

Laudatio for Judith Kerr

Dear Judith Kerr,

Such a familiar address from a complete stranger may not be quite what you would expect on so formal an occasion, but then to me you do not feel like a complete stranger. Nor, I suspect, do many in our audience think of you as such. For we feel that we know you. Many of us will long ago have made your acquaintance: some by reading *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* and the other volumes of your entrancing semi-autobiographical trilogy, and others, the younger ones, by reading your delightful children's stories, or, those more advanced in years, by reading your stories to their children or grandchildren. So it is that you enjoy such an unusual degree of affection among this audience – and far beyond.

This evening we are celebrating the award to you of honorary membership of the Gesellschaft für Exilforschung (Society for Exile Studies). It is as a writer who was herself a refugee and who turned her experience as a refugee into much loved works of literature that we are honouring you. It is appropriate that this celebration is taking place at the Wiener Library, founded by Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany as far back as 1933 and the oldest repository in the world for materials relating to the refugee experience, to National Socialism and the Holocaust. It is a pleasure to thank the Wiener Library and its long-serving Director, Ben Barkow, for hosting this ceremony. It is also a pleasure to thank the Association of Jewish Refugees for its generous support for this occasion. The AJR, founded in 1941 to represent the Jewish refugees from Nazism in Britain, is still performing valuable services to its community three quarters of a century later, under its Chairman, Andrew Kaufman, and its Chief Executive, Michael Newman. Both the AJR and the Wiener Library have long been in the forefront of the commemoration of the former refugees from Nazi Germany and their history.

Judith Kerr is one of the many refugees who have made a notable contribution to British society in the field of culture and the arts. She was born Anna Judith Helene Kerr on 14 June 1923 to Alfred Kerr (originally Kempner) and his wife Julia (née Weismann), who then lived at Höhmannstraße 6, in the green and leafy Berlin suburb of Grunewald. The Kerrs also had a son, born two years earlier, who would go on to become Sir Michael Kerr, a brilliant barrister and the first foreign-born lawyer for some eight centuries to rise to the rank of Lord Justice of Appeal. The Kerr family lived in very comfortable circumstances, as Alfred Kerr was Germany's leading theatre critic, a unique stylist whose reviews, especially in the *Berliner Tageblatt*, made or broke reputations.

Kerr was not only Jewish, but also a longstanding critic of the Nazis. So it was that on 14 February 1933, two weeks after the Nazi assumption of power, he was warned by a police officer that his passport was about to be confiscated. Though ill with influenza, he packed a bag and fled to Czechoslovakia. On 5 March 1933, Julia and the children slipped across the border to Switzerland, where the family was reunited. They spent some months in Switzerland, before moving to Paris. Alfred Kerr loved Paris, but found it impossible to earn a living there as a refugee, as he had left his readership behind in Germany and there was no call for a German theatre critic in France (or, as it turned out, in Britain either). At the age of 65, Kerr was unable to re-skill himself for a new career and had to rely on what little he could earn by his pen. So began fifteen years of dire and humiliating poverty, of demoralising loss of status, public recognition and respect, and of the comforts of life that Kerr had enjoyed in Berlin.

In 1935, Kerr was offered what appeared to be a lifeline: a lucrative contract to write a film script for the great film director Alexander Korda. On the promise of that, Kerr and his wife left for London in late 1935; the children, who had been staying with Julia Kerr's parents in Nice to save money, followed in 1936. The family could afford no more than rooms in a hotel, a down-at-heel establishment called the Foyer Suisse at 12, Upper Bedford Place, Bloomsbury, inhabited largely by a motley array of disconsolate refugees. However, the Kerrs ensured that their children were well educated: Michael was sent to a public school, Aldenham, where he was happy and where he won a scholarship that relieved his parents of the need to pay school fees, while Judith went to Hayes Court School in Kent, where she was not happy, as a refugee girl singled out for her brains among the hockey-playing English girls.

The period between 1933 and 1936, the early years of the Kerr family's emigration, forms the background to *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*, published by Collins, now HarperCollins, in 1971. It marked a new phase in literary works about refugees; it is the best known of a group of autobiographically-based works, including Lore Segal's *Other People's Houses* and Eva Figes's *Little Eden*, that introduced their readers to the plight of the children among the refugees who fled from the Nazis after 1933. The book owes its worldwide success to its beautifully observed and sensitively conveyed portrayal of a refugee family trying to maintain itself in an unfamiliar and all too often uncaring environment. Though written from the perspective of Anna, a child, it appeals to a readership of both children and adults, since the latter are enabled by Judith Kerr's lucid and elegant prose to gain insight from little Anna's observations into the underlying emotional dynamics within the family, their precarious position as refugees on the margins of society and the severe limitations of their material and cultural situation.

The second volume of the trilogy, *The Other Way Round*, published in 1975 and since reissued under the title *Bombs on Aunt Dainty*, covers the wartime years in Britain and shows how the children, by now adolescents, can adapt to their new situation while their parents cannot. The burden of care gradually passes from the parents to the children, as implied by the original title. After the first payment he received from Alexander Korda, Alfred Kerr never earned another significant sum of money before he died in 1948, on a visit to Hamburg. The role of breadwinner fell on Julia Kerr, who spoke good English, unlike her husband, and who was able to earn a modest income from secretarial work, demeaning and frustrating though that was. Like her fictional counterpart Anna, Judith Kerr was also restricted to such jobs as were open to 'enemy aliens', the wartime designation for those formerly of German nationality, in her case a dead-end position with a dull but worthy wartime charity. Michael Kerr, however, won a scholarship to Clare College, Cambridge, where he was studying law when, in May 1940, he was interned on the Isle of Man, as part of the government's ill-conceived policy of detaining all 'enemy aliens' for security reasons.

