

A Brief History of Jewish Deaf Children Evacuated during the Second World War between 1939/1946

During my research on the subject of the evacuation of Jewish Deaf children, I came across a book by Joan Weinberg (nee Lechem) on the history of the Residential School for Jewish Deaf children. It contained a section about Jewish Deaf children evacuated during the war period between February 1940 and May 1946. This book interested me but it was based on accounts given by hearing authorities; the hearing writers omitted the deaf ex pupils' experiences from the book. It dawned on me that the reason for such omission was because of Deaf children's limited educational achievements and poor writing abilities due to the poor schooling during the war. I thought carefully and felt it was of great importance to record the Jewish deaf children's experiences as evacuees during the last war and I shall give a brief account here.

When war broke out on September 3 1939, the teachers taught us how to use gas mask and gave strict instructions that every child must carry it all the time in sling with cardboard box.

When I was eight & half years old in February 1940, I remembered that all deaf children marched to the coaches that were to take them to Brighton. There were about 53 deaf children in total. We all boarded the coaches and left without being given an opportunity to say goodbye to our families. When we arrived at Brighton, we were excited to see the sea and expected to go swimming or walking along the promenade. We could not do that because barricades wrapped with barbed wire were already erected along the promenade. At Black Rock there were two big guns. When we saw the big guns, we realised the reality of the situation and that a real war was on. On every Shabbat (Saturdays) after service, we always went walking.

During the celebration of Passover, some of the children went home to their families to celebrate Passover with them. I was one of the fortunate ones as there were children who were unable to join their families.

Our place of residence was not only for Jewish Deaf children; other children were there too. At mealtimes, we had to go to second sittings in the dining room because kosher food was served during that second sitting – we could not mix with other children who were not Jewish, apart from the older children who were allowed to mix to participate in the boy scouts and girl guides activities.

We stayed at Brighton for only 7 months because this area was deemed as an unsafe place for Jewish children.

Sometime in the month of September 1940, Mr Hart, the headmaster, announced that we were leaving Brighton and we all moved to Havering House in Milton Libourne, near Marlborough in Wiltshire. This very small village seemed well hidden from away civilisation and the people who lived there. Where we were staying was a beautiful place, but it was very limited in terms of roominess of the classrooms. When we arrived at Havering House, we became excited, as it was completely different to Brighton. At Milton Libourne, there were greens everywhere on the landscape, a welcoming and pleasant contrast to that of barbed wire barricades in Brighton! The house was located between two hills, surrounded by enormous open fields, gardens and greenhouses. There were about nine bedrooms and two bathrooms in Havering House. One large bedroom in the loft and three on the upper floor accommodated the children and members of staff were placed in five smaller individual bedrooms within the building. Initially, senior boys were put in the loft but it was noted that they always got up early, dressed and went down, straight into the girls' bedroom for a good look! The teachers decided to put a stop to that by transferring the girls to the loft and the boys to the girls' bedroom!



Mr Simeon Hart, Headmaster



Havering House in wartime

School lessons were given in a cottage quite a walking distance away and older children had to walk there daily for their lessons. This continued until the arrival of a new teacher, Mr. Anstis, and his family. As they had no home and had to be accommodated, the cottage was allocated to them and the children had to take lessons in the tiny classrooms in Havering House. So small and restricted were the rooms that it caused discomfort, as they had to be shared by two classes. Generally the curriculum consisted of formal subject teaching in the mornings; these could be Maths, English, Hebrew and suchlike. After late morning, most of the day was taken up by outside activities and necessary manual work such as sewing, gardening, maintenance of hedges and keeping the grounds and lawns tidy. All children rise at 7am every morning and they had to make their own beds before breakfast. Bedtimes for the children varied, depending on ages with the youngest in bed between 6pm and 6.30pm, the time scale rising every half-an-hour ending with the senior children going to bed at 8pm at the latest.

