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Penny Powers, Covert Hero of the Twentieth Century

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Full Title:	Penny Powers, Covert Hero of the Twentieth Century
Article Type:	Original Article (double blind)
Abstract:	<p>Ms. Penny Powers, a covert British Intelligence Officer during most of the twentieth century and (perhaps) memorialized as Miss. Money Penny in the James Bond film series, was one of the most unrecognized saviors of children in danger in modern world history. Ms. Powers covertly organized and ran the Kindertransport and Operation Pedro Pan, two shining examples of the British intelligence service's efforts to save thousands of children from danger.</p> <p>Ms. Powers used the same repeatable model twice to save children in danger. Specifically, she helped save 10,000 Jewish children in the Kindertransport and 14,000 Cuban children in Operation Pedro Pan by transporting the children to a safe location, organizing temporary care for the children, planning to reunite the children with their parents when the danger had passed, and using private donations instead of government funding to help the plan appeal to the host countries. In 2016, US Representative Mike Honda proposed to replicate her model to help save children in danger in the Syrian civil war. Now, 25 years after her death, it is high time for Ms. Powers to be recognized for helping save 24,000 children.</p>
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Author Biography:

Sara Pollard was born and raised in Washington D.C. Ms. Pollard attended the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School (K-10) and is currently a Senior completing her high school studies at Bullis School in Potomac, Maryland as part of the class of 2021. She plans to attend university next year.

Penny Powers, Covert Hero of the Twentieth Century

INTRODUCTION

Ms. Penny Powers, a covert British Intelligence Officer during most of the twentieth century, was one of the most unrecognized saviors of children in danger in modern world history. Very little information is publicly known about Ms. Powers, who worked undercover at British embassies around the world in the intelligence division. According to Prof. María de los Angeles Torres, author of *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future*, a Professor of Latin American Studies at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and herself one of the 14,000 Cuban children Ms. Powers saved, “Powers was a natural. A small but energetic woman (who some would characterize as stubborn) ... Powers was known for her bravery and her commitment to children as well” (Torres, 2004). In 1982, Ms. Powers (without publicity) received the Order of the British Empire for her work with children and her struggle against oppressive regimes from Queen Elizabeth II. The motto of the award is memorable: “For God and the Empire” (Torres, 2004). In 1993, in an interview with Prof. de los Angeles Torres three years before her death, Ms. Powers insisted, “The children, the children needed to be saved.”

Ms. Powers is reported to have helped organize the Kindertransport as a British Intelligence Officer working inside Nazi Europe from December 1938 to September 1939. During this time, she helped 10,000 Jewish children from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia travel by train and ferry to Great Britain (Holtman, 2014). According to the recently published *Research Handbook on Child Migration*, “Penny Powers, a British intelligence officer who had

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4 played a key role in the Kindertransport of Jewish children out of Nazi Europe during World
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7 War II, became a point person for British assistance” (Bhabha et.al., 2018).
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10 Ms. Powers is also reported to have organized and led the covert Operation Pedro Pan as
11 a British Intelligence Officer assigned to the British Embassy in Havana, Cuba from 1960 to
12 1962. During this time, working undercover as an English teacher at the Ruston School, she
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14 organized the secret transport of 14,048 Cuban children to safety in the US after the Cuban
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16 government fell to Fidel Castro and communism (Sanchez, 2017; Conde, 1999). Professor de los
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18 Angeles Torres wrote, “Penny Powers, a British intelligence official who helped with the
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20 Kindertransport, would become the central coordinator for the underground’s effort during
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22 Operation Pedro Pan” (Torres, 2004). Operation Pedro Pan was secret for 30 years. Not even the
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24 Cuban children themselves knew that they were part of the operation.
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31 32 ***POWERS’ STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE*** 33

