ and from that day on I never have” (Kurt Fuchel).¹³

There is a slight change of perspective: the testimonies often seem to be written with greater distance, not only temporally but most of all psychologically. In fact, what *I came Alone* (on the whole) shows above all is the resilience of the Kinder and their strong desire to be “normal”; but again, on the specific question of the language learning process, we find little and what we do find is once again much more about the effect it produced on the psychological disposition and the behaviour of the Kinder, rather than the process itself. These memories range from positive ones to feelings of fear and insecurity (in certain situations such as the first day at school or the reaction of the foster family) and in certain cases also include deeper psychological/psychosomatic reactions caused by insufficient language competence. (I shall interpret an example from the book and go into greater detail in the penultimate section of this article).

Both books – *We came as Children* and *I came Alone* – are important attempts to document the experiences of the Kinder in general. They provide a wealth of information but, from the specific point of view of the language learning experience, it is clear that this is not their main centre of interest.

11 Berta Leverton and Shmuel Lowensohn, eds, *I came Alone: The Stories of the Kindertransports* (Lewes: Book Guild, 1990).

12 *Ibid.*, 285.

13 *Ibid.*, 107.

As has already been pointed out, many of the children were too young to remember and so their later judgement that the process of assimilation had been a success was somehow what they were expected to think. This personal perception was reinforced at the social and cultural level, and through the attitude, widely shared among the population of the time, towards other languages and cultures in general and towards German in particular: “The English as a whole were, in the 1930s, still very much islanders, tending to look either inwards or far overseas to their colonies for their points of reference. Hence the lack of interest – and even sheer ignorance – among the population in general as regards events on the Continent should not be underestimated.”¹⁴

Not surprisingly in the social context in which the Kinder found themselves on arriving in the UK, the pressure to fit in was the dominant one and inevitably impinged on their language experience. An idea of what the pressure to adapt actually meant may be found in the pamphlet *Helpful Information and Guidance for Every Refugee*, which of course was written and distributed with the best of intentions.¹⁵ This indeed advises the refugees to learn “the English language and its correct pronunciation” as soon as possible, to “refrain from speaking German in the streets and in public conveyances and in public places”, and to behave in a way that will not cause irritation (meaning that speakers of German should avoid “speaking loudly or dressing in an unconventional way or having strange manners”). Just a brief word about emphasizing the need to learn the “correct pronunciation”: while it was good advice, it reflects a somewhat simplistic view of language variation, competences, and learning as a whole.

As an example of the complexity of the situation, the 2009 study by Iris Guske presents a number of important cases.¹⁶ One of them is Curtis Mann, who recalls his experience on arrival in the UK:

We . . . were taken by train to London. . . . I was sensitive to the fact that I might not understand any announcement, as my name, Kurt Zuckermann, was not easy for an English person to pronounce, or at least, it was likely to be garbled. . . . About noon I was told that I would need to take a train . . .

14 William Abbey et al., *Between two Languages: German-Speaking Exiles in Great Britain* (Stuttgart: Verlag Hans-Dieter Heinz, 1995), 10.

15 German Jewish Aid Committee with Jewish Board of Deputies, eds, *While you are in England: Helpful Information and Guidance for Every Refugee* (London, 1938), 13.

16 Iris Guske, *Trauma and Attachment in the Kindertransport Context* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

to Birchington . . . In due course, the conductor came into my car, and said something to me in broad cockney which I did not understand. I gathered that what he was trying to tell me was important. I then communicated with one of the men in my compartment, looking for help, for understanding. No one spoke German, I knew just a little English. Finally, with the aid of gestures, paper and pencil, I figured out that I was on the wrong train and I gathered that I needed to go from “this train” to “another train”. But when? Where? . . . Looking back on that time period, I want to say that I had a feeling of emptiness. . . . I did not feel connected.¹⁷

The episode shows that the boy – who had a certain knowledge of English – could not understand what was said because of the conductor’s local accent. On an abstract level this seems of minor importance for the language learning process, though in fact different varieties of the language to be acquired can represent an obstacle for language learners at various levels of communication, and often native speakers are not aware of this. Directly connected with the perception of the language is the actual ability of learners to articulate the language properly. Here again there are a number of testimonies that touch on the question of the German accent, which in some cases remained noticeable throughout the lives of the people in question (a famous example is the writer Erich Fried but plenty of others can be found in Guske’s *Trauma and Attachment*, as well as in Marian Malet and Anthony Grenville’s *Changing Countries*, 2002¹⁸).

