

SIMONE COTTRELL, ROYAL BOTANIC GARDEN SYDNEY



The Stolen Generations Memorial at the Australian Botanic Gardens.

A difficult era for children

Maria Hertogh was separated from a mother she loved, and she was forced to adapt to a new culture far away. She was not the only one. There were many other cases of unwilling children being taken from one place to another in those days.

When young Maria Hertogh's future was being decided in Singapore's High Court, every step of the process was big news. There were even film cameras at the airport in the Netherlands to capture her arrival there.

Her sad story was therefore very well-known. She had been separated from her birth parents, the Hertoghs, when she was five years old. For the next seven years, she was looked after by Aminah Mohamed, and grew

to love her second family deeply. Then, against her wishes, she was taken from Cik Aminah and sent to live with the Hertoghs in the Netherlands.

Sadly, at that same time, in other parts of the world, many other children — thousands, in fact — were forcibly taken from the families they loved. Unlike Maria's case, there were no public protests, no riots, no media attention. We only heard about those children's tragic stories years later.

Today, adults know that such stories are important reminders that when there are conflicts — whether over race, religion, or other differences — it is often children who are most cruelly affected.

Stolen generations

One of the most shocking examples of children being forced out of their homes happened in Australia, between 1910 and 1969. The government decided to take Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children away from their families. Aboriginal Australian is the term used to describe the native or indigenous peoples of Australia, while Torres Strait Islanders are from a group of islands located between Australia and Papua New Guinea.

Many white Australians — those of European heritage — believed they were superior to these brown-skinned natives. From the time the Europeans arrived, through most of the 20th century, Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders faced huge amounts of **discrimination**. They were not given the same rights as white Australians. Aboriginal Australians were not allowed to live with other Australians. Instead, they were placed on reserves or missions, which were often in remote corners of Australia's countryside.

Many white Australians believed that the best way to deal with the natives was **assimilation**: indigenous people should adopt "white Australian culture". In 1910, assimilation became part of Australian law. Indigenous children would be removed from their families. They would be adopted by white families while others were placed in government institutions.

Historians say that as many as one in three Aboriginal Australian children may have been taken from their families. This often resulted in lifelong suffering for the children and their families.

The indigenous children who were raised in institutions or by white families still faced endless discrimination. Indigenous people were not allowed into swimming pools or cinemas — that applied even to indigenous kids who had been adopted by white families. Abuse and neglect were common in the institutions. The indigenous children were often not educated properly either.

The children taken from their families came to be known as the Stolen Generations. While assimilation policies officially ended in 1969, their impact on the children and their families is still evident today.

Stopped from connecting with their own culture and heritage, many members of the Stolen Generations grew up with depression, anxiety, and other mental health struggles. Even their parents suffered in these ways. In addition, many of the Stolen Generations faced lifelong poverty.

In 2008, then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd expressed the Australian Government's regret for the "pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind".

Rescued generation

Children of the Stolen Generations were taken from their families by governments that discriminated against them. But elsewhere, children were sometimes sent away to save them from discrimination. They are refugees: forced to leave their homes to escape harm.

This was what happened to thousands of European children from 1938 to 1940. They were put on trains and ships to Britain as part of a bold plan known as "Kindertransport". (The word "kinder", like in "kindergarten", means children in German.) The plan was hatched by leaders in Britain when they saw the horrific way that Germany was treating Jews.

Germany was then under the control of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party. The Nazis had spent years spreading hateful lies against people of the Jewish faith, blaming them for Germany's economic problems. In November 1938, the Nazis took their hate campaign to a new level, launching violent attacks against Jewish homes, shops and offices, and places of worship. Thousands of Jews were rounded up and imprisoned in faraway camps. The Nazis did this not only in Germany but also in the Austrian and Czech territories they controlled.

Britain decided that it had to do something. The government announced that it would allow children under the age of 17 to enter from Nazi-controlled lands. But, the real work was done by volunteers. With assistance from Jewish groups in and around Germany, the British organised transportation for the children to Britain, where thousands of families and organisations welcomed the kids and looked after them.

The first Kindertransport arrived in Britain in early December 1938, with around 200 children. They were from a Jewish orphanage in Berlin that had been destroyed in the Nazi campaign.

The trips had to stop in May 1940, when German forces had taken over most of Europe. By then, around 10,000 children had been rescued in this manner, three-quarters of whom were Jewish.

Parents selflessly and willingly surrendered their children to Kindertransport volunteers, knowing that this was the best way to guarantee that their children would survive the Nazis' terrifying rule.

It must have been very difficult for the children to leave their family and friends behind, and then to have to learn a new language and adapt to different customs. But,

their parents and guardians were right to send them away to save their lives.

Their fate would probably have been much worse if they had stayed. The Nazis' persecution of Jews became more and more extreme. Before they were defeated in 1945, they had killed around 6 million Jews. It was the worst **genocide** in history.

Lessons from history

In Singapore, the High Court judge believed he was doing the right thing when he ordered that Maria be returned to her birth parents. But, some Muslims were convinced that the whole system was discriminating against their community when Cik Aminah, who was a Malayan Muslim, was forced to give up her beloved daughter to a European Christian family. The riots happened because some community leaders wanted to turn this private family dispute into a big show of protest against unfairness in colonial Singapore.

When we take a more global view, it is clear that Maria Hertogh's sad story was not completely unique. Bad things can happen when societies are divided, and children are often caught in between. Australia's Stolen Generations and the Jewish children of Nazi-controlled Europe were some of the worst victims of deep racial discrimination.

Fortunately, history also offers positive examples to inspire us. The Kindertransport mission, for example, came to the rescue of thousands of children who could have been killed in the genocide by the Nazi.

Decades later, governments of the world came together at the United Nations to declare the importance of protecting children. They came up with a new international agreement called the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which sets out

international standards on the provision for the rights of children. It declared that children “should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding” and be “protected against all forms of discrimination”. Singapore acceded to the UNCRC in 1995.

— By ZACHARY JOHN

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VOCAB BUILDER

discrimination (say “**dis**-kri-mi-nay-shen”; noun) = unfairly treating some people worse than others.

assimilation (say “e-**sim**-i-**lay**-shen”; noun) = the process of making someone become a part of a group.

genocide (say “**jen**-uh-syd”; noun) = a campaign to kill a large number of the members of an ethnic group in order to eliminate that group.

This story about child victims is part of a series about Maria Hertogh. The stories help us to understand why people can be unfair and even cruel to some children and their families. Only then can we figure out how to make the world a safer, more caring place for all people. For the full series, visit our website, www.more.whatsup.sg.