34 Ms. Powers likely learned and helped invent a method for how to transport children away
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36 from danger during the Kindertransport and then implemented a very similar plan in Cuba, 25
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38 years later, to save a whole new generation of children facing danger. According to a 2011
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40 interview with Carlos Eire, one of the children saved in Operation Pedro Pan, Mr. Eire reported,
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42 “Without Penny Powers, who had been part of the Kindertransport, many agree this [Operation
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44 Pedro Pan] may not have taken shape in the way it did. She had this template in mind. In terms
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46 of numbers it was much larger than the Kindertransport“ (Birnbaum, 2011). There are very few
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48 other public historical records or books that document her exact role.
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54 It appears that the Kindertransport and Operation Pedro Pan parallel each other in four
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56 major areas. First, after the children’s lives were endangered, Ms. Powers organized
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4 transportation for the children to a safe location. Second, Ms. Powers organized religious
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6 organizations and other volunteers to temporarily house and care for the children. Third, she
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8 planned to reunite the children with their parents when the danger had passed. And, finally, she
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10 executed the plan using private donations instead of government funding.
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14 *TRANSPORTATION.* After Kristallnacht, the night when the Nazis destroyed Jewish
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16 communities, business, and arrested about 30,000 Jewish men, it became clear to the government
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18 of Great Britain that the Jewish children in Germany were in mortal danger (United States
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20 Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019). To save these children, Ms. Powers helped organize the
21
22 Kindertransport which successfully transported 10,000 children to Great Britain using trains and
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24 boats and organized for their care. Similarly, in 1961 after Fidel Castro came to power and
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26 threatened to imprison his opponent's children, Ms. Powers "conceived a plan" for the children
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28 to be granted a student visa from Great Britain to study in Jamaica or the Bahamas and then
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30 placed aboard the daily KLM flight from Havana to Kingston, Jamaica. The airplane would then
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32 stop in Miami (on the way to Jamaica) where the children would secretly exit the plane to safety
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34 (Torres, 2004).
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42 *CARE FOR CHILDREN.* Both the Kindertransport and Operation Pedro Pan relied on
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44 religious organizations and volunteers to care for thousands of the temporary orphans that
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46 arrived in Great Britain and, 25 years later, the United States. For the Kindertransport, Jewish,
47
48 Quaker, and Christian organizations in Germany and Great Britain worked with the British
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50 government to place about half of the Jewish children with foster families, if possible, and the
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52 other half were placed in hostels, farms or boarding schools (United States Holocaust Memorial
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54 Museum, 2019). The effort was first organized by Mr. Otto Schiff of the Central British Fund for
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4 the Relief of German Jewry and later was led by the Movement for the Care of Children from
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6 Germany. Similarly, the children from Operation Pedro Pan were received upon arrival in the US
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8 by the Catholic Welfare Bureau (CWB, or Catholic Charities) of Miami under the direction of
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10 Father Bryan O. Walsh. The CWB placed 50% of the children with relatives living in the US.
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12 Those without relatives were taken into the care of the CWB (Operation Pedro Pan Group Inc.,
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14 2009). Some of the children remained under the care of the Catholic Church for years, and others
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16 (when the Church ran out of space) were placed into foster homes or orphanages across 35 states
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18 (Ojitojan, 1998).
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24 *PLAN TO REUNITE.* Both the Kindertransport and Operation Pedro Pan were organized
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26 with the belief that the children would be reunited with their parents after the danger in their
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28 home country had passed, so the housing and educational arrangements for the children were
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30 purposefully temporary. Interestingly, in both cases, the children did not return to their parents
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32 until much later than expected -- and many were never reunited with their parents.
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37 According to the Holocaust Encyclopedia, most of the Jewish children from the
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39 Kindertransport could not return back to their families because their families had been killed
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41 during the war. Many of these children would later obtain British citizenship or would emigrate
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43 to Israel, America, or Canada (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019). Similarly,
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45 Operation Pedro Pan only planned to house the Cuban children for a few months. *The New York*
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47 *Times* reported on January 12, 1998, that, "The family separations were to have lasted only a few
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49 months -- whenever the parents obtained visas to travel to the United States or Mr. Castro was
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51 ousted, as many Cubans at the time expected. But the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962
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53 abruptly ended flights to and from the island, leaving the children stranded on the other side of
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4 the Straits of Florida” (Ojitojan, 1998). A significant, but unknown, number of the children were
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6 never reunited with their parents.
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9 *PRIVATE DONATIONS.* Both the Kindertransport and Operation Pedro Pan were
10 organized using private donations rather than government funding to make the operations more
11 appealing for the host country. For Kindertransport, “sponsors” were located for each child
12 (Hodge, 2012). For Operation Pedro Pan, the Catholic Church paid for the children’s care while
13 in the United States and the parents were required to pay for round-trip airfare (Operation Pedro
14 Pan Group Inc., 2009). Specifically, for the Kindertransport, the Movement for the Care of
15 Children from Germany identified sponsors (either organizations or individuals) for each child
16 who agreed to pay for the costs of the child’s travels to Great Britain and return home once the
17 danger had passed, and be responsible for the cost of care of the child while in Great Britain
18 (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019; Hodge, 2012). Similarly, thousands of
19 Cuban children were sponsored by their relatives in the US -- and each sponsor was also required
20 to provide \$25 for the round-trip airfare. For children without sponsors, Catholic Charities in 35
21 states provided foster homes and group care homes for the young temporary orphans (Operation
22 Pedro Pan Group Inc., 2009).
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44 Ms. Powers likely created the model used to save the children during the Kindertransport
45 and then followed that same model to save the Cuban children 25 years later. Indeed, it appears
46 that the operations parallel each other in four major areas: transporting the children to a safe
47 location, organizing religious organizations and other volunteers to temporarily house and care
48 for the children, planning to reunite the children with their parents when the danger passed, and
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4 using private donations instead of government funding to make the operation more appealing to
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6 the host countries.
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8 9 ***SYRIA: ANOTHER GENERATION OF CHILDREN IN DANGER***

