



The Children' "Ark": A Story of Hope

30.06.2004 | Ben Shlomo Hakohen, Yosef

Yosef Hakohen, an educator and writer living in Jerusalem, recounts the moving story of how 500 Jewish schoolchildren were sheltered in the village of Shefford, England, during World War II, and what the villagers learned about Jewish life and traditions.

The Children's "Ark": A Story of Hope

Over sixty years ago, a sea of anti-Semitism engulfed Christian Europe. Within this stormy sea, there was a little-known "ark"—a place of refuge and shalom for some of the suffering children of Israel. The story of this ark begins in London on Friday, August 31st, 1939 – three days before the outbreak of war with Germany. The British government had decided to evacuate all the schoolchildren of London to the safety of the countryside. According to the plan, each school in London would be relocated to a village in the countryside, and the children would be housed in the homes of the local residents. The exact arrangements for housing, food, and learning facilities, however, would be taken care of "after" the children arrived, for the government wanted to keep the destination of these schools a secret until the day of the emergency evacuation.

One of these schools was "the Jewish Secondary School" – a Torah-observant school with five hundred students. Some of the students were children who were raised in England, and others were refugee children who had recently arrived from Germany and Austria. (In most cases, these refugee children arrived without their parents.) The children of this religious Jewish school, together with the staff, were sent to the village of Shefford and the surrounding area. Dr. Judith Grunfeld, the Headmistress of the Jewish Secondary School, wrote a book titled *Shefford* which describes the school's experience in this village, and in the following excerpt, she writes:

" "The Children of Israel" was for most of the villagers just a biblical term, evoking a picture of wandering caravans in the desert moving towards the Promised Land. One Godfearing woman, when told who had arrived, called excitedly out to her husband, "Tom, come quickly, the Children of Israel from the Bible are here." Others had associated the word "Jew" with mean merchants, or had acquired an imaginary picture of Jews sprouting horns on their foreheads. "But you have no horns," one woman actually remarked in genuine surprise to one of the boys whom she had taken into her house."

It may be that this particular boy was my neighbor, Dr. Leo Levi, as he had been one of the students in Shefford, and he remembers that his hosts had told him that they were surprised to discover that he didn't have horns and a tail! In this next excerpt from the book, the author describes the encounter of the Jewish children with their Christian hosts during the first, chaotic day:

"Teachers and helpers told me of the great difficulties that our children had encountered when they arrived in the foster-homes. Everywhere a welcoming meal with some especially nice things had been prepared for them. Foster-parents and their own families had been eagerly watching the new additions to their household and had joyfully anticipated how they would relish the first meal, a ham omelette, that token of welcome that had been so lovingly prepared for them. And everywhere it had been the same story. The children, shy and tired, had not touched the meal, had shaken their heads and hardly sipped a few drops of tea. They had showed signs of embarrassment. Some had been able to say a few words of "thank you" that obviously came from their hearts, but they had all succeeded in creating in those village homes an atmosphere of disappointment and frustration. . . . At the baker"s, over the garden fence, at the fishmonger"s and at the post office, neighbors exchanged tales about the unappreciative evacuees. . . . Our teachers had heard about this wave of disappointment and had decided that they would visit the houses, one by one, and speak to the villagers and explain the situation to them; explain that these were Jewish children and that they were brought up to obey the "Law of Israel", that they had been taught to observe the dietary laws according to the Bible, that some of them had just come over from Nazi persecution, could not speak English and consequently were unable to explain why they had to refuse the truly delicious meal which had been so thoughtfully, nay so lovingly, prepared for them, but that they were nevertheless, truly and sincerely grateful for all the kindness shown to them."

The villagers tried to understand, but they found it difficult to accept these "strange" children. And the situation became worse with the arrival of "Shabbos" – the Jewish Sabbath – on Friday evening. As the sun began to set, the children and their teachers gathered together to chant the traditional prayers welcoming the Shabbos Queen. They then ate the Shabbos meal that the school had prepared, and after the meal, the children returned to their hosts. Dr. Judith Grunfeld describes the Shabbos encounter with their foster parents:

" "Johnny switch the light on just here on your right while I hold the bucket" the farmer would call out from the stable to the evacuee whom he wanted to show his cows. "Sony, I have to go over to the greenhouse, you can come with me and carry the torch for me", "Jackie, will you put the kettle on the fire, please, Granny fancies a cup of tea". "Here are two shillings, run over to the pub and get me a packet of cigarettes." "

The children, however, could not fulfill these requests, for they did not want to violate the laws of Shabbos. The villagers did not fully understand that these children were keeping the laws of their Sabbath, and they decided that they were no longer willing to keep the children:

