

AN INTERVIEW WITH EVE LEADBEATER: Why we must support refugee children.

Recently, I had the pleasure of interviewing Eve Leadbeater, along with her campaigning sidekick and husband, Allan. Eve is a refugee who travelled to Nottingham via the Kindertransport when she was only 8 years old. I was nervous to meet her as through my research I discovered some of the amazing campaign work she had been doing for child refugee rights and I could not help but feel a little intimidated. But meeting both Eve and Allan was a truly inspiring experience and left me feeling motivated to do more to help others.

'My parents had said they would see me soon when they said goodbye.'

Eve explained that she doesn't remember much of her life in Prague or indeed of the actual journey to Nottingham. She believed this was partly due to the fact that she was the only Kindertransport child in her area. She described what she could of her last interactions with her family: jokes about the British that she shared with her father and brother painted a picture of a close and loving family. In contrast, her mother telling her that they would see each other soon, whilst knowing that this was not very likely, resonates in her memory as devastating. Eve remembered how her brother was set to take another train only a few months later, but it was too late; he did not survive the Holocaust.

'[There were so many little things you'd never seen before in England: you went to bed upstairs [...] you had a garden, a dog. There were so many little things.'

Being a stranger in a new country must have seemed daunting but Eve described how she adapted pretty quickly and became 'more British than the British'. She told me how she came over in July and by Christmas, had completely forgotten how to speak Czech. I asked if there was anything in particular that made it easier and she spoke highly of the people around her. She was taken in by a teacher who went on to become her mother - and whose care was vital to her settling in well. She went to school and made friends with the children there, who she declared 'were very sympathetic' and would bring in toys and talk to her. Importantly for Eve, though, she moved in next door to another girl her age. Eve is still friends with this girl to this day. So it was that the people of Nottingham helped to make Eve feel accepted in this strange new place, and acceptance, she feels, was the key to her comfortably adapting.

'[Eve spoke to a young boy in Athens and] the relationship somehow was unexpected: he was sympathising with her while she was trying to sympathise with him.'

Eve described how just a few years ago, she and her husband went to Athens with an organisation known as 'Safe Passage', who help with the refugee crisis in Greece. They arranged for Eve to speak to a young boy who is cared for by the organisation there. Neither Eve nor Allan could have anticipated how special this conversation would turn out to be: while Eve was trying hard to sympathise with the young boy and show him support, it was in fact the young boy who found himself deeply moved by Eve's story. During their visit, Eve found herself impressed and inspired by how welcoming the Greeks were and although the conditions for these people were far from perfect, the people living in 'Safe Passage' accommodation were indeed safe and as joyful as could be possible in such a difficult situation. Eve and Allan's abiding impression of the visit was that we need to do more at home in the UK. So that's what they did.

Although she has been an Oxfam volunteer for many years, Eve only began her campaigning on child refugees in her late 80s. She has campaigned outside Nottingham County Hall in protest at the county council's decision to stop accepting young refugees, and has protested outside parliament while fighting for Theresa May (Prime Minister at the time) to welcome more young migrants into Britain. The fact that Eve has taken her own situation to encourage the rest of the world to be more accepting and caring of modern-day refugee children should be a model to us all.

'If you want good citizens, then you've got to start by welcoming them and learning about them.'

Safe Passage is one key organisation that Eve and Allan told me about. They are a non-profit organisation made up of many volunteers, doing tremendous amounts of work for child refugees. They formed in 2016 following a visit to Calais where they realised the dire need in which refugees find themselves, and today, they help child refugees to access legal routes to safety. Their website, <https://www.safeassage.org.uk/>, provides much more information about the work they have done and how you can get involved.

There are plenty of ways you can support organisations like Safe Passage but that all starts with caring. Eve and Allan explained the current crisis in Greece and described how providing money is just not enough. Allan explained how we can so easily do more from the comfort of our own homes. In fact, Allan made clear that a key campaign technique, which he would encourage everyone to try, is simply writing to your local MP.

'When I was younger, I would never have dreamed of contacting my MP - but find out who your MP is and write to them.'

Eve and Allan did not start campaigning until much later in their lives – but in this, they are all the more inspirational, showing us it is never too late to start trying to help others. We might be nearing the last generation of Holocaust survivors, but theirs will not be the last generation of people needing our help – and today, child refugees need us just as much as ever – and perhaps even more than ever before.

Find your local MP:

Ashfield: Lee Anderson

Bassetlaw: Brendan Clarke-Smith

Broxtowe: Darren Henry

Gedling: Tom Randall

Mansfield: Ben Bradley

Newark: Robert Jenrick

Nottingham East: Nadia Whittome

Nottingham North: Alex Norris

Nottingham South: Lilian Greenwood

Rushcliffe: Ruth Edwards

Sherwood: Mark Spencer

Lucy Barry-Shaw