

I was three, making the journey alone': Ursula Kantorowicz travels on the Kindertransport, 1939

My family spent weeks getting together permits and visas. The idea was to send me to England to live with my uncle. I was born in July 1935 in Reichenbach, Germany, into a wealthy family. The family textile firm, Cohn Gebrüder, was established in 1876 by my great-grandfather, Herman and his brother Arnold. They had a huge factory in town; we lived opposite, in the Red Villa. It had parquet floors, stained-glass windows and central heating, which was a luxury back then.

The day after Kristallnacht, on 9 November 1938, my father and grandfather – along with other Jewish men in the town – were taken to Buchenwald concentration camp. My mother got them out by bribing officials with her jewellery. They returned with shaven heads and no shoelaces. At that point, the camps weren't as final as they became.

My family spent the next weeks getting together permits and visas. The idea was to send me to England on the Kindertransport to live with my uncle, Helmut Kantorowicz, his wife Berta, known as Putti, and his mother Regina – and for my parents to join me. My uncle emigrated in 1933; my father stayed behind as he didn't want to leave the family firm.

I left in February 1939, driven by the family chauffeur with my mother and nanny to Berlin. They put me on the train to Hamburg and from there I sailed to Southampton. Even though she was flying to England a few weeks later, it must have been awful for my mother, not knowing if she would see me again. It's impossible for me to remember how I felt, aged three, making that journey alone. But it must have been comforting having other children around me.

I have a copy of my list of possessions. It says, in German: "The child is wearing the following: vest, knickers, socks, shoes, over-shoes, bib, dress, small jacket, wellington boots, woolly hat, gloves (attached to coat), handkerchief." I was carrying more clothes and shoes in my rucksack and case, as well as "one doll and one toy dog".

My uncle met me in Southampton and took me home to London. My parents arrived three weeks later; my mother said I never left her side. My father was interned on the Isle of Man for a year, as a potential "enemy alien". He got early release because he said his mother was ill, which was only a little bit true.

We moved with my uncle and aunt to Hertfordshire a year later. My cousins were born, followed by my brother Steven in 1944. We spoke German at home, but it evolved into "Immigranto" – a bit of this, and a bit of that. My parents later rented a house nearby for us.

This picture appeared in the Southampton Daily Echo in February 1939. I have a transcript of the article: it says I was "the baby of the party". I've spent my life trying to trace the other girls – perhaps one will read this and get in touch.

My parents lost everything in the war. Our town is in Poland today, called Dzierzoniow; if it was in Germany, we would have got some restitution. My mother's parents, Leopold and Alice Heppner, didn't make it out of Germany – we never found out how or where they died. My mother never forgave my father for not helping them out.