During the Second World War, German was even more marginalized in the UK than before, and this was to a large extent the reason for the social pressure that the Kinder found themselves under. But there was another important factor, which concerned the trauma the Kinder had been through: the events contributing to that trauma had been experienced through the German language, so that language was associated with those traumatic experiences. Returning to the language of traumatic experiences can – as is well known – revive painful memories of those experiences, even provoking flashbacks or other vivid recollections. Changing language, then, was for many a way of turning the page definitively and finally getting away from the traumata of the recent past (as remembered by Kurt Fuchel, quoted earlier).

17 *Ibid.*, 238–40.

18 Marian Malet and Anthony Grenville, eds, *Changing Countries: The Experience and Achievement of German-Speaking Exiles from Hitler in Britain from 1933 to Today* (London: Libris, 2002).

Presentation of the corpus

I started to get interested in the question of the Kinder and the linguistic side of their experience after participating in a research project that focuses on another group of refugees from Nazi Germany, the Jeckes, who established themselves in Palestine. Their experiences are documented in a corpus of interviews entitled the “Israel-Korpus: Emigrantendeutsch in Israel”, mainly researched and conducted by Professor Anne Betten of the University of Salzburg between 1989 and 1994 in Israel.¹⁹

What particularly surprised me about these interviewees was that, despite having lived in Israel for many decades, the Jeckes had maintained a high level of competence in German. In order to be able to understand the linguistic experience of the Kindertransportees, in my research project I adopted a similar methodology to Betten’s: I collected extended (narrative) interviews concentrating on what learning a new language had meant for the Kinder, both on the narrower linguistic level and on a wider cultural level. This perspective can be developed by using one of the biographical approaches common in multilingualism research – language biographies.

Language biographies are accounts of an individual’s language development across their lifespan.²⁰ Thinking and speaking about their linguistic development or “upbringing” can help people to identify the role that different varieties of the same language play in their lives, about particular events that might have influenced their attitudes. Language biographies also emphasize the importance of what Brigitta Busch calls *Spracherleben*, which she has translated as the “lived experience of language”.²¹ The concept refers to “The question . . . [of] how linguistic variation can serve to construct belonging or difference, and above all, how such constructions can be experienced by speakers as exclusions or inclusions due to language.”²²

The English linguist Patrick Stevenson in his study about multilingualism in Berlin puts the concept of *Spracherleben* in a broader historical

19 Anne Betten, “Israel-Korpus: Emigrantendeutsch in Israel”, archived and accessible online at the Datenbank für Gesprochenes Deutsch, Institut für Deutsche Sprache, Mannheim, <http://dgd.ids-mannheim.de> (accessed 1 June 2019).

20 See Brigitta Busch, *Mehrsprachigkeit* (Vienna: Facultas WUV, 2013); Rita Franceschini, ed., “Sprache und Biographie”, *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 160 (2010).

21 Brigitta Busch, “Expanding the Notion of the Linguistic Repertoire: On the Concept of *Spracherleben* – the Lived Experience of Language”, *Applied Linguistics* 38, no. 3 (June 2017): 340–58.

22 *Ibid.*, 342.

perspective: “Understanding someone’s lived experience of language means exploring the effects of language on their own unique life (hi)story, but this also entails identifying the many external pressures that constrain and shape this (hi)story and the ways in which it can be constructed and told”.²³

In 2017 I gathered forty-two interviews with former German-speaking refugees in the UK, of which twenty-four were with Kindertransportees. These were published in February 2019 in my *Gerettet: Berichte von Kindertransport und Auswanderung*.²⁴ The duration of the interviews varies between 45 and 170 minutes; although they focus primarily on the refugees’ linguistic background, the questions posed cover the whole range of their experiences, including education, language, culture, and everyday life, and the answers cover much more than the language question on which I want to concentrate here.

