

Helen Peters on Anna at War

In 2017, my husband, who is Headmaster of Roedean School in Brighton, returned from the school's Founders' Day commemoration and told me about an elderly woman who had introduced herself to him. Now in her nineties, she had come to show her gratitude to the school that had taken her in as a Jewish refugee from Europe just before the Second World War. She described how her father, as he put her on the train, had cut off her plaits, hoping that if she could pass as a boy then she would be safer.

"I travelled all the way to England," she said, "with my pigtails in my pockets."

We were both very moved by this, especially the sacrifice of the parents who sent their children away to safety, knowing they might never see them again, and the courage of the children as they travelled across Nazi-occupied Europe to start a new life with strangers.

I started to think about writing a story that would show how a child refugee comes to be in a situation where she has to leave her home and travel to safety in a foreign country. I began to research the Kindertransport, the coordinated rescue effort that brought ten thousand children, mostly Jewish, from Nazi-occupied Europe to Britain. I read a book called *...And the Policeman Smiled: 10,000 Children escape from Nazi Europe*, by Barry Turner. From this book, I discovered to my (and my husband's) surprise, that one of his relatives, Elaine Blond, was a leading organiser of the Kindertransport in England. From 1938 to 1948, Elaine Blond was a full-time volunteer with the Refugee Children's Movement at Bloomsbury House.

I was awed and moved by the courage of these children.

They managed to quickly learn English, settle into new schools and often excel academically and then in their chosen careers. They had to find a way to deal with the constant worry about their families while forging new lives for themselves.

As an English teacher, I spend a lot of time with girls of Anna's age who have travelled from Africa and Asia to board at Roedean. Although their situation is utterly different from Anna's, these girls also have to adapt to living thousands of miles away from their families in a culture with different food, customs and climate, all while studying in a very different school system in an unfamiliar language and trying to meet their parents' high expectations. I am in constant awe of their courage, cheerfulness and capacity for hard work.

As a child, I loved books in which children tackle huge problems using their own ingenuity and courage. I wanted Anna to be able to show her strength of character in an act of great daring and bravery. It took me a while to work out what that should be.

You'll have to read her story to find out.