

CBT Library Highlights: Lidingo 1/10/10

Lidingo : Memories of the small Swedish haven which 200 girls called 'home' after the Holocaust

by Chana (Igell) Mantel, translated by Edward Levine, Machon Yachdav, Jerusalem 1998

It was 1945. Sweden had taken in several thousand Jewish refugees, most of them widowed women and orphaned children. Some were sent to foster families; others were still in refugee camps. Still others were being treated in hospitals throughout Sweden, attempting to regain their physical and emotional health after six years of starvation, torture, displacement, and humiliation.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, the German-born rabbi who had served in Denmark and found his own haven in neutral Sweden, was serving as a representative of the American *Vaad Hatzalah*. He travelled to the refugee camps and discovered that, although the physical needs of the women and girls were being looked after, no provision had been made for their religious or educational needs. He conceived of a residential program to minister to these broken girls and bring them back to full lives. Rabbi Wolbe personally petitioned the Swedish government for help. A run-down dormitory on the island of Lidingo was procured. He hired Rabbi Benyamin Zev Jacobson, himself a refugee from Copenhagen, and his wife to teach the girls and also Mr. Nissan Igell as head administrator and his wife to serve as housemother. Much to the dismay of the Reform Jewish establishment in Sweden, who favored assimilation into Swedish society, Rabbi Wolbe and Rav Jacobson scoured the country for girls who were in danger of being lost to their Jewish heritage and offered them a warm, safe environment in which to resume their studies and their traditions. Approximately 200 girls passed through Lidingo, most able to resume 'normal' lives after living in Lidingo. A few girls could not overcome their traumatic experiences and had to be returned to long term therapeutic settings. Some of the hospitalized survivors were never discharged alive, succumbing to the ravages of their bodies and spirits.

The curriculum in Lidingo consisted of secular and religious studies. The refugee girls came from all over Europe and therefore spoke many different languages. Initially, classes were actually taught in German, it being the only universal language among them. Naturally, this was rather repugnant to the girls and it was soon decided to intensify the Hebrew language classes with the aim of using Hebrew as the universal language of instruction and conversation. The girls were highly motivated to learn Hebrew since they were nearly unanimous in their desire to immigrate to Israel. This goal was accomplished, making it easier for the girls to settle in Israel when the school finally relocated to Haifa in 1948. By that time, many of the girls were young women who soon married and started their own families. Rabbi Wolbe and the Jacobsons and

the Igells all settled in Israel soon afterwards and they remained in close contact with their former charges, continuing to 'parent' them by helping and advising them throughout their lives.

This book was written by the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Igell. She knew the girls personally while they lived in Lidingo and then afterwards in Israel. The group stayed in close touch with each other, attending reunions and *s'machot* with their Lidingo 'sisters' who were the only family that most of them had after the war. The author interviewed many of the women, now grandmothers, to reconstruct the story of their three years in Lidingo. Included are poignant recollections of their lingering fears, nightmares, and problems adjusting to life after their war experiences. Excerpts from the girls' diaries comprise the appendix of the book.

Although the style of the book is very straightforward, even somewhat plain, it is hard to know whether that is the fault of the translator or the writer. The chapters are short and the history is somewhat idealized at times, painting the adult rescuers as flawless saints. In fairness, one does get the impression that the teachers and administrators of the school were *moser nefesh* to the point of near-saintliness, giving up their own homes and family life to minister to these youngsters. The story itself is very moving both from the point of view of the girls who had to overcome so much to return to normal life and from the viewpoint of the extraordinary sacrifices which the staff made to tend to these broken children. The recollection of this little known episode in postwar Jewish history serves as a reminder of the tremendous odds against Holocaust survivors in countries all over the world as they sought to reestablish themselves and rebuild their lives.