At the time of migration to the UK, mainly in 1939, the average age of the interviewees was between eight and twelve years (four were younger, nine were older). They came from the whole German-speaking area and just over half came from the capitals of Germany and Austria: eight from Berlin and five from Vienna.

German was the language of most of the interviews. Since I was interested in the degree of language maintenance,²⁵ the choice of German as the language of the interviews was important. When first contacted, many of the interviewees expressed doubts about whether they could still speak German well enough to be interviewed in it. The common answer was “My English is that of the child I was when I left Germany”, but it turned out not to be a child’s German when they spoke to me.

The interviews showed that in fact most of the participants had little or no real difficulty in speaking and recounting their experiences in German on a conversational level. There were of course longer than normal pauses (hesitation) due to word searches (and word suggestions from the interviewer could occur); indeed, in some interviews switching between German and English (code-switching) occurred frequently. A few interviewees accepted being questioned in German but preferred to answer in English; only four interviews are completely in English. The

23 Patrick Stevenson, *Language and Migration in a Multilingual Metropolis: Berlin Lives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 78.

24 Eva-Maria Thüne, *Gerettet: Berichte von Kindertransport und Auswanderung* (Berlin and Leipzig: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2019).

25 For more on this aspect see *ibid.*

interviews are to become part of the Archive for Spoken German (Archiv für Gesprochenes Deutsch) of the Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache in Mannheim.

Concerning their knowledge of English before the interviewees came to Great Britain, most of them (61%) stated that they did not have any; others (22%) said they had very little. This amounts to 83% (more than four fifths of the total), as compared to 6% who claimed to have had a good knowledge and 11% a medium one. For the vast majority of these children, then, learning the new language was one of the most important challenges they had to face on arrival.

Discussion of examples

In this section I shall discuss some examples, focusing in more detail on the central question of the English learning experience. The examples are intended to provide more insight into certain aspects of the language learning process and also to show how linguistic competence has a direct influence on the development of a cultural identity and more generally of a personal one. (Since the question of identity is central, we shall return to it in the penultimate section.)

The majority of my interview partners – like those in the books I discussed earlier – have no clear recollection of how they acquired English: most say that it just “happened” in a very short time and they became fluent speakers. Example 1 shows this clearly:

Example 1: I presume I had to learn English

ET: Do you remember how you learned English?

JR: At school. I presume I had to. There wasn't anybody at school who spoke German. Children at that age learn very, very quickly and forget very quickly. [John Ruppin, aged six when he came to the UK]²⁶

The speaker summarizes the predominant experience among children who were very young (under six or seven years old). At this early age and even later, learning a language is perceived as a natural process without any potential conflicts on the linguistic level.

Example 2: Peers as language teachers. The interviewee gives more insight about the linguistic “baggage” with which the Kinder arrived:

ET: You came to England and did you already know a little English?

26 Interview in English, translated into German in *ibid.*, 170.

FD: No word. In middle school one learned English from 14 or 16 on. We learned French [until then]. That was completely useless. . . . [In England] I was simply sent out to play with the children from the neighbourhood. They had a lot of fun and began by teaching me swear words. But that was a very good way. . . .

ET: So you learned a bit of English with the children from the neighbourhood?

FD: [laughs] Yes. A bit. We started with five words. I had to . . . learn very very quickly. School started in September and I arrived in June. I cannot say that I had difficulties with language at school.

ET: Sie kamen nach England und konnten Sie schon etwas Englisch?

