



## **THE HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS AT WEIR COURTNEY, LINGFIELD**

Although Lingfield and Dormans Land were recognised 'reception areas' for evacuees throughout the war years some villagers were unaware that several child survivors from the European death camps were living at Weir Courtney House, between 5<sup>th</sup> December 1945 and 18<sup>th</sup> December 1948. Weir Courtney was then the home of Sir Benjamin and Lady Drage, Sir Benjamin was the owner of a large furniture store in High Holborn, London. His home was leased rent-free to the Central British Fund for Jewish Relief and Rehabilitation, the body organising the Children's Refugee Movement, with the agreement that the CBF would pay the rates and taxes and maintain the fabric of the building.

Liberation in 1945 was not a flag waving ceremony for the survivors of the death camps. Thousands died in the days and weeks after their liberation. Others would be physically and mentally scarred for years to come. Holocaust survivors were often stateless at the end of the war; their homes and families had been destroyed and their country of birth occupied by one of the Allied powers.

The need to do something led to the 'Children from the Concentration Camps Scheme' set up by the Home Office, though largely funded by Jewish sources at the end of 1945. A strict ceiling of 1,000 child survivors were allowed to enter Britain. The children were 'in Britain to recuperate and were to come for that purpose only'. In the end 732 children came to Britain, with the help of the '45 Aid Society'. Once in Britain the Children's Refugee Movement of the Central British Fund for World Jewish Relief took over the welfare and support of the children.

Weir Courtney was one of a total of 28 hostels which were opened to receive the children. The emphasis at first, not surprisingly, was on food and medicine. Meals were large and very regular. The emotional needs of the children were harder to satisfy.

The Matron of Weir Courtney, Miss Alice Goldberger, and her staff devotedly cared for the children from the day they arrived at Weir Courtney in 1945 until their departure for a new home in London in December 1948.

The magazine *JOHN BULL*, 9 Oct. 1948, reported an interview with Alice Goldberger:

“On the night the first children arrived in 1945 they were full of hostility, fear and distrust when they caught sight of food they rushed to it, snatching bits from each other's plates and stuffing their pockets with uneaten pieces. These they later hid under their pillows fearing that they would get no more. When the staff tried to undress them for bed, pandemonium broke out. They had decided that this fairyland was a trick; as soon as the lights were turned out the SS men would come and kill them in their beds. Some of the children were difficult to understand because they spoke a mixture of several languages picked up in the various camps through which they passed.”

Learning English gave the children a new start, by 1948 English was the only language the children used. In the New Year of 1946 several of the children were registered at Lingfield Junior School. Four girls were registered on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1946, three boys followed one week later. A total of nineteen children from Weir Courtney were registered at Lingfield School over the course of the next few weeks.

The upkeep of Weir Courtney Hostel continued to be borne by the members of the West London Synagogue. Additional funding from other sources was difficult to find, although contributions were made by individuals in Britain and America.

In 1947 Lingfield School was becoming more and more overcrowded, facilities were stretched to the limit. It was decided to transfer the Weir Courtney children to Dormansland Primary School at the beginning of the autumn term 1947. Thirteen Jewish children, aged between 6 and 10 years old were registered at Dormansland School on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1947.

There are no records in Lingfield or Dormansland of the reactions of village school children towards the children from Weir Courtney Hostel.

Letters from a German Jewish boy to his parents, after his evacuation to Horsham in the summer of 1939, have been published and show bitter feelings there against any German speaking children:

‘...the atmosphere against the Germans is very strong and it is best not to say a word of German on the street because the reactions are unpleasant, even when you are refugees,’

‘..In playtime some of the German and Austrian boys had to fight some of the English boys who called them blooming Nazis and swore at us. Though they called us Nazis it was not a bit of anti-semitism in it.’

[*Letters from a War Child: Ernest Dieter Ball's correspondence, 1939-41. Publ. by Horsham Museum, 1999*].

In Dec. 1948 the Jewish children and staff moved from Weir Courtney to a house in Isleworth, London, which they called 'Lingfield House'. The move to the city was a preparation for their adult lives; to develop their confidence and self-reliance, and provide wider opportunities for their further education. More Jewish children were to join them at Lingfield House, all survivors of the Holocaust.

The Lingfield House Report for 1950 gives some idea of their improvement after 5 years: '..In 1945 our aim was to provide a home for some of the Jewish children from the concentration camps. It seemed too much to hope that these children could reach maturity unscathed by the horrors they had witnessed and suffered....although they still require the greatest understanding and patience, most of them are now indistinguishable from normal children. Only one child, a girl now 15, proved to be a hopeless case and had to be transferred to a mental home where she is regularly visited by the matron.'

According to the 1952 House Report, 26 children had by then left Lingfield House of those:

- 6 had been adopted,
- 4 had gone to Israel,
- 9 had been re-united with a parent or relative,
- 5 were working in London,
- 1 was working in Canada,
- and 1 child had died.

Alice Goldberger remained a mother figure for all her 'family' of refugee children. At the end of 1957 the house at Isleworth was closed and a flat in Hampstead was taken as a centre, providing accommodation for the remaining 4 children and serving as a home, in a real family sense, where all the children could always return when they needed help and advice. Alice Goldberger continued to care for her 'foster' family until her own death in February 1986.

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#### Acknowledgements and Bibliography

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Dormansland School Register

Lingfield School Log Book

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Wiener Library