

Jewish Historical Studies

Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England

Article:

Wyberlye Ladies Convalescent Home, Burgess Hill

Lesley Urbach ^{1,*}

How to cite: Urbach, L. 'Wyberlye Ladies Convalescent Home, Burgess Hill.' *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2020, 51(1), pp. 202-207. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2020v51.013>.

Published: 27 April 2020

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double blind peer-review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Copyright:

© 2019, The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2020v51.013>

Open Access:

Jewish Historical Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

* Correspondence: lcurbach@aol.com

¹ Independent scholar

RESEARCH REPORT

Wyberlye Ladies Convalescent Home, Burgess Hill

LESLEY URBACH

This brief report focuses on the experiences of fifty girls who came to Britain on the Kindertransport and lived at the Wyberlye Ladies Convalescent Home in Burgess Hill, West Sussex, for varying periods of time between 1 January 1939 and early 1941. The home was owned by the Grand Order Sons of Jacob, a Jewish Friendly Society. I used the oral and written testimony of nine women who had been among these girls, the minutes of the meetings of the Grand Order which ran the convalescent home and cared for the girls, and articles from the *Jewish Chronicle* and the *Mid-Sussex News*. The Grand Order had been established in 1900 to help poor Jews. In return for weekly contributions, members received financial support during illness and help towards funeral and associated expenses.

In early December 1938 the Movement for the Care of Refugee Children from Germany asked the Grand Order to take responsibility for children who had come or were coming from Germany and Austria on the Kindertransport. This request was formally agreed to at the Order's Annual General Meeting on 25 December 1938. The meeting adopted the following resolution: "That the Annual Conference of Delegates of the Lodges of the Order confirms the action of the Executive Council in undertaking the care of at least 50 refugee children at "Wyberlye" Convalescent Home, Burgess Hill, Sussex, and we pledge ourselves and our respective Lodges to provide the necessary funds for that purpose."¹ Eight girls who arrived later came through the intervention of the Polish Refugee Committee, while it is unclear how five girls from Czechoslovakia were referred there. Members of the Grand Order joined together to pay for the girls' maintenance of £1 per week for each child (the equivalent of about £50 today) and "several members offered substantial gifts in kind, such as clothing and food

¹ Grand Order Sons of Jacob (hereafter, GOSJ), Minute Book, MS 422, A4216 7/2/6/1938, University of Southampton.

supplies.”² Speaking at the same Annual General Meeting, Brother J. Heller, the outgoing Grand President, called on the members to: “make it a matter of personal honour and moral responsibility to see that these children shall be cared for until each of their individual problems are at an end, whether by restoration to their natural parents, or otherwise.”³

The convalescent home continued to operate throughout and its matron, Hilda Joseph, took charge of the children, on top of her normal duties, helped by her sister. The Grand Order established a Care Committee for the children chaired by Brother A. P. Segalov.⁴

The first twenty-three girls, which included the German-born Wohl sisters Eva, aged sixteen, and Ursula (Ulli), aged thirteen (later my mother and aunt, respectively), travelled by coach from Dovercourt holiday camp in Harwich on 1 January 1939. Vienna-born Ester Müller (later Friedman) was fourteen when she arrived at Wyberlye. Her first impression was that it was “gorgeous . . . It had grounds – a big wood, a tennis course, golf course. It was out of this world. The sitting room was large with comfortable chairs with French windows opening into the grounds. We couldn’t get over what a wonderful place it was.”⁵ They were welcomed by the matron who wore a uniform and cap and looked, Ester recalled, very stern. She was, all the women confirmed, very strict but, apart from one who referred to her as “the only fly in the ointment”, they also reported that she ensured they were well cared for.⁶

In January 1939 the *Jewish Chronicle* reported that “Burgess Hill residents have shown marked sympathy for the child refugees and the local Girl Guides Association has offered assistance.”⁷ However, to date no evidence has been unearthed as to what they did to elicit this positive report. By August 1939 there was a total of fifty girls there ranging in ages from eight to seventeen.

They slept in the main house until the old coaching stables were converted into dormitories in June 1939. The Grand Order Sons of Jacob raised more than £1,000, the equivalent of £50,000 today, over a three-month period to pay for the conversion. At its opening on 1 June 1939,

2 “Friendly Societies, Grand Order Sons of Jacob Efforts for Refugee Children”, *Jewish Chronicle* (hereafter, JC), 13 Jan. 1939, 26.

3 GOSJ, Minute Book, MS 422, A4216 7/2/6/1938.

4 *Ibid.*, A4216 7/10/1/1939.

5 Ester Friedman, interview 18331, Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, Royal Holloway College.

6 Lilly Goldfarb, interview 22879, *ibid.*

7 “Friendly Societies”, JC, 13 Jan. 1939, 26.

Rabbi Lew from Highgate Synagogue prayed for the refugee children “who have fled from tyranny and oppression”.⁸ The original plan to build a new building was abandoned when the Movement for the Care of Refugee Children from Germany turned down the Grand Order’s funding application.⁹

At the quarterly conference of the Grand Order on 9 July 1939, Lionel Shorts, the Grand President, expressed the hope that all “would continue to look after these children and that they would maintain an active and direct interest in them by watching them progress from day-to-day”.¹⁰ In later life, women who had been there as children reported that they had been treated well and were well looked after. Ulli Wohl (later Adler) commented: “my only wish is that my parents had known how well we were looked after.”¹¹

The girls came from different levels of religious observance and social backgrounds and had different upbringings. Czech-born Alice Masters, née Ebokova, was shocked to discover that “all the girls there were either from Germany or Austria . . . At the beginning it was an adjustment because we didn’t speak German or English and we came from a village. They were all city girls and they were more sophisticated. We were utterly lost. Suddenly we were placed in this thing, and they thought we were little hicks . . . but we adjusted quickly, it did not take long before we made friends with some of them and managed as best we could.”¹²

