

Weekend / Special reunion

# Celebration of survival

Survivors Harry Spiro, Sir Ben Helfgott and Janek Goldberger were joined by other 'Loughton Boys' at a '45 Aid Society reunion, writes Jenni Frazer

**H**arry Spiro was nine years old when war broke out in 1939, living in Piotrkow, in Poland, with his parents and younger sister, Gita. "We heard how Jews were being treated in Germany," he told *Jewish News*, "but in the first weeks after the Germans invaded, nothing really happened. And then they established a ghetto, the first in Poland, and everything changed".

But Harry – like fellow Piotrkow resident Sir Ben Helfgott and Janek Goldberger, from the Polish town of Bielsko Biala – survived. After six years of indescribable persecution, the three men were fortunate enough to become members of a 700-strong close-knit group of young orphans, known as 'the Boys', brought to Britain by the Central British Fund [the forerunner of World Jewish Relief] in August 1945.

After landing first in Carlisle, the group, ranging from young teens to those in their early 20s, were sent initially to Windermere in the Lake District.

That is well-known. What is less well-known is what happened to the Boys when they left Windermere. On Sunday, the families of many of the Boys who were sent to Loughton, Essex, joined in celebration of their survival, and an emotional reunion organised by the '45 Aid Society.

The Loughton Boys were sent to a gloriously green estate called Holmehurst, staying for

just over two years in a 19th century mansion close to Epping Forest. Twenty-six of the Windermere Boys went to Holmehurst, and each of the three survivors who took part in Sunday's warm and welcoming event remembered their time there with great affection.

Maurice Helfgott, one of Sir Ben's sons, said: "About 12 years ago, my parents were in the neighbourhood and my father decided to knock on the door of Holmehurst."

He told the owners he had once lived there. Wendy and Richard Higgins welcomed the couple in, listened to Sir Ben's stories of his time there, and promptly invited them to return for a grand afternoon tea – with a number of other survivors and their families.

So began a close connection between the Holmehurst present owners and the '45 Aid Society, which culminated in a unique two-centre event. Working closely with the '45 Aid Society, the Epping Forest District Museum marked its reopening after lockdown with an in-depth exhibition about the Boys and their time in the area.

The exhibition, featuring objects from the Imperial War Museum and the Jewish Museum, was "hugely popular" in the wider community, according to one of the Epping volunteers. The '45 Aid Society helped the museum secure a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund in order to stage the



Sir Ben Helfgott, Jan Goldberger and Harry Spiro pictured at a lunch inside Holmehurst, the original



Three original Loughton Boys: Jan Goldberger, Harry Spiro and Sir Ben Helfgott, outside the museum with Robert Rinder and Angela Cohen

exhibition. And all the security and local administration on Sunday was provided by a team of e-police officers.

After a visit to the museum, the nearly 100-strong group moved on to Holmehurst itself, to be greeted by Wendy and Richard Higgins and a raft of civic and local figures, including the Lord Lieutenant of Essex and local MP Dame Eleanor Laing. A Blue Plaque on the front of the house now marks