FD: Kein Wort. Bei der Realschule lernte man Englisch ab 14 oder 16. Wir lernten Französisch. Das war total nutzlos. . . . Ich wurde einfach rausgeschickt, mit den Nachbarskindern zu spielen. Die hatten großen Spaß mir die Fluchwörter zuerst zu lernen. Aber das war ein sehr guter Weg. . . . ET: Da hatten sie dann schon sozusagen zusammen mit den Nachbarkindern ein bisschen Englisch gelernt? FD: [lacht] Ja, ein bisschen gelernt. Wir fingen ja mit fünf Worten an. Ich musste . . . sehr, sehr schnell lernen. Die Schule fing im September an und ich kam im Juni. Ich kann nicht sagen, dass ich Schwierigkeiten hatte mit der Sprache in der Schule. [Francis Deutsch, aged thirteen at the time of migration]²⁷

There are at least three interesting points: first, the interviewee talks about a lack of previous knowledge from school in Austria due to a language teaching tradition in which French was the only modern language taught, in most secondary schools.²⁸ This could be one explanation – among others – for the overall high percentage of Kinder of a certain age without knowledge of English. Second, teaching English was in many cases the responsibility of teachers in hostels and/or schools or of the foster families themselves, who were often not prepared for this difficult task. But there is another group that helped in the learning process – the peer group, British children with whom the Kinder came into contact and with whom they frequently played. These children often acted as language teachers, while also providing valuable advice about the norms of communication. Third, the fact that the learning process was remembered as quick suggests that there is no real memory of the individual steps involved. In fact, acquiring

²⁷ Ibid., 174.

²⁸ See Friederike Klippel, “Fremdsprachenunterricht (19./20. Jahrhundert)”, last modified 2007, [www.historisches-lexikon-bayerns.de/Lexikon/Fremdsprachenunterricht_\(19./20._Jahrhundert\)](http://www.historisches-lexikon-bayerns.de/Lexikon/Fremdsprachenunterricht_(19./20._Jahrhundert)) (accessed 1 June 2019).

a language is a mixture of conscious learning on the one hand and training – the development of physical skills (articulatory habits for instance) – on the other.

The perceived speed of the learning process may be connected with another aspect, the concept of the “lived experience of language” (*Spracherleben*) that Busch proposes. I suggest this connection because Busch’s idea is based on the phenomenology of perception (as developed by Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) and casts light on the often neglected bodily and emotional dimensions of experience and speech: “Merleau-Ponty makes a terminological distinction between the physical body [*corps physique*] as an object that is observable and measurable, and the living body [*corps vivant*] as the subject of perception, feeling, experience, action, and interaction.”²⁹ This distinction can explain something about the ambiguity with which many interviewees judge the rapidity of the learning process: on a cognitive level they judge it as positive, because it opens up a new competence in their general behaviour. At the same time they admit to a sensation of being overwhelmed by something that seems not to be completely under their control or fully understandable. It is arguably this that accounts for the ambiguity in their perception (compare Gershon’s example iii above). This will become clearer in the examples that follow.

Example 3: English pronunciation. As already illustrated, correct pronunciation was perceived to be one of the key objectives in the learning of English, since this is necessary if a person is to be accepted as a full member of the language community. In order to achieve this, certain physical habits have to be developed. In Example 3a the speaker remembers the actual learning procedure, which involved training of lip movements. At the time she thought this was nonsense but with hindsight she came to appreciate the usefulness of these exercises and actually felt protected by not having a recognizable German accent.

Example 3a:

ET: At a certain point [in your book] you explain how you acquired the right pronunciation.

RB: We had to hold a mirror in order to move the mouth in the right way with the sounds. At the time I thought it was nonsense. But with hindsight it is true that we don’t have a German accent. And that protected us.

29 Busch, “Expanding the Notion”, 350.

ET: Du beschreibst an einer Stelle, wie ihr die richtige Aussprache gelernt habt. RB: Wir haben einen Spiegel halten müssen, um den Mund zu den richtigen Lauten zu bewegen. Zu der Zeit dachte ich, es war Blödsinn. Aber im Rückblick war es so, dass wir keinen deutschen Akzent haben. Und das hat uns geschützt. [Ruth Barnett, aged four at the time of migration]³⁰

Pronunciation, like many aspects of language learning, involves not only the ability to produce certain vowels, consonants, and also intonation patterns as accurately as possible but depends first and foremost on perception in order to recognize them.

