

# A Scottish Child's View of the War

In the summer of 1939, Hamish Cameron, who lived with his Mum, Dad and sister Elspeth in Ayr, remembers having a foreboding sense that war would come:

**"Even I, as a child, knew that war was coming despite optimistic newspaper headlines... we had been issued with gas masks fairly recently".**

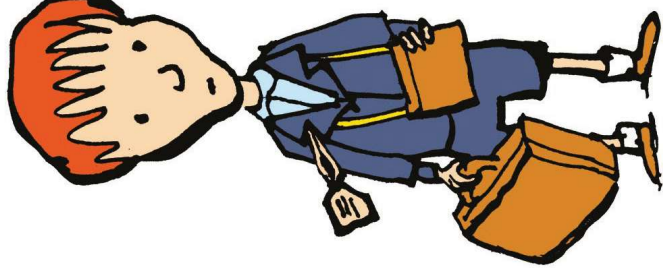
## Child Evacuation: Operation Pied Piper

One of the most emotionally wrenching decisions made by the British government during WW2 was its decision to evacuate (move away) infants and children living in some British cities to protect them from the risk of German bomb attacks. Parents prepared their children for the long journey to the countryside by equipping them with a list of supplies such as a warm coat, overnight clothes, hairbrush, blanket, and some food for the journey (although not all parents could afford to do so). Every evacuee was given a label showing their name, address, date of birth and their school. Children were accompanied by a guardian, usually their teacher, who travelled with them to a reception centre in a new town.

Nearly 170,000 Scottish schoolchildren were evacuated from the crowded city centres of Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee and the naval ports of Rosyth and Clydebank, where the shipyards and munitions factories, crucial to the war effort were key targets.

## 'I'll take that one', Evacuee host parent

New arrivals were asked to line up against a wall or stage in the village hall and potential hosts were invited to take their pick. The phrase, "I'll take that one" became a statement indelibly etched in countless children's memories. Children's experiences of evacuation were mixed: for some it was a life-enhancing adventure, while others were homesick. In some cases, evacuees were brutally mistreated by their host parent.



### **Glasgow Evacuees arrive in Ayr**

In September 1939 Hamish recalls seeing child evacuees from Glasgow arriving at Ayr Academy:

// We looked at long lines of children, evacuated from Glasgow, streaming along Fort Street. They were walking from the railway station to Ayr Academy, which was a reception centre. From there evacuees were distributed amongst families in Ayr. I remember being appalled by the sight of those children. All were carrying bundles and, of course, gas masks, but many of them, to us, looked dirty and many appeared to be in rags. We were not rich and wore patched jerseys and shorts, but that was my first glimpse of real poverty. Years later I learned that they came from some of the worst slums of Glasgow where conditions were beyond our imaginations. //

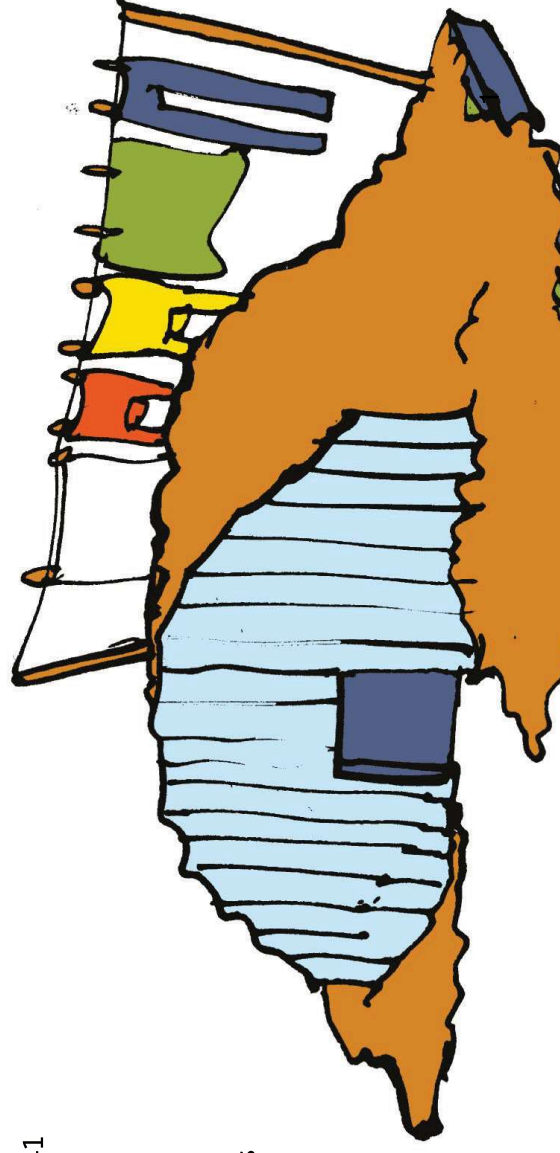
### **The Greenock Blitz**

In his account, Hamish also describes his family's experience of the 1941 Greenock Blitz:

// I remember the first air raid quite clearly because we were wakened by Granny and told to get our dressing gowns on and get downstairs quickly. All lights, of course, were out. Even though the thick blackout curtains would not let a chink out during the raid you took no chances and used only torches. We joined the others on the lower part of the stairs, which was considered the safest part of the house as, at that

particular part, there were two walls on either side, and that is where Granny and Grandpa were a year later when they were bombed out, and which probably saved them. We sat on the stairs for several hours, mostly in the dark. We played word games and invented tortures to inflict on Hitler. Even then, in the darkest days of the war, we never doubted for a minute that we would win.

