

Link 5: Ilse Sinclair

Life story of a Jewish refugee who was nanny to the Sturdy family at Melksham Court for a while

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NATIONAL LIFE STORIES

LIVING MEMORY OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

ILSE SINCLAIR

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And eventually, I was supposed to be the nanny of the one who was expecting a baby, and we would be moving to a certain place where they had built a house, and I would be her nanny. And she was utterly charming, and it turned out, they moved to the parents of the other woman, in Gloucestershire, and we arrived in the summer of 1940, or the spring of 1940, in this fabulous manor house in the Cotswolds, in Gloucestershire. And it was just one of the most amazing years of my life. They treated me fairly well, I was their nanny. There were these two young women, the men would be stationed here, there and everywhere, and we were living with the grandparents of the child I was looking after, who were a very aristocratic couple.

Obviously not Jewish?

Not Jewish. And treated me very well. The grandparents treated me very well. The daughter of the house was rather snooty, but that's neither here nor there. I had a very interesting year with them, because every now and then, the mothers of the children, by that time, in the end there were three children for me to look after, because the first woman had a second child, and the other woman had her first child, so I looked after three small children, and it was delightful. I had a very good programme.

Everything was written down. Ilse, get up at 8 o'clock in the morning, bring up breakfast at 8.15, to the Pink Room, to the Peach Room, to whatever. The best thing that happened to me in that house, was that, oh, there were lots of things, one that I got on extremely well with the grandmother of the children, and with the grandfather. When the younger people, I mean, my employees if you like, my employers, had to leave for, I don't know where, but the men were stationed, I wasn't allowed to go with them, because some of these places were what they called "Protected Areas", and foreigners weren't allowed. And the grandparents had decided that they liked me so much, they wanted me as a sort of standby nanny for their daughter, as well as for the friend's children. They wanted me to be there, to stay with them, so that when the family came back with the children, I would always be there.

When they were taking their children with them?

When they were taking their children with them. In that year I was there, I learned about gardening, I learned about English tradition, I learned about English architecture, because the old man was an architect, and he had converted that house from an old manor house, it was a 16th Century house, and he had himself, kind of rebuilt it, and it was a lovely place. I think Maxwell Joseph owned it for a time. It was beautiful. And I was fascinated and I had a very happy time.

So you spent more time not looking after the babies?

Some of the time, anyway, not looking after the children, and in the time when I wasn't looking after the children, I was helping Mrs. Sturdy in the garden, we would make rock gardens, she would take me on a picnic, we would pick stones from a quarry, and she would explain things to me in English, "You know, Ilse, we do this and that, we do that. And tell me about your home." She was interested in me, she wanted to know about my parents, she wanted to know about my background. And we got on incredibly well. She treated me like a human being, and it was wonderful, absolutely super. I think I learned my speaking my English from them. They, they were lovely people. And towards the end of that year, Mrs. Sturdy one day said to me, "How would you feel if we took on a cook, who was a Jewish refugee like you?" Why she asked me I can't think, but she did. I said, "Gosh, that's a marvellous idea, why not?" And she said, "Well, you know our cook's been stealing, and I think I want to give her the boot." And there was also a parlour maid who I got very friendly with, and I've been offered this lady who wants to be evacuated from London, and she will come as a cook, and I wanted you really to agree to that. I thought it was very funny to ask me, but you know And so I met such a close, a woman who became such a close friend of mine, I visited her in the autumn in Memphis, and we went to Florida together, and she's now 85, and she's just a lovely woman. She was a Viennese social worker/psychotherapist, who worked as a housekeeper in London, and wanted to get herself evacuated with her daughter, and she came to live in Melksham Court, which was this place. And so I had a very, very good year in Melksham Court in Gloucestershire, as a nanny. I had a very strict routine. I was paid 15/- a week. I had one half day off a week, and in fact it was the place where I met my future father-in-law. One day, Mr. Sturdy said to me, "Ilse, I'm going into Dersley, (Dursley) to lecture on some refugees, like yourself, on British architecture. Would you like to come with me? Because there were a lot of Bristol Jewish refugees, who've been, who are living there, in a workhouse,

because Bristol is a protected area, they're not allowed to live in Bristol any more, so they're kind of evacuated to this workhouse, and they're living there together, like animals", he said, "It's a ghastly situation, so I'm going to lecture to them." And I went with him. I remember him saying, you know, "It'll be nice for you, you'll meet your own kind again." And I remember thinking, "I don't want to meet my old kind, I'm having a lovely time here." And there was something in me that wanted me to stay with English people who weren't Jewish, who didn't remind me of all the stuff I left behind, and there was a very strong feeling inside me, "No, I want time to stand still. I don't want to be reminded of what happened last year, and what's still going on in Germany." There was a funny sort of feeling going on in me.

You'd closed your mind to it to a certain extent?

Yes.

And didn't want it opened again?

Yes. To a large extent, I closed my mind to all the trauma that was going on early in the War. That was 1940, and I knew my parents were still there, and I didn't really want to think about it. And then I met a lovely old man, who later became my father-in-law, who was a vet, a German vet, and he was evacuated from Bristol, and he became friendly with me. And in fact, very soon after, he and his housekeeper friend, moved into a small place, into digs really, and they shared, they had two rooms, or three rooms, in somebody's house. His son became my husband, but not until years later. But from the moment he set eyes on me, he wanted me for a daughter-in-law. And it was very funny, because he had twin sons, and he had another son in Israel, and he constantly talked about his twin sons, who were both doctors, and he thought they would suit me very well.

Both of them?

Both of them! He didn't mind which of them I met. And he kept on saying, "Will you come for tea on Sunday, because my son Paul is coming from Bristol, and I would like you to meet him." And I could never get a day off on a Sunday. My day off was Tuesday afternoon or something, so I never met him. But I became, you know, very friendly with my father-in-law, and in fact our cook, who was called Senta, the Viennese lady who became a close friend of mine, her father was a Viennese man, was friendly with my father-in-law, and these two men kind of, they wanted to get me married, but I was only 18 and I wasn't going to get married yet, and you know, they tried to manipulate me into meeting Paul, or Carl, they didn't mind who, who were called Schnitzler, and had come from the Rheinland. Well, the job went on, and my friendship with Mr. Schnitzler went on. Meanwhile, I was asked by the sister of my old friend Marian, would I be her nanny near London? She had been evacuated, or she'd taken herself off with her husband, to Surrey. East Moseley in Surrey. Would I be their nanny, and look after her little boy, and they would offer me 20/- a week, and a whole day off a week, and I would be near London, where most of my friends were, and it would be like home. And I was in a terrible dilemma. I liked my job, I liked my friends, I liked my way of life. I loved the place, Melksham Court, but I realised that there was a war on, I realised that I would

never meet other young people, I was very isolated from young people, and my friend Senta pushed me out of that nest. She said, "You must get away from here. You'll never meet anybody you should meet. You'll never meet a young man. You must get out into the world, you must do other things." And she said, "This is not the right place for you." She hated me leaving, she pushed me out.