

## 45 AID SOCIETY EVENT

# Reunited with Flight Sergeant who flew them to Britain after the Holocaust

**Dina Rosell**

16 members of the group known as The Boys who were liberated from Theresienstadt after experiencing a number of other camps and death marches and losing their families in the Holocaust have attended an emotional reunification in North West London with the RAF serviceman who flew them to Britain in his RAF bomber in August 1945.

94-year-old Flight Sergeant Norman Shepherd was 20 when he received the call to pick up the group of orphaned child survivors. They became known collectively as 'The Boys' (although there were 80 girls included). He flew them from Prague to Crosby on Eden in Cumbria. In June 1945, the British Government gave permission for 1000 orphans under 16 to be brought to Britain on the understanding that they would be rehabilitated and eventually emigrate to other countries. So, on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1945, a group of 260 boys and 80 girls orphaned by the Holocaust were flown in a fleet of a dozen Lancaster Bombers from Ruzyně airport in Prague to a group of villages near the Lake District.

In 1963, some of The Boys founded the '45 Aid Society to raise funds for other survivors, give back to

charity and teach the lessons of the Holocaust through an education programme involving second and third generations after the War that involved giving talks in schools across the UK based on the stories of their parents and grandparents.

In his book, *The Boys: Triumph Over Adversity*, historian of the Holocaust Martin Gilbert, movingly describes the reaction of the children and those who received them when they arrived in England. The welcoming committee was led by Leonard Montefiore, a relative of Sir Moses Montefiore, who was the chairman of the Committee for the care of Children from the Concentration Camps, and Joan Stiebel, executive director of the Central British Fund.

Berish Lerner, who was himself a refugee who escaped to England just before the war, was stationed at the hostel in Windermere that was to receive The Boys. While Mr Lerner and other staff prepared for their imminent arrival, they speculated about how they were going to cope with "these traumatised youngsters who had been subjected to almost five years of persecution and witnessed wholesale murder, most of whom had lost parents and families".

Mr Lerner was concerned about other important issues facing



Sajid Javid with members of the 45 Aid Society at their reunion

PHOTO JOHN RIFKIN

religious madrichim like himself. How would the survivors react to the introduction of Jewish traditions "which they were forced to leave behind, which belonged to a traditional Jewish background with observance of kashrus, Shabbos and Yomim Tovim? Would the boys join a minyan for tefillah? Or would they resent being influenced to lead a traditional Jewish life that had been cut off in the ghettos and concentration camps?"

The children were overwhelmed by the kindness of the staff and English people in general as well as amazed and overcome by the beauty and majesty of the Lake District. Michael Perlmutter said, "I was reborn in Windermere in 1945. The promise of England was a dream to a teenage boy who no longer believed that he could believe in dreams. But it happened."

Chaim Liss, from Lodz, said he would "never forget those first wonderful experiences when each of us felt that we were brought back from hell to a new and civilised existence".

Harry Spiro admitted that habits acquired in the camp, particularly involving food, were hard to break. "We would sit at long tables to eat and the bread would be given to the top of the table. The first round of bread never reached the bottom of the table because "the boys" would always take extra bread to hide for later."

Harry, one of the group of children whom Norman Shepherd helped to fly to England 74 years ago, said he felt overwhelmed with gratitude at being reunited with the RAF pilot: "This has been a very emotional evening for us as survivors. I feel happy to be here tonight, surrounded by so many generations, and I feel very optimistic for the future."

Broadcaster Robert Rinder, who is a grandson of one of 'The Boys', Moishe Malenicky, thanked the RAF veteran "for being our shepherd and delivering us to safety".

Home Secretary Sajid Javid said he could think of "few things more important than teaching one's children the lessons of the Holocaust. I think it is so important for the younger generation to hear stories of the Holocaust, especially if they're privileged enough to hear them from survivors as it makes them a witness to what happened."

The Home Secretary also spoke about the occasion when he brought his family to survivor Harry Spiro's house to hear his story, after meeting him at a Holocaust Educational Trust dinner.

Lord Eric Pickles, a loyal supporter of the '45 Aid Society, said: "Tonight has made clear just what a great loss Europe faced 70 years ago, as so much potential happiness and creativity was wiped away by bigotry. There can be no doubt that 'The Boys' have made this country a better place for everyone."

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