

Kindertransport Fashion

I have been working on a cultural history of buttons, trying to discover why people seem reluctant to throw away a nondescript ordinary button tin, even when they are never likely to use them. Many of the buttons people showed me had pieces of fabric still attached, from a favourite overcoat, scraps of uniform shirt or even the remnants of a wedding dress with its satin-covered buttons stained with rust from their shanks, like old blood. Some were kept in an old suitcase or carrier bag, stuffed under a bed with a few items of clothing that somehow they could never quite discard.

One of the resources I used was the Imperial War Museum. There I came across examples of Kindertransport clothing. From October 1938 until August 1939 the British government accepted almost 10,000 unaccompanied refugee Jewish children, escaping Nazi persecution. What the children wore became for many the only tangible evidence of their past life. The children were dressed in the best clothes their parents or guardians could muster, the stoutest boots, the warmest coats sometimes many sizes too big to last them well, painstakingly embroidered and smocked shirts and dresses, hand-knitted sweaters. They were to keep them warm for the long and difficult journey across Europe and the Channel, but also perhaps to show their foster parents how dearly valued they were.

You will find a navy blue knitted dress, stiff with age, once worn by one Edith Glucksmann, with flowers embroidered on the yoke and sleeves and red floral buttons down the front opening, held in place by the crocheted edges. One begins to imagine the person who produced this garment: it is a complicated

pattern with lacework and intricate intarsia techniques. The flowers embroidered on the yoke in red, blue and white are cheerful daisies, pansies and edelweiss, reminding one of Heidi and the Tyrole. Did the maker already know that this child was to be sent away when it was decorated, their own future uncertain? It seemed as if in the stitches, in the minute choices of style, lay the evidence of one family history. A series of dolls' clothes, sewn by small hands reminded me of the dolls sewn by concentration camp survivors at Belsen. The miniature items of clothing seemed to heighten the pathos, with the dolls as both comforter and symbol of humanity. Ruth Sofie Hirsh, evacuated from Czechoslovakia, had donated her mother's wedding veil and wax flower diadem, as testament to that lost life. These modest items caught at the imagination.

Yet we understand that clothes should be glamorous, don't we? Elegant and most of all sexy. How could there be value in such tired relics? Style is ephemeral, a magical quality that we find within ourselves - providing, of course, we know how to get at it and what to do with it when we do. How come, even for those of us caught up in the lure of fashion, what we actually wear is often just plain disappointing? I may not be able to buy haute couture, but I can tell you what colour, skirt length, trouser leg, whether the salient mode is piratical, Russian ballet or space age zombie. Of course it is foolish to appear a slave to fashion, and the humiliation grows deeper with age - but neither would I want my clothes to betray me as ignorant.

Traditionally, in recent centuries at least, it is women who bear the brunt of this conundrum; getting dressed and our attitudes to clothes can be complicated and troubling. Today men too are increasingly drawn into the same

palaver, hoping to be noticed via clothes that represent them as more attractive, and so more powerful. Even trying to dress neutrally can seem an impossible task, for nothing that we wear seems impervious to the judgment of others. Catch sight of your reflection in a shop window, dressed to impress or just to fit in, and how few of us fail to flinch?

But these garments from the Kindertransport, and the clothes we collect in camera, hold a gentler significance that isn't to do with gender or status, and it calls on fashion quietly to beguile. Clothes embody memories; unflattering old clothes may delight and move us. To bag up the clothes of someone who has died can seem painfully intimate. We may find solace in the worn out, shapeless sweater of a lost lover; we hang on to an old scarf, just for nostalgia's sake, a sense that it embodies a more hopeful past, even when we have forgotten to whom it once belonged. It is as if the limp fabric, the knitting thickened in the wash, the rusted zip that jars, the button that no longer stay put, where old clothes begin to take on a value of their own.

Today when fashion moves faster than ever before in the West, aided by cheap labour and the capabilities of digital machinery and ordering techniques, the idea of a garment lasting for years, gradually gaining in our affections even as it frays and tears, might seem archaic. Some old clothes retain our affections; some seem important.

Such simple remnants as the Kindertransport clothing take on a near sacred quality given their provenance, but it is also important to remember their base value – in the comfort of ordinary things and in our tender relationship with the clothes with which we daily come into contact.