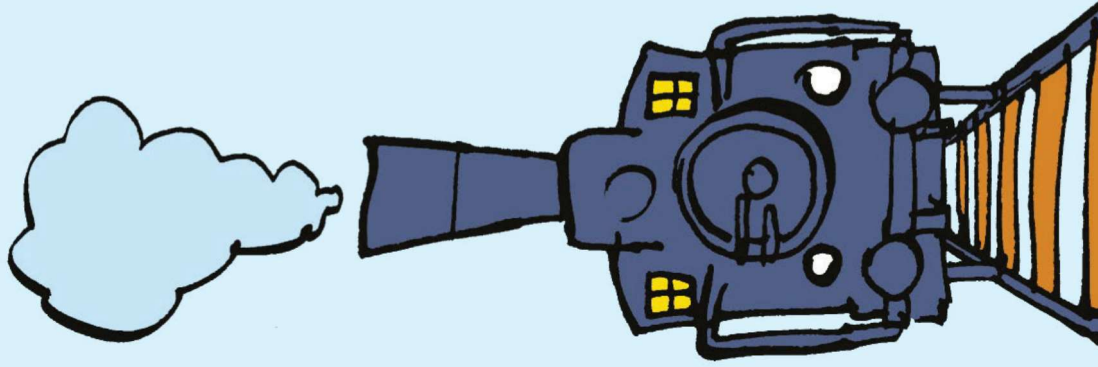
One night I woke up and went downstairs to find Mum in the dark, with the blackout shutters open standing at the sitting room window looking out at the red glow in the sky. I knew how dangerous it was to stand at a window during a raid so I knew she must be worried. I remember her putting her hand on my shoulder and saying "Some poor souls are getting it bad tonight". I could see the great glow in the sky which, as we discovered later, was Greenock burning. //



# The Kindertransport

The Kindertransport (German for 'children's transport') was a rescue effort that helped 10,000 mainly Jewish children escape from Adolf Hitler's reign of terror in Nazi-occupied countries in Europe.

This humanitarian rescue operation started in 1938, before WW2 broke out, bringing children from Czechoslovakia, Germany and Austria to the sanctuary of the UK. On 2nd December 1938, the first Kindertransport arrived in Harwich, England — 200 children from a Jewish orphanage that had been destroyed during 'Kristallnacht' (German for 'Crystal Night' or Night of the Broken Glass), when Nazis attacked Jewish people and destroyed property.



The late Sir Nicholas Winton, a British Jewish Stockbroker, was one of the key 'heroes' of the transports, who risked his life organising the rescue of 669 children destined for concentration camps. He organised foster families for Jewish children by placing adverts in newspapers. He and his team even persuaded British custom officials to accept children with incomplete documentation. Former MP, Lord Dubs, who was six years old when he escaped from Czechoslovakia on a Kindertransport train (one of eight trains that travelled across four countries), has described Sir Nicholas Winton as:

"...just one of those special human beings. His legacy is that when there is a need for you to do something for your fellow human beings, you have got to do it."

Some Jewish children travelled on from London to Glasgow on a train in May 1939. One of them was Henry Wuga, he says he was made to feel 'very welcome' by his host, an older Jewish lady. "Within a few weeks I was at school – Queen's Park School" (in the Battlefield area of Glasgow).

The children paid a high price for their freedom. Research by The Association of Jewish Refugees determined that over 50 per cent never saw either of their parents again with some losing their entire families.

## 🔗 Activities

- 1 Write a VE Day diary account imagining you are Hamish or his sister Elspeth. What did they do on VE Day when it finally happened? Do they remember their Mum and Dad dancing around the kitchen? Did they listen to Churchill's 3pm speech on the radio/wireless set?
2. What must it have been like to have been on the Kindertransport? Imagine you had to leave your country and your family as a young child. Write a letter to your parents describing your journey.
- 3 Interview a member of your community who was a child during WW2. Might they have been a child evacuee? If so, where did they go to live during WW2? Do they remember the Greenock Blitz of 1941? What are their most vivid memories of being a child during WW2?

## 📖 Reading ideas

Many classic novels were inspired by the experiences of WW2 child evacuees. Some authors, like **Nina Bawden**, (author of **Carrie's War**) had themselves experienced evacuation.

**Michael Bond's Paddington Bear** (1958) is about an orphan bear found by a family at Paddington railway station in London, sitting on his suitcase with a note attached to his coat that reads: "Please look after this bear. Thank you."

In **C.S. Lewis's novel The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe** (1950) the Pevensie children are evacuated from London to the stately manor that contains the wardrobe portal to Narnia.

**William Golding's novel Lord of the Flies** (1954) is about a plane full of child evacuees who are shot down over a tropical island.

**Goodnight Mister Tom** by **Michelle Magorian** focuses on a young boy, Willie Beech, who is evacuated to the countryside and grows in confidence due to the care of old Mister Tom.



Credit: Scottish Child's View of WW2, words of Hamish Cameron, from WW2 People's War. WW2 People's War is an online archive of wartime memories contributed by members of the public and gathered by the BBC. The archive can be found at [bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/04/g9900004.shtml](http://bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/04/g9900004.shtml)