At Havering House there were few Jewish teachers and only Mr Lindley and Miss Elkan from Germany were Jewish, the rest were a non-Jewish teachers, along with only one matron Miss Ballinson, who strictly observed that only kosher food be used and served. The teaching of Hebrew was a very important element of the Jewish children's education. Normally it was the task and custom for a male teacher to do that, along with the teaching and preparations of boys for Bar Mitzvah when they reach the age of thirteen. The teacher then, Mr. Lindley, was unfortunately called up to join the army, thus leaving only one Jewish teacher available, Miss Elkan. The task of teaching Hebrew fell on her and she taught us to read Hebrew and translate English. She was both a strict and an excellent teacher and did her task admirably as it was extremely difficult in those wartime days to recruit Jewish teachers.



Mr Lindley, a teacher



Miss Ballinson, Head Matron

When the boys reached 13 years of age, every Saturday morning during their birthday months we attended service and prayed in the dinning room instead of the synagogue because our school was in a remote village. Travelling to the synagogue was out of bounds to all children because we were not allowed under Jewish religion laws to travel by transport on Shabbat days. I thought it all sad to witness the boys praying during their Bar Mitzvah without the Scroll of the Torah in the dinning room of Havering House. This took away and denied all the boys' opportunities and experience to pray and touch the Scroll of Torah in a synagogue.

When the headmaster, Mr. Hart, died at school on 30th January 1943, I was then 12 years old. He intended to retire some time previously but the Board of Deputies forced him to carry on as headmaster because there was no Jewish person available to take over from Mr. Hart. Miss Elkan had been in England since 1940 and was in possession of a German passport; this may have been the reason why she was not given Mr. Hart's job.



Miss Elkan, a teacher



Mr Benham, Acting Headmaster

A few weeks were to pass after the death of Mr. Hart when Mr Lindley was discharge from the army and he returned to the school at Havering House. He looked a badly shaken and nervous person and it was presumed that he suffered from shellshock. I remembered asking him about the war, but he refused to respond to my questions. We all thought he would become our new headmaster, but that was not the case. It appears that he was too badly traumatised by war to be able to do the headmaster's functions. Instead, a non-Jewish man, Mr. Benham, was appointed to succeed Mr. Hart as acting headmaster until the end of the war. Mr. Benham, despite his non-Jewish religion, had some experience of Jewish religion.

During the war, the children were allowed go home during annual holidays, especially for Passover and the summer holidays. Some of the parents came and picked up their children, but some of the children went home by themselves and met their parents at Paddington station in London. The rest of children, mainly orphans who had no parents, stayed in school. However, there were times when these orphans were generously taken to share their holidays with their classmates' families. Family atmosphere and friendship played an important role with these orphans; very often when children's family members visit the school, they brought food and sweets for the orphans.

News of the war as reported by the press and on the wireless were from time to time relayed by the teachers to the children. However, during the entire war period no one knew or were told of the genocide against the Jews by the Nazis until it became known until late in 1945 after the war ended. Among the evacuees were ten Jewish children who escaped from Nazi Germany in 1939. All children were encouraged to write home to their parents to maintain contact but the ten refugees never wrote letters to their parents as it was not possible to post any to Germany, However, one day by some sort of a miracle, one of the refugees, Ruth Danziger (now Fallman), received a letter from the Red Cross. The letter came from China. When Ruth opened it, she was amazed to learn that her parents successfully fled to China from Nazi Germany. From then on, she was able to write to them via the Red Cross – but there was sadness for the other nine refugees who were unable to get in touch with their loved ones.

Daily activities at the school during the war varied, but generally they are as follows:

For girls over 12 years old -

- Knitting all wool clothings for the Armed Forces.
- Darning children's socks because all the clothes were rationed.
- Laying the tables for prepared the meals.
- Brushing flowering peaches in the greenhouse to remove pollen because bees and wasps could not get into the greenhouse.

For boys over 12 years old -

- Working in the fields to grow all kinds of vegetables.
- Feeding 112 chickens in the mornings and in the evenings on a rota basis, collecting eggs and cleaning out all the excrement trays in the hen house every Sunday mornings.

Lifting out all the vegetables at the end of the season, and digging the patches to prepare for new planting. This latter task involved boys trekking over half a mile to a nearby farm to collect manure in wheelbarrows and pushing them back.

The house had central heating and it needed coke to burn to warm the rooms. Everyday the boys had to use the wheelbarrow to fill and take coke beside the coke dip to the boiler. They also had to check that the fire was still burning, besides taking responsibility to remove all the ashes and stale coke from the boiler.