The following example will help to understand the ambiguity involved in the learning process.

Example 3b:

ET: How was it for you at the beginning? You didn't know any English.

RD: Oh, it was terrible, really bad. I thought that I would never learn English. It was such a stupid language. "Harwich", how can you pronounce something like this? Crazy. I was intelligent enough to know that this didn't work at all.

ET: So, pronunciation was a problem.

RD: Yes. I think I was equally intelligent, if not more, than the others. But I wanted to say it right. All the others just spoke, they just picked it up. I wanted to know why you say it like this.

ET: Did they explain it to you?

RD: No, nobody. I had to learn it on my own. In school they had been very nice to us, but there were too many of us.

ET: Wie war das für Sie am Anfang? Sie hatten ja überhaupt kein Englisch.

RD: Oh, es war schrecklich, ganz schlimm. Ich dachte, dass ich nie Englisch lernen würde. Das war so eine dumme Sprache. "Harwich" wie kann man sowas so aussprechen? Verrückt. Ich war intelligent genug zu wissen, dass das überhaupt nicht geht. ET: Also, die Aussprache war ein Problem. RD: Ja. Ich glaub, ich war genauso intelligent, if not more, wie die anderen. Aber ich wollte es richtig sagen, die anderen haben alle gesprochen, die haben alles so aufgenommen. Ich wollte wissen, warum man das so sagt. ET: Hat man es Ihnen erklärt? RD: Nein, niemand. Das musste ich selber lernen. In der Schule waren sie sehr nett und lieb zu uns, aber es waren zu viele in der Schule. [Ruth David, aged ten at the time of migration]³¹

30 Ibid., 176.

31 Ibid., 162-3.

This example is interesting on the text level, because the narrator develops two different perspectives: there is the narrator from today who expresses her judgement about the initial feeling of being without a language (“Oh, it was terrible, really bad. I thought that I would never learn English”). At the same time there is the perspective of the girl (ten at the time) who expresses her feelings using the exact words from the time (“‘Harwich’, how can you pronounce something like this? Crazy”). Often in oral narrations and especially in biographical interviews the overlapping of different “voices” occurs.³² This can happen at moments when a vivid memory comes back to the narrator and stands out as a specific episodic element in the overall mnemonic reconstruction.

From the point of view of the lived experience of the language, what the speaker expresses here is clearly her frustration as a schoolchild: she wanted to understand but nobody explained it to her and this left her with a feeling of loneliness in this struggle for understanding.

Language and identity

After these memories of Kindertransportees about their situation as regards English at or shortly after the moment of their arrival in the UK, I want to concentrate on one individual case to illustrate what the language learning experience or, better, the developing bilingualism means in terms of identity. The text I have chosen is the testimony of Bea Green in 2017: since she is among those who were also included in *I came Alone* (interviewed in 1980), it is possible to detect a development between her two accounts over a long timespan. Bea Green, aged fourteen on arrival in the UK remembers in *I came Alone* the first day at school: “I want to go to school. I haven’t been since Kristallnacht. So I am allowed to go next day. I am wearing my dirndl and am stared at. The headmistress ba[u]lks at my name: Beate. Did I have another? I suggest the other two but she decides on ‘Bay-ar-tar’.”³³ This narration is a clear example of the initial feeling of being different, because of the traditional Bavarian dirndl Green was wearing but also because of her name. Being called by one’s name is one of the moments in which an individual is strongly connected with one’s

32 See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics” (1937–38), in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84–254.

33 Leverton and Lowensohn, *I came Alone*, 130.

identity. This is even more so for children or adolescents. From the point of view of language, Green concentrates on a typical identity-linked problem of migrants, her difficult German name. For some Kinder (and many other migrants) this was later one of the main reasons that they changed their names to more “English” ones.