The older children helped with the younger children and, once the war began, they helped in the house. Girls younger than fourteen attended school in Burgess Hill and in January 1939 the *Jewish Chronicle* reported that “the education of the children was in reliable hands”.¹³ The girls were well fed even if some did not always like the food. They ate in the dining room of the house and the food was Kosher. Alice recalls: “Places were set for breakfast just in the best style you can imagine, and next to each setting there was a banana or piece of fruit for breakfast and cereal. I mean, I had never seen things like that in my village.”¹⁴

Eva Wohl (later Urbach) remembers little contact with a Jewish

8 “Jewish Refugee Children, Home at Burgess Hill opened”, *Mid-Sussex Times*, 6 June 1939, 1.

9 GOSJ, Minute Book, MS 422, A4216 7/2/6/1939.

10 *Ibid.*, A4216 7/9/7/1939, Quarterly Conference.

11 Ursula Adler, interview 32900, Visual History Archive.

12 Alice Masters, interview 22608, *ibid.*

13 “Friendly Societies”, *JC*, 13 Jan. 1939, 26.

14 Masters, interview 22608.

community apart from with members of the Grand Order until the war started, when Jews were evacuated to the area and weekly services took place at the Home. For some of the girls who had come from non-practising Jewish homes, it was a completely new experience.¹⁵ In March 1939 and 1940, the Grand President invited members to offer hospitality to the children during Passover: Eva and Ulli Wohl, for instance, went to the home of Brother Segalov.

And what about their parents? Before the war, letters were exchanged and in the case of Eva and Ulli, there was even a telephone call. Once war broke out, letters of no more than twenty-five words were exchanged through the Red Cross. The girls were homesick and Alice recalled: "Once I decided to go to the village on a Saturday morning to buy myself a little candy. As I was walking towards a store I saw a father walking with his little girl holding hands. It broke my heart and I started to cry bitterly remembering walking with my father. From then on I did not go to the village on Saturdays."¹⁶

The parents of German-born Lotti Gruber (later Blumenthal) arrived in England just before the war broke out. She recalled her mother appearing in the dining room at Wyberlye in early September 1939. The matron hurriedly took them out to a separate room to avoid upsetting the other children – a sensitive thing to do as evidenced by Alice's comment, "It was very painful when parents arrived . . . we felt terribly envious".¹⁷ Ester Friedman recalled that "all we could think was what can we do to bring our parents over". She explained that they would surround members of the Grand Order when they visited the home, begging them to help their parents to get to Britain and being told that they could not help.¹⁸ She writes about her heart aching for her family and being alone in the dormitory: "I heard the voices of the other girls but in my heart was only one voice, one ache". Ester wrote a moving poem to ease the ache, which can be found in the Kindertransport collection *I came Alone* (1990).¹⁹

Several of the girls searched for people with the same surname in the telephone book to ask them to help their parents. Eva Wohl never received a reply to her letter to one Maurice Wohl. While Ester's effort resulted in

15 Eva Urbach, interview 30857, Visual History Archive.

16 Masters, interview 22608.

17 Lotti Blumenthal, interview 44146, Visual History Archive; Masters, interview 22608.

18 Friedman, interview 18331.

19 Ester Friedman, poem in *I came Alone: The Stories of the Kindertransports*, ed. Bertha Leverton and Shmuel Lowensohn (Lewes: Book Guild, 1990), 100.

a domestic visa for her sister, she was unable to get out of Germany in time and was murdered. Once the war broke out, the girls knew they were unlikely to see their parents again. Ulli was so hysterical at this thought that staff threw a glass of cold water over her to calm her down.²⁰ Nevertheless, of the twelve women at Wyberlye whom I have studied, five were reunited with their parents before the start of the war.

After September 1939 many of the contributions being made by members of the Grand Order Sons of Jacob towards the girls' maintenance stopped and did not restart, this despite the urgings of the Grand President on two occasions that they do their best to resume the payments to the Refugee Fund.²¹

From May 1940, girls aged sixteen or over had to leave the home because Burgess Hill was designated as a protected area which was out of bounds to adult refugees. Ester was called into the matron's office on her sixteenth birthday in September 1940 and told that she had to leave the home that day. She reports that she was very upset at first, particularly at the thought of leaving the younger children. Who, she wondered, would read them a bedtime story?²²

Wyberlye was requisitioned by the military authorities in early 1941 and collections for the refugee fund ceased altogether. The Movement for the Care of Refugee Children from Germany and the Polish Refugee Committee were notified that they needed to take the children back. The Movement's request for a refund of money it had paid in advance for the children's care was turned down by the Grand Order because of its expenditure on clothes for the children.²³

The interest of the Grand Order Sons of Jacob ended once the building was requisitioned. It seems that the younger girls went to foster homes and the older ones to hostels or into private accommodation, while those whose parents had arrived were reunited with them. There was no further mention of the children in the Grand Order's minutes of meetings. Their care for them had come to an end.

In conclusion: the Grand Order Sons of Jacob provided fifty girls who came to England on the Kindertransport with a home and security for a period of up to two years. The views of those women whose testimony I heard overwhelmingly mirrored Eva Urbach's comment that "the Grand

20 Adler, interview 32900.

21 GOSJ, Minute Book, MS 422, A4216 7/2/6/1939.

22 Friedman, interview 18331.

23 GOSJ, Minute Book, MS 422, A4216 7/2/6/1941.

Order Sons of Jacob looked after us really, really well. We were very happy there.”²⁴

24 Urbach, interview 30857.