Strong boys only were engaged to walk 1½ miles shortcut across the field instead of about three miles each way on the road to Pewsey railway station collect kosher meat from London.

Older girls and boys -

Clearing up all plates and cutlery after meals.

Peeling potatoes and preparing meals on a rota basis every evening for the next day, except on Shabbat days.

Helping farmers to collect bales of straws and all kinds of vegetables in the autumn.

Those who were over 14 years of age did this; there were also many prisoners of war, mainly Italians, helping out at the same time but they were guarded by British soldiers.

There were other activities and incidents during these evacuation years at Havering House. However, rules were enforced so that a pattern was established and children followed it routinely.

Smaller children tended to play with rabbits, a forbidden Jewish practice, but as the rabbits belonged to Ann, the daughter of the teacher, Mrs. Benham, this was overlooked and the boys were made to clean the rabbit hatches every other day.

During Shabbat days after weekly prayers, children aged between ten and twelve were made to march like soldiers for at least two mile in each direction, whereas older children had to do likewise for between three and four miles each way, regardless of the weather. No one carried gas masks at all during the stay at Havering House.

Educationally speaking, the older children studied for about 70% of the time and spend the remaining 30% helping members of the staff to overcome severe shortage of manpower.

When the children reach 15 years of age, they were given some privileges that allowed them to venture out by themselves; also on every Friday evening, Mr. Benham, the headmaster would invite them to his sitting room and have a chat and a drink after prayer. They were able to go shopping on their own, without having to be accompanied by teachers.

If any child was in trouble, he received punishment, which was mainly being sent to the garden to remove weed between bricks on the patio ground, or sweep up the fallen leaves.

I can vividly recall that to answer the call of nature, the girls only had to visit the toilet inside the house whereas the boys had to take a long walk outside the house to visit an outbuilding which did not have any flushing water, this journey involved going a long way round a line of hedgerows. Sometimes it was too much trouble for the boys to make a dash for the toilet, so they took to peeing behind the hedges. One day, Mr. Benham discovered the purpose why some boys were using the hedges and demanded an explanation. He was told that the trip to the toilet was too long and too far. Instead of giving out punishment, Mr. Benham had a section of the hedge cut out so that the boys were able to take a shorter route to the toilet!

I can also remember a group of us walking to a small town called Pewsey to do some shopping. We had to cross some fields and there was a British army barracks, which we were strictly forbidden to visit, or even get near to it. After about two years later, this same barracks were taken over by the American army and we were surprisingly invited to visit them. The US soldiers at the barracks gave us all sweets and chocolates, as well as silk stockings for some members of our teaching staff! We were sometimes allowed to play with the ack-ack guns - unloaded of course!

Around 1943 the place became rather busy, a hive of activity, and there were soldiers and tanks everywhere and lorries moved about ceaselessly. Mr Benham, the headmaster, told everyone that he believed it imminent that the armed forces would very shortly invade France. Mr. Benham's suspicions were aroused seemingly because it was unusual to see 3 white stripes on the every transport, even warplanes with gliders. The older boys became excited and saw the gliders hooked off from the warplanes landing over the vast Salisbury Plains from Milton Hills. When we finished prayer on Shabbat, we rushed out and walked to the Milton Hills that overlooked Salisbury Plains. We saw many gliders lay about and many soldiers were engaged in manoeuvres and mock battles amongst themselves. A few months later, the invasion of France happened! It was fascinating to witness the build-up to that historical event.

By the end of May 1945, we were all informed by the teachers that the war was over and Germany had been defeated. The children became very happy, cheering and shouting. We all remembered one child, Harry Newman, making out a placard with the letters "WAR IS OVER", holding it above his head and dancing about. Everyone, however, had to stay at Havering House for another year. We all returned to 101 Nightingale Lane in Wandsworth Common, SW12, on 13th May 1946. Our school was situated next door to Oak Lodge School! Mr Benham asked me to come to the school to help out moving the furniture because the government had taken over the place for Women Aliens Reception instead of named women internees.



101 Nightingale Lane, Wandsworth in 1946

I stayed at school for another year before I left in December 1947 without having taken any examinations, a situation also shared by other pupils who attended the school during the war years.

Jack Hart ©
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