In the interview with me in London in April 2017, Bea Green retold the same episode from a slightly different perspective:

And this was the end of June. And I said: please could I go to school. No, it's not worthwhile, there are only two weeks left. Please, I want to go to school. So, they forbade me to go to school. And that made me want to go even more. She [her foster mother] must have spoken with the headmistress who said, ok, these last days she can come without paying to get used to it. And obviously all of them had their school uniform on and I arrived with my dirndl. But it was ok.

And I remember quite clearly being there. It was a small class with only eight children. It was a private school, nothing special. But I still remember that I said to myself: I will master this language. This sentence has stuck into my head: I will master this language. *And I got it. I love English.*

Und dann das war also in Ende Juni. Und da hab ich noch gesagt: Kann ich bitte in die Schule gehen. Na, das lohnt sich net, das sind jetzt nur noch zwei Wochen. Bitte, bitte kann ich in die Schule gehen. Also man hat mir verboten, in die Schule zu gehen. Und deshalb wollte ich unbedingt in die Schule gehen. Ich bin also, hat sie gesagt, hat sie wahrscheinlich mit der headmistress gesprochen und die hat gesagt, ja sie kommt umsonst, ein paar Tage lang, um sich daran zu gewöhnen. Und die haben natürlich alle diese Schuluniformen gehabt und ich bin mit meinem Dirndl hingekommen. Ging auch. Ich weiß noch genau, wie ich da war. Es war eine kleine Klasse nur acht Kinder. Also es ist eine Privatschule, nichts Interessantes. Aber ich weiß noch, ich hab mir gesagt: Ich werde diese Sprache bemeistern. Der Satz ist in meinem Kopf geblieben: Ich werde diese Sprache bemeistern. *And I got it. I love English.*³⁴

Bea Green focuses on the first day at school and again mentions her dress, the dirndl, but this time she makes a point of saying that the others had a school uniform. From a linguistic point of view, there is a fundamental difference between the first version and the second: the first is in the present tense, which recalls the event as if it is happening, whereas the second version is presented in the past tense, as recollections usually are.

What is striking from the point of view of language biography is the

34 Thüne, *Gerettet*, 165.

emphasis that Green gives to a sort of transformative moment: the language learning process is suddenly no longer passive, the learner participating in a passive way; rather, Green's narration focuses on a profound moment of change, when a new but deep motivation and commitment crystallizes.³⁵ Linguistically this is highlighted by at least four points: first, the use of the first metaphor – *diese Sprache bemeistern* (“master this language”) – which may be a reaction to an underlying sense of being powerless; second, the repetition of the sentence *Ich werde diese Sprache bemeistern* (“I will master this language”); third, the use of the second metaphor, *Der Satz ist in meinem Kopf geblieben* (“The sentence remained in my head”), in which the head is seen as a container in which important information is kept throughout one's life; last, the code-switching into English, which underlines the performative aspect of the memory.

This all shows how this moment of change – in which Green not only tries to adapt but consciously makes a decision – becomes a key memory in her language biography and can be connected with a general reflection about Green's construction of identity. In *I came Alone*, Green makes this statement: “BG: My home is here now; I even feel English, Anglaise, Inglesa, when I'm abroad. I've been back to Munich and I cannot honestly say that I feel German. And yet . . . there is that little trace of homesickness and I don't know what for.”³⁶ This can be compared with part of the interview from 2017:

BG: I was able to adapt quite well. For me it was fine, that I once was a Bavarian girl. But that now I am British. And to this day I still describe myself as a Bavarian Jewish Brit. I am all these three. It suits me. Why not?

ET: German is part of your identity?

BG: *Of course*. Funnily enough I never call myself German, because it's Bavarian I am fond of.

BG: Ich hab mich ganz gut eingewöhnt. Mir war es ganz recht, dass ich mal ein bayrisches Mädels war. Aber dass ich jetzt britisch bin. Heute noch beschreibe ich mich als Bavarian Jewish Brit. Ich bin alle diese drei. Es passt mir. Warum nicht? ET: Das Deutsche gehört zu Ihrer Identität? BG: Of course. Deutsch nenn ich mich nie komischerweise, weil mir Bairisch irgendwie am Herzen liegt.³⁷

35 See Charlotte Burck, *Multilingual Living: Explorations of Language and Subjectivity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

36 Leverton and Lowensohn, *I came Alone*, 130.

37 Thüne, *Gerettet*, 269.

The difference between the earlier statement in *I came Alone* and the later one lies mainly in the fact that in 1980 Green called herself British – when she was abroad – but nevertheless seemed to feel a certain homesickness, although she cannot specify for what. In the second quotation this attitude has changed: Green specifies that she does not call herself German but Bavarian – an interesting difference both linguistically and culturally – but now she mentions together three different aspects of her identity, and so ends up reconciling them to some degree. This becomes possible through a profound process of mediation during her life, which gives a place to each part of her identity.

Final remarks

Let me come back to Busch's concept of the "lived experience of language" (*Spracherleben*): the examples here are intended to suggest an explanation for this phenomenon which is connected to language perception, the attribution of values to a language through the constructions of language ideologies (what is a good and what is a bad language). In her conceptualization of the linguistic repertoire, Busch in fact does not see the speaker as an (independently acting) individual but as a subject formed through – and in – language and discourse. Consequently, her conception of the language repertoire is not something the individual possesses "but [has] formed and deployed in intersubjective processes located on the border between the self and the other. This is precisely why I attach a crucial significance to the concept of the lived experience of language".³⁸

If a speaker continues to perceive his or her accent as problematic in a given language community, they may think they do not belong, while feeling that their *Spracherleben* is weighed down with a negative element that comes not only from their personal competence but also from the perception and interaction with the language community in which they are living. The testimonies of the Kindertransportees – although in general they are full of gratitude and positive accounts about the whole experience of rescue from persecution – provide substantial support for this. In their accounts (as we have already seen) they mention many situations that pertain to the lived experience of language, a range of different feelings including joy, pride, shame, anger, or fear.

In her *Trauma and Attachment in the Kindertransport Context*, Guske came

38 Busch, "Expanding the Notion", 346.

to the conclusion that: “Language acquisition and attrition had . . . been shrugged off as a relatively minor issue by the Kinder I had talked to. Accordingly, they did not muster much interest in the topic, since they were not convinced that a study of linguistic process would yield results that would find practical applications in the here and now and benefit present and future generations of unaccompanied child refugees.”³⁹ This tendency can also still be perceived – at least to some extent – in the interviews I conducted and also in other collections of interviews⁴⁰ but, given that the language question is directly connected with questions of identity, the examples here show that for some of the Kindertransportees it has had a lifelong importance.

The acquisition of English meant that German became, for many of the Kinder I have interviewed, a heritage language, but it was by no means an ordinary or straightforward heritage language. At least, it is not like the ones we find in classic cases such as Italian, among Italians who have established themselves in the United States.

Some of the Kinder ended up accepting bilingualism – that they were speakers not just of English but also of German. But for many this acceptance came only at the end of a long process during which they carefully observed the evolution of postwar Germany and in some cases reconstructed their identity in the light of it. This reconstruction happened on a greatly enlarged scale after 1989, which was the date of the First Reunion of the Kinder in Britain and also, of course, of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The reunification of Germany indeed spurred many German cities to take an interest in the Kinder, invite them back to Germany, and build a cultural, even linguistic, bridge towards them.

What is the lesson from all this for the migrations that we see around us today? The narrations of the Kinder seen from the point of view of language and cultural repertoire point up a number of key situations that present parallels with what migrant children of today might go through. The experiences of the Kinder can serve to establish a sort of knowledge base consisting of crucial moments for migrants, such as situations that lead to a sense of exclusion, or of being laughed at, misunderstandings, a sensation of being powerless, but also to moments of profound change, of resilience, and the gradually dawning awareness that aspects of

39 Guske, *Trauma and Attachment*, 48.

40 Malet and Grenville, *Changing Countries*.

one's personal experience that seem to be in tension or even in conflict – traumatic, in other words – can in fact co-exist or even be reconciled at least in part.