The internment of Michael Kerr marked a low point in the family's years in Britain. But when a letter from Julia Kerr was passed on by the editor of the *Evening Standard* to the Home Secretary, Michael was released. He went on to join the RAF, becoming a pilot and an officer. For all its privations, the wartime period played a key role in the gradual integration of the Kerr family, especially the younger generation, into British society. When they were bombed out of the Foyer Suisse, Alfred Kerr was almost glad to have shared in the hardships that the war inflicted on the British civilian population, proud to have faced the trials of war alongside the rest of the population of London and to have become part of the dogged resistance of the British people to Hitler. Admiration for the spirit of ordinary British people at war pervades Judith Kerr's depiction of her wartime years. It was also during the war that she commenced her studies at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, which was to lead on to her first career as an illustrator, a career that she continued to pursue alongside her writing.

In 1954, Judith Kerr married the screenwriter Nigel Kneale, best remembered for the *Quatermass* series on BBC TV in the 1950s, which had its audience cowering behind their drawing-room sofas. Kneale also contributed to the artistic resurgence of the later 1950s in Britain, co-writing the screenplays for the film versions of John Osborne's epoch-making dramas *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer*, the latter with Laurence Olivier. The Kerrs settled in Barnes, where Judith Kerr still lives, and had two children, Matthew and Tacy. Nigel Kneale encouraged Judith Kerr to write. In the late 1960s, she began to publish the illustrated children's stories that have earned her legions of devoted fans across the world. First came *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* (1968), followed by *Mog the*

Forgetful Cat (1970), the first of the eighteen illustrated books chronicling the (mis)adventures of this lovable, if accident-prone and somewhat obtuse feline.

In his study *The Hitler Emigrés*, Daniel Snowman claims to detect in the enigmatic visiting tiger a hint of the terror inspired by the Nazis in those who fled from them. I remain unconvinced by this interpretation. I see Judith Kerr's tiger as standing more in the tradition of British children's stories where animals act almost like humans, appearing so to speak as half walrus, half carpenter. That tradition goes back to Beatrix Potter, to Jemima Puddle-Duck and Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, as well as to Lewis Carroll, encompassing A.A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh and Michael Bond's Paddington Bear. In an article in February 1954 in the monthly journal of the Association of Jewish Refugees, then called *AJR Information*, Kenneth Ambrose (who was born Kurt Abrahamsohn in Stettin and had emigrated to Britain in 1936) pointed to the gentle, humane quality of the books that he was reading to his British-born children, by contrast with their gory German counterparts recounting the grisly fates of Struwwelpeter (Shock-Headed Peter) and Max and Moritz, to say nothing of the Grimms.

Judith Kerr's tiger has just that hint of mystery, that frisson of the unknown to appeal to young children; he is not merely a bouncing bundle of energy, like A.A. Milne's Tigger, nor on the other hand does he have the fearful symmetry of William Blake's Tyger, stalking the forests of our nights. Judith Kerr's tiger is not overtly threatening; he knocks politely at the door of Sophie's family's home and displays his manners as he sits down at table. But he devours all the food in the house ravenously and drinks the water tank dry, so Sophie cannot have her evening bath, whether to her regret or her relief we are not told. Finally, although Sophie's mother lays in a stock of tiger food, he never returns. The tiger remains a mystery, his story an indication to children that there may exist a world beyond the mundane world of adults, a world that can be approached through the power of a child's imagination, a world where the normal rules of everyday life are suspended in playful wonder. After all, if one can have cat food or dog food, why should there not be an imaginative space for tiger food?

The humanity that informs Judith Kerr's stories reflects, at least in part, her view of her adopted homeland, Britain. In a recent interview with *ZEITmagazin*, she repeatedly emphasised the qualities of helpfulness, courtesy and generosity that she encountered in Britain, especially during the war. Though her parents spoke English with a strong German accent while the bombs were falling all around them, no one, she recalled, ever said an unfriendly word to them. When her parents wished to send her to friends in the country to escape the bombing, a journey that she, as an 'enemy alien' had to report to the local police station, she objected, concerned that she would not be able to contact her parents if the worst happened. Hearing this, a policeman told her to go, promising her

that he would 'keep an eye' on her parents and would telephone her if anything happened. 'Judith Kerr', commented *ZEITmagazin*, 'das ist eindeutig, ist verliebt in England. Wer ihr zuhört, dem fällt wieder ein, dass die *Britishness* noch eine andere Seite hat als die paranoide, von der in den letzten Jahren die Rede war.' A reassuring tribute at a time of huge strain in relations between Britain and its European neighbours.

Instead of ending on a political note, I would like to conclude with a tribute to another of the foundations of the young Judith Kerr's life, her close and loving relationship with her father, as depicted in one of his poems. Its title is taken from the greeting that she spoke when she came into his room every evening on her return from work. I discovered the poem through Deborah Vietor-Engländer, Alfred Kerr's biographer.

'Bonsoir Papa.' Das Glück tritt in mein Zimmer,/ Ein liebes Leuchten hat mein Herz erhellt;/ Dein Auge lacht; ein lustig-leichter Schimmer/ Liegt auf der Welt./ Im Wirrsal dieses irren Erdenballes/ Ging doch das eine Labsal nicht zugrund:/ 'Bonsoir Papa' – das liebt ich über alles/ In deinem Mund./ Und, süße Puppi, dieses ist mein Wille:/ Bald bin ich fern, den ewigen Schatten nah,/ Ruf es noch einmal in die große Stille:/ 'Bonsoir, Papa.'

Anthony Grenville