

Millisle, County Down—Haven from Nazi Terror

The story of the Refugee Resettlement Farm, which existed in Millisle, County Down from 1938 to 1948, is one of the little-known 'secret histories' of the Second World War in Ireland. To this remote, disused farm on the beautiful Ards peninsula, came, in the late 1930s, Jewish children who escaped on Kindertransports, together with older members of religious Zionist youth groups, and some adults, all refugees from Nazi terror.

In the years before the war, hundreds of thousands of persecuted Jews in danger of their lives tried desperately to leave Nazi-ruled Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. After Kristallnacht (night of broken glass) on 9 November 1938—when hundreds of Jewish synagogues, businesses and shops were burned, smashed and looted, and Jews in towns and cities all over Germany and Austria were violently attacked, beaten and imprisoned—they redoubled their efforts to leave. But hardly any country, in Europe or elsewhere, including Ireland, allowed penniless refugees—most of their possessions, their businesses and homes had been confiscated by the Nazis—into their countries in any numbers.

Escape of the children

The Kindertransport rescue operation was unique, in that about 10,000 unaccompanied children from three months to seventeen years of age were permitted entry into the United Kingdom on block visas. Funds were raised, guarantors and foster families found, and the escapes organised, in groups of two and three hundred, by a small but heroic group of volunteers, Jewish and Christian, including Quakers and Methodists, under the auspices of the London-based Refugee Children's Movement.

Frightened and bewildered, the children were put on trains clutching a few precious belongings—they could bring nothing of value. Most of the Kindertransport children never saw their parents or families again. To this day, they live with painful memories of their parents at the railway station holding back tears as they waved their last goodbye. Because of this scheme, and because of the courage and selflessness of the parents in sending them to safety, these children escaped certain death in the horrors of the ghettos and concentration camps. As it was, of the six million Jews who were murdered in the Nazi Holocaust, about a million and a half were children.

In December 1938 the first Kindertransport of 206 children arrived from the Hook of Holland to Harwich, on the east coast of Britain. Priority had been given to orphans, children whose parents were in concentration camps, and boys threatened with deportation to camps. They were first sent to an unoccupied holiday camp at Dovercourt, near Lowestoft. Other Kindertransports followed, until, with the outbreak of war in September 1939, the borders were sealed, and the Kindertransports ceased. A lucky few of these children had relatives in England; the rest were accepted into foster homes, boarding schools or hostels all over Britain. And some were sent to Northern Ireland, a place which most of them had never heard of.

Ecumenical response

The small Jewish community of Belfast responded wonderfully to the needs of the young refugees who ended up in Northern Ireland. A Refugee Aid committee was set up, and funds were raised from the communities of Belfast and Dublin, from the Central British Fund, and later from the Northern Ireland ministry of agriculture. Also in Belfast, the Committee for German Refugees was launched under the umbrella of, and with funding from, the Joint Christian Churches, including Presbyterians, Methodists, Church of Ireland, Quakers and Catholics.

A hostel was established at Cliftonpark Avenue, Belfast, initially for the older group of refugees. When the Kindertransport children began arriving, nearly every Jewish family, and some non-Jewish families, took a child into their homes. In May 1939, Barney Hurwitz, Leo Scop and Maurice Solomon of the Refugee Aid Committee leased a derelict farm of about seventy acres—part of

which had previously been used for bleaching damaged flax—on the County Down coast. The lease is said to have been signed by Barney Hurwitz, president of the Belfast Hebrew Congregation, and the owner, Lawrence Gorman, over a drink at Mooney's bar, in Belfast's Cornmarket.

Arrival at 'the farm'

'The farm', as it became known to its inhabitants, was situated close to the village of Millisle, about twenty miles from Belfast. The children arrived from the Belfast hostel in the summer of 1939. They found a few derelict barns and outbuildings, and a dilapidated stone farmhouse known as Ballyrolly House. The night they arrived was remembered by them as one of howling winds and heavy rain; the tents leaked and they woke up soaking wet. The next night they were moved to a newly whitewashed cowshed. An old stable with rain trickling in served as the dining room. As the only toilet facilities were outside privies, latrines had to be dug.

Gradually, with the assistance of the Belfast Committee and local people, conditions improved. The fields were cleared; the younger children helped to gather stones and uproot weeds and thistles; the older ones, together with the adults, dug, hoed and planted grain and vegetables. Ballyrolly House was cleaned up and made habitable. Long wooden huts were built, providing dormitories and a few small bedrooms. The cistern was cleaned and a rotary hand pump supplied, and eventually there were showers, flush toilets, a recreation room with billiards and table tennis, offices, and a small synagogue. Later a large, twin-gabled structure was built, which included a cow byre, with workshops and storage rooms above; here, among other items, the refugees' suitcases were stored—for most of them, all they had left of their former homes and families.

Building a community

Up to eighty people, including the children, lived and worked on the farm at any one time. In all, from the first arrivals in 1938 to its closure in 1948, well over 300 adults and children are believed to have passed through it. It was run as a co-operative farm, patterned on the kibbutz principle; all the children, even the youngest, worked on the farm, and received a shilling per week pocket money; later this rose to half a crown.

The children attended the local school, where the head teacher, John Palmer, sat each refugee child with a local child, to help them learn the language. Mrs Mawhinney taught the under-eights. At fourteen, many continued on to local secondary schools, including Bangor Grammar School, Bangor High School, and Regent House. Several young refugees also attended night school in nearby Donaghadee, and joined local scouts, Red Cross First Aid classes, and—for boys from fourteen to seventeen years—the local Air Training Corps.

The farm manager was Eugen Patriasz, a Hungarian refugee, who had a university degree in agriculture from Vienna, but no practical experience. Several local people were employed alongside the refugees, teaching them farming skills, and considerable help was given by neighbours. Franz and Edith Kohner, refugees from the Sudetenland with two young children, administered the farm, bought the supplies, managed the rationing, coupons, blackout and other wartime problems. There was much paperwork. Despite being refugees from Nazism and having good reason to hate all that Hitler stood for, the refugees from Germany and Austria were designated 'enemy aliens' and subject to restrictions: they could only reside in designated areas; there was a 10pm curfew; an Aliens Registration Book was required, and a permit needed from local police to leave the farm, even for one night.

Although he was a saxophone player from Vienna, Erwin Yakobi (known to everyone as Yakobi) was put in charge of the children's health and welfare because he came from a medical family. According to the refugees, Yakobi, a small rotund man with a sweet smile, provided them with much-needed emotional support. Along with other older refugees, all these people played a part in the difficult job of welding this disparate group of young people, of varying ages, from different countries, many of them children alone, many emotionally scarred, and all displaced, into a thriving, working co-operative farm community.

Life on the farm

By October 1940, the farm had two Clydesdale workhorses, seven cows, 2,000 chickens, sixteen acres of vegetables, and the rest in cereals. Crops included oats, barley, wheat, carrots, Brussels sprouts, cabbages, cauliflowers, potatoes, onions, turnips, and maize. In 1941, with the aid of government grants and donations, including one from the Dublin Jewish community, a Ferguson tractor was acquired.

Eventually there was a dairy where butter and cream were churned, a kosher kitchen, a sewing room and a laundry, and a workshop where farm and domestic machinery was repaired. There was a carpenter, and even a cobbler. Over time the refugees got to know their neighbours, who were initially suspicious of these German-speaking foreigners. The children played football with the locals, and they are still remembered today by a few older Millisle residents. There were strong connections with Belfast's Jews, many of whom visited frequently. During the summers of the war years, young volunteers came to help, mostly from Dublin's Jewish community, and long-lasting friendships were formed.

But, sharing as they did past harrowing experiences, and understanding each other's underlying feelings of homesickness, loss and anxiety about the fate of their families, inevitably the refugees were closest to each other. Once the war had begun, postal services between belligerents ceased, and, apart from the odd letter smuggled out through Switzerland or America, the refugees only heard news of their families from infrequent, brief, Red Cross messages limited to fourteen words. Many heard nothing from their families for years on end. And, for the older ones, there was the ever-present fear of a Nazi invasion of Britain or Ireland, which, in 1940-41, appeared a strong possibility.

Meanwhile, daily life went on. For recreation young people played ping-pong, billiards and card games, and listened to the radio, especially to the BBC news, which they followed anxiously on a war map on the wall; they played gramophone records—classical, swing and jazz. Monopoly was popular (the Austrian and German versions with which they were familiar), and for boys especially, constructing model aeroplanes. In summer, they went swimming at Millisle beach, played football, held concerts and dances. Sometimes five or six people would hire a rowing boat and spend the long summer evenings fishing for herrings.

They all loved the cinema and frequently walked the three miles to the bustling resort of Donaghadee, where the refugees were allowed free entry to the Regal Cinema. It was here, in 1945, that they saw the horrific newsreel pictures of the newly liberated concentration camps, although many still did not relate the victims they saw on film to their own families. Occasionally they visited Belfast for the cinema or for shopping, limited though that was due to cost and rationing. Some were invited to visit the Dublin families of volunteers they had got to know. Generally speaking though, travel was not easy during the war years. Fuel was in short supply and severely rationed. If they travelled at all, it was by bicycle or horse-drawn cart, or 'shank's mare'.

The end

Most of the refugees remained at Millisle until the end of the war, and some stayed on until it finally closed in May 1948. As they grew older, many left to join the Pioneer Corps of the British Army, or to get jobs, and a few, with financial support from refugee organisations, went on to further education at Queen's University. At least one girl completed her nurse's training at Newtownards Hospital.

Only some time after the end of the war in 1945, did they finally learn the dreadful truth of what had happened to most of their families and loved ones: while the children were growing up on the farm in relative safety and tranquillity, they had, unknowingly, almost all become orphans. Most found that their entire families had perished in the Holocaust. Although a lucky few went to remaining relatives in Britain, Canada or America, most had to make their own lives and their own futures, alone. It says much for the courage and determination of the Kindertransport children that despite everything, so many went on to live positive and productive lives.

Epilogue

When I visited the Farm (now privately owned) to research a book, I was welcomed by the present owners. Local Millisle historian Bobbie Hackworth, who attended the village school and played football with the refugees, showed me around. Although the wooden huts which housed the dormitories and the recreation room are no longer there, the original stone farmhouse, Ballyrolly House, remains, as do the barns and out-buildings and the twin-gabled structure housing the byre; this had been built by the refugees under the direction of Adolf Mundheim, a civil engineer, a refugee from Hanover, of breeze blocks made on the farm.

The dunes on Millisle beach, where the farm children played—'The Knowes'—no longer exist. But you can still walk, as the refugees did, the three miles along the shore from Millisle to Donaghadee, although the cinema they visited is now the community centre. The Ballycopeland Windmill, just outside Millisle village, a landmark to the farm children at the time, has been restored and, with the miller's house, is open to the public.

Although the former refugees are now dispersed to Britain, America, Canada, and other places, a few of the former residents still live in Northern Ireland. Edith Kohner, now in her eighties, living in nearby Newcastle, provided me with the photos reproduced here and detailed recollections of her years at the farm, in which she, her husband and family played such an important part. And in the modern Belfast Synagogue there is a plaque put up by the former refugees, the children of Millisle farm, expressing their heartfelt thanks to the Belfast Jewish community for their help and support during the Second World War.

*Marilyn Taylor is a writer and librarian. Her *Faraway Home*, a work of fiction based on the Millisle story, won the Bisto Children's Book of the year Award, 2000.*

Further reading:

B. Barton, *Northern Ireland in the Second World War* (Belfast 1995).

M. Hayes, *Sweet Killough Let Go Your Anchor* (Belfast 1996).

M. Taylor, *Faraway Home* (Dublin 1999).

B. Turner, *...And the Policeman Smiled; 10,000 children escape from Nazi Europe* (London 1990).