

# OUR days

people had no idea where they were going until they got there, as the bus drivers were only told their destination after the bus was filled with children. The local villagers of Shefford, who had never set eyes on a Jew before, were suddenly instructed to welcome these “Children of Israel,” as they called them, into their homes. The families tried to be kind but couldn’t understand why these hungry children refused their tasty meals or why they went to bed with the lights off on Friday nights. It took some time for both sides to acclimate but eventually *kasbrus* and Shabbos became almost as much a part of the villagers’ lives as the children’s.

My mother was an avid diarist; she kept a journal all her life, and it was through her entries that we got a glimpse of her experiences in Shefford during the war. But it was only as adults that we first started to hear these stories. On one occasion, her sister gave her a gift of the book *Shefford*, written by Dr. Judith Grunfeld. At first she was reluctant to read it; it probably brought back too many difficult memories. But after she did, she started to open up. Dr. Grunfeld was a student and colleague of Sarah Schenirer, the founder of the Bais Yaakov movement and the beloved

## A Friend in Shefford

Discovering “long-lost sisters”

By Ann Goldberg

**M**y mother never spoke much about her experiences during the Holocaust. Compared to many others, she was very fortunate. Her parents had sent her and her two sisters to England on the Kindertransport, and although it was traumatic, they were among the fortunate few who were eventually reunited with their parents.

Occasional stories about these years came out in a disjointed way. It wasn’t until I was an adult and my mother was in her 80s that I learned they had arrived in England just before Chanukah. She and her sisters had been separated and lived with three different families. They didn’t know if they would ever see their parents again, or each other. The family that took her in was kind, but she was only 13 and living among strangers who didn’t speak her language. How lonely and sad she must have felt! Although we celebrated many happy Chanukahs together as a family, she told me that she never forgot that first miserable Chanukah in England.

Shortly after their arrival in the country, she and her sisters and all the other children of Rabbi Dr. Solomon Schonfeld’s Jewish Secondary School were evacuated to the small village of Shefford deep in the English countryside.

The British government had decided to implement this evacuation policy to safeguard children once England entered the war, as they were fairly sure that London would be bombed by the German air force.

The evacuation process was very disorganized. The plan was announced on August 31, 1939, carried out the following day on September 1, and Britain declared war on Germany on September 3. Most



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principal of the school my mother attended in Shefford throughout the war. But she was much more than just a principal. She was also a surrogate mother to all her pupils, who were far from home and terribly worried about their families back in blitz-torn London or even still in Nazi Europe. In her diary my mother mentioned Dr. Grunfeld's personal care for each and every child. Once, when she had to spend a few days in the hospital, Dr. Grunfeld came to visit her regularly, and on her return she found "welcome home" gifts from her on her pillow. My mother didn't read us many of her entries; they were probably too painful.

I was amazed that everything was written in English. After all, she was only a young girl when she arrived, with a sparse knowledge of the language, and her diaries were intended for her eyes only. I couldn't understand why she hadn't just written in German. "Never!" she replied. "We never, ever spoke or wrote anything in German. We hated Germany and everything German. We wanted to forget it."

However, her English was far from perfect, and reading her entries years later she was often embarrassed by her mistakes. One entry in particular, one of the first she ever read to us, became a standing joke. Referring to a close friend of hers named Millie she had written, "I stand well with Millie." She was obviously trying to translate the German sentence "*Ich stebe gut mit Millie*," which means "I get along well with Millie." Over the years, whenever she occasionally made a grammatical mistake and corrected herself she would laugh and say, "Oops! That was another 'I stand well with Millie.'" Millie featured frequently in my mother's Shefford stories. It was obvious their friendship had helped both

of them get through this difficult period in their lives.

Fast forward many years. I was living in Jerusalem and part of a group of religious writers participating in a professional forum. We were having a discussion on writing about the Holocaust, and I happened to post that my mother had been in Shefford during "Operation Pied Piper Tomorrow," as it was dubbed. A few minutes later I received an email from a woman named Miriam Lieberman in the United States, telling me that her mother and two sisters had also been in Shefford; maybe they knew each other. She listed their names; one of the sisters was named Millie. I felt my stomach lurch; in my heart, I already had no doubt that this was the Millie of my mother's diary. A quick phone call to my aunt (my mother is no longer alive) confirmed it. I found myself shivering as I felt this new connection to my mother, and all the stories she had told us about her special friend came flooding back to me. A flurry of emails between Miriam, her cousins (Millie's daughters) and me ensued, causing the tears to flow as we exchanged stories of what we had heard about each other's mothers and filled in the gaps about their lives after the war. Sadly, Millie died 28 years ago, but one of her daughters remembers her mentioning my mother frequently "with fondness and longing." It was uncanny how their lives had run along parallel lines. We all felt like we were discovering long-lost sisters.

Mummy, I guess you and Millie have already met again in *olam ha'emes*, but I want you to know that "I am standing well" with Millie's children and niece. ■

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