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11 Even in 2016, 20 years after her death, Ms. Powers' model was drawn upon to save the
12 next generation of children in danger. US Representative Michael Honda proposed HR 6510:
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14 The Save the Children Act of 2016, using the same model that Ms. Powers used in Germany and
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16 Cuba. It is possible that US Representative Honda did not realize he followed in Ms. Powers'
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18 footsteps. Dr. Amitai Etzioni, a professor at George Washington University who escaped from
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20 Nazi Germany as a child, proposed the idea for this bill to US Representative Honda in 2015.
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27 Following Ms. Powers' model, US Representative Honda's bill proposed to first
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29 authorize the US Government to grant temporary visas to 25,000 Syrian refugee children and
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31 allow the US State Department to transport the children to the US and back to Syria once the
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33 danger of the civil war had passed. Then, the bill proposed that the US Government's Office of
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35 Refugee Resettlement (ORR) be, "In charge of working with voluntary associations, other
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37 charities, and child advocacy organizations to place the Syrian children among host families that
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39 have volunteered to house them, or into the foster care for refugee minors already approved by
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41 the ORR" (Save the Children Act of 2016, 2016). Finally, after the danger had passed, the bill
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43 proposed a grace period of six months for the children to stay in the US in order to allow their
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45 families to re-establish their households in Syria before the children returned. The cost of the bill
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47 was never calculated by the Congressional Budget Office because the bill was never considered
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49 for a vote (Save the Children Act of 2016, 2016).
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56 57 **CONCLUSION**

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4 Ms. Powers, working as a British Intelligence Officer for most of the twentieth century,
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6
7 quietly helped organize two operations and saved over twenty thousand children, She made a
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9 significant impact by helping create a repeatable model for saving children in danger.
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11 Specifically, she helped save 10,000 Jewish children in the Kindertransport and 14,000 Cuban
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13 children in Operation Pedro Pan by transporting the children to a safe location, organizing
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15 temporary care for the children, planning to reunite the children with their parents when the
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17 danger had passed, and using private donations instead of government funding to help the plan
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19 appeal to the host countries. And, twenty years after Ms. Powers died, US Representative Mike
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21 Honda proposed to replicate her model to help save children in danger due to the Syrian civil
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23 war.
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29 Rabbi Hillel said, "Whoever saves a life, it is as though he had saved the entire world"
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31 (Jerusalem Talmud Sanhedrin 4:1 (22a)). Ms. Powers saved the lives of countless children and it
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33 is appropriate for her to be widely recognized and given full credit for her important
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35 accomplishments and contributions.
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