"The children slept, but the villagers did not. In the Billeting Officer"s house the telephone would not stop ringing. At the local pub there was arguing going on. They had to give vent to their feelings: "Fancy sending us these children, they can"t even speak English, they won"t eat with us. . . . Strange ways they have, poor kiddies, but what about those big ones, foreigners in every way." At the Rector"s house, at the Vicar"s, there were continuous phone calls too, conveying complaints and bewilderment. The Vicar himself was disappointed. He had hoped to fill his Sunday School and find new members for his church choir. Neighbors called each other and early next morning, with the postman, the milkman, at the butcher"s, at the baker"s, there was one topic all through the village and they all agreed that they would not take this lying down. They had been cheated in the fulfillment of their national duty. They had wanted to take little evacuees to their houses, to their hearts, to their churches and Sunday Schools. They had intended to make them a part of their own family. But with these children this was simply unthinkable. They were so totally different from what they had expected them to be, and some of the little ones cried all the time. They could not communicate but had the look of hunted animals. The bigger ones, many of them charming and polite, spoke and laughed in a different language and did not eat anything but bread and drank only lemonade. They did not join in prayers, they had strange books in their luggage, had strange cotton squares with fringes under their shirts. It all seemed such a big mess. "We shall have to organize their exodus back to London in exchange for children of our own brand and faith." "

In the next excerpt, the author describes what happened in the days that followed:

"And while the villagers were angry, the little children, unaware of all the annoyance they had caused, slept peacefully in the various homes where the revolt was brewing. The *Siddurim* (Prayer Books) were lying by their bedsides, *Arba Kanfoth* (the square garments with fringes) were dangling from the chair, *Yarmulkes* were on their sleeping heads. They were blissfully ignorant of the plan that concerned them so much. "But behold the Keeper of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers." The next morning the sun rose and the children awoke. Some of them, being rested, had a captivating smile, some took a fancy to the little dog in the house or to the canary, some had a lovely way of saying "Thank you very much" and looked so pathetic that one's heart could melt. They were all very clean, and surprisingly well-mannered. . . . Although they were so young they had a way of looking after themselves and after their younger brothers and sisters. Their habits were immaculate; they never asked for anything. It was very strange. One could not even say what caused it or how it came about, but it is a fact that soon enough Mrs. B. told Mrs. H. that her little evacuee had settled down so very well and Mrs. H. retaliated by praising her own little girl. The Rector and his wife, the Reverend and Mrs. A. McGhee, took their seven evacuees for a treat to Whipsnade Zoo and felt proud of themselves to own such well-mannered young men. . . . It is a fact too that not long afterwards freshly-washed *Arba Kanfoth* were seen dangling from the washing line in Mrs. K.'s pretty garden, and Moss, the village grocer, got in a supply of kosher margarine because so many customers asked for it "so that Jackie (or Freddie or Bernard) could have a piece of bread with margarine instead of eating the bread dry all the time". . . . And Mrs F. went upstairs to switch the light off in Simon's bedroom, because "I know the boy will sleep all night with the light on if I don't do it for him as it is his Sabbath." "

As the months went by, the villagers fell in love with their "Jewish children." They became familiar with Jewish traditions, and they began to respect the children for remaining loyal to their traditions and beliefs in a strange environment. After all, many of the children were refugees whose parents – if they were still alive – were in the hands of the Germans; yet, the children remained loyal to the religious education that they had received from their parents. As the author writes:

"Slowly and surely these Jewish children, firm and sure in their actions, firm and sure in their loyalty to the principles of their upbringing, captured the hearts of their hosts, their foster-parents, as they were called. Slowly the relationship developed, and trust and pride grew in the hearts of those kind-hearted people who came to consider the children as their own evacuees, respected them and respected the crowd of them for their steadfastness and loyalty to their own religious tradition, loved them in spite of all differences between them, and kept them in their cottages for six long years. . . . It was also reported to me that at a meeting of the Church Ladies Guild, when they discussed the date for the annual Whist drive which was to raise funds for the church, Mrs. W. objected to the date being fixed on a Tuesday, because that Tuesday she said "was the only day when her evacuee was allowed that month to have his hair cut" (Tuesday was Lag B'Omer) and for that hair-cut she had to take him to a good barber in Bedford, and this was important enough for her." (Between Passover and Shavous, there is a period of mourning when haircuts are forbidden; however on Lag B'Omer, haircuts are permitted.)

These foster-parents respected the religious faith of their guests, and they did not attempt to "missionize." In addition, they began to encourage their evacuees to observe all the Jewish traditions, and boys were encouraged to wear their *yarmulkes*. One Yom Kippur, one of the village mothers noticed that her foster-daughter did not put on her canvass shoes and instead wore her leather shoes. This Christian woman had become familiar with Jewish traditions, and she knew that Jews do not wear any leather on this holy day, including leather shoes. In a firm voice, she asked the young girl, "And why did you not wear your canvass shoes?" The indignant foster-mother felt excluded from the common feeling of parental pride when she saw her evacuee not following the tradition in this particular instance.

In addition, the villagers developed a warm and respectful relationship with the teachers and rabbis at the school. Some of these Torah teachers were also expert artisans, sportsmen, and musicians. Rabbi Dr. Solomon Schonfeld, Principal of the Jewish Secondary School, was well-liked and admired by the local officials and clergy, and the Headmaster of the school, Dr. Abraham Levene, had an asset that secured him high esteem amongst the Shefford population: a vast knowledge of English lore and literature, combined with an English sense of humor. As the author writes:

"He knew how to comment in Johnson's language in response to a remark about the weather, he could speak to the farmer about birds and plants, to the village politician about English constitutional law. He parted with his knowledge freely. He could drown all differences of creed and habit by a witty, intelligent remark. He represented us well at official meetings, addressed local societies, represented the school at local occasions of joy or sorrow, wrote well-received articles in the local paper."

The friendships that developed between the Jewish children and their Christian hosts lasted for many years, long after the children had left Shefford. As Dr. Judith Grunfeld writes in her concluding chapter:

"And for many years, even to the present day, the ties of friendship between those who were once evacuees in Shefford – and are now men and women in the prime of their life – have remained. Many an old Sheffordian coming from America, from Australia or from Israel to visit England goes to Shefford to visit his old former family and to have a look around . . . parcels and cards with seasonal greetings, cards conveying the "Compliments of the Season", still arrive in this little village from many places all over the globe. At various weddings in London in the years after the war the old landlady and the old landlord of Shefford were important and honoured people among the wedding guests. The ties lasted a long time and they still survive."

At the end of the war, the school and its students returned to London. Before they left Shefford, Dr. Judith Grunfeld addressed the villagers, and the following is an excerpt of her farewell remarks:

"In the hearts of all our children, I can safely say, Shefford will continue to live on. There were about 600 children in the course of the six years who have passed through our school in Shefford. When they have become old and grey, I am sure that they will still talk of you. Wherever former pupils meet, Shefford will be affectionately remembered and to God's throne the story will go. While on the Continent children were starved to death and massacred throughout these last grim years, this village gave them sunshine and warm welcome. Somehow they found enough room even in the smallest cottage for the evacuee-refugees. There were clean sheets, sheets which were so difficult to replace. There was motherly care for them when they were ill, presents for birthdays and the seasons of the year, leisure to take them out for a treat, a place near the fire within the circle of the family. Foster-parents and children grew fond of each other, love engendered love and many a story will be told about loyalty that defies years of separation. Men and women of Shefford, you can be proud of yourselves. You have added a very wonderful chapter to the annals of humanity. . . . Now we are going to say goodbye. A part of the road that is called life we have walked together. You were the hosts, we were the guests. The guests are leaving now and they are leaving with a blessing. You all know the famous saying in the Bible when God says to Abraham "Those that bless thee shall be blessed." No doubt this can be applied to these children of Israel that were under your care and the way you have made them welcome here. We pray that the kindness you have shown to them will be repaid to you from above and that the divine blessing may come upon you abundantly so that your own children may be strong and your families happy. We thank you, mothers and fathers and all those who were good to us, the doctor for his medical care so devotedly applied, the sergeant who mingled discipline with kindness, the billeting officer for his patience, the gentlemen of the clergy for their consideration, those who lent us their halls to teach in, gave us their lecture rooms for our prayer assemblies and our meals. Shefford may be small on the map, but we shall see to it that its fame will be spread far

and wide. I hope you will remember us as we remember you, and when teachers at school want to drive home a lesson about how to live up to a great challenge, they will bring up the example of what happened during the Second World War in Shefford, the little village in Bedfordshire."

Before returning to London, she also addressed the staff and students of the school, and she said:

"At times our work seemed too difficult to cope with; but there was a driving force within us that strengthened us and kept us alert; and that force was engendered by the ghastly reports that reached us from the Continent. We knew that God who saved us alive would ask one day ask "And where have you been and what have you been doing while your people were thrown into the burning hell and I kept you alive?" We tried to answer this challenge and we built up a community of children whom we taught to live the way of the Torah and to drink from its living waters. . . . We have thus tried to build one little sanctuary whilst so many have been destroyed."

In the book *Shefford*, the author describes the school as a "Noah's Ark" riding the waves of a great flood of anti-Jewish hatred in Christian Europe. The unique story of this "ark" serves as a reminder that we are all the children of One God, created in the divine image. And this story also serves as a reminder that when we, the Children of Israel, remain faithful to our own heritage and beliefs, we can gain the friendship and respect of others.

Note: The Book *Shefford* by Dr. Judith Grunfeld was published by the Soncino Press to mark the 40th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II. It has recently been reprinted by Feldheim Publishers (www.feldheim.com); moreover, the new edition contains a few memoirs of students at Shefford.

There is also a well-written biography of Dr. Judith Grunfeld. The title of this book is *Rebetzin Grunfeld*, and the author is Miriam Dansky. It is published by ArtScroll (www.artscroll.com).