Karen Gershon: Stranger from the Kindertransport

[T]he world’s blood and my blood were cold
the exiled Jew in me was old
and thoughts of death appalled me less
than knowledge of my loneliness.

(Gershon, ‘The Children’s Exodus’ [Collected Poems 22])

Like so many Kinder, Karen Gershon lost both her parents in the Holocaust and recounts the burdens of loss as the primary shaping force in her life and writing. As she comments in her video, Stranger in a Strange Land, ‘I don’t want to be reconciled, to put [the Holocaust past] aside. I want it with me.’

Born Kaethe Loewenthal to a middle-class family in Bielefeld, Germany, on 29 August 1923, Gershon was the youngest of three daughters. A month after Kristallnacht, in December 1938, their parents sent Kaethe and her next older sister Lise on the Kindertransport. The oldest, Anne, who also came to England, died of anemia in 1943. In a gesture of assimilation to British culture, Kaethe changed her name to Karen but chose Gershon for her surname since its translation of her father’s name into Hebrew reinforced her identification with Jewish tradition while its meaning, stranger in a strange land, noted the Jews’ historical identity.

All of Gershon’s published work, including translations, memoirs, novels, and poetry, is devoted to Jewish themes. Though she began writing poetry in German, her native language, and in the German romantic tradition, her ‘subject matter was Jewish’ (‘Stranger’ 10). According to Peter Lawson, her first volume of Selected Poems (1966) mines the Hebrew Bible ‘to impose a stabilizing narrative on the disorienting Jewish experience under Nazism’ (‘Karen Gershon’, Holocaust Novelists 107). She began to write in English upon her arrival on the Kindertransport, both to belong and ‘in a revulsion against everything German’ (Gershon, ‘Stranger’ 10). The effort, however, does not represent an unencumbered transition, as she reflects:

One cannot respond emotionally to words one did not know as a child, but as acquired consciously, with an effort; they never mean more than
themselves, their quality cannot be felt with the senses. This makes my poetry very bare. On the other hand, when I began to write in English I had never read any English poetry and the experience was exhilarating, as if I were the first person ever to turn the language into poetry. Some of this excitement persists: the feeling that the meaning of a poem and the words to express it come from two different sources, the one unconscious and the other external; I am caught between them but in me they meet. It makes even the most personal poem seem more than my own: a discovery. (‘Stranger’ 10)

Invoking the master narrative of Jewish wandering from ancient times through the Holocaust, diaspora, and beyond, Gershon calls attention to her Zionist aspirations that she hoped would be realized when she emigrated to Israel in 1968 but which ended with her return to England in 1973. In her author’s note to the collective Kindertransport autobiography, We Came as Children, Gershon reflects on her odyssey:

When I came to this country I was on my way to what was then called Palestine. While working on this book, I realized that, for me, England would always remain a foster-home. I then continued my journey, together with the family I had made. Perhaps I had left it too late.

I feel more at home in Israel than I do in England, but I don’t feel at home there either, and that is worse, because there I still expected to be able to feel at home. Here I am reconciled.

Having internalized and practiced wandering as integral to her identity, her characters, and even the forms of all her writing, she found creative expression in the productively liminal space she carved for herself in England. For it was in the Janus-faced welcome England extended to her that she could reconcile herself to her position as outsider. The different parts of her multi-hyphenated identity, German-Jewish and Anglo-Jewish, would remain in unresolved tension with each other, a product of her recognition that a synthesis of her identities was impossible, either in practical or psychological terms. Despite Gershon’s desire to imagine a home in national identity, there would be no stable national or cultural foundation on which her writing could lean or with which it would identify. She remained in a state of productively ambivalent rootlessness, testifying in her video interview that she ‘used English to write about an experience that’s not English – the Holocaust’.

All of Gershon’s writing is autobiographical, even when her protagonist is definitively transposed from a Jewish to gentile identity, as with Helen in Burn Helen (1980), or from female to male, as in The Fifth Generation (1987). So intensely did she respond to the Kindertransport that at the time of its twenty-fifth anniversary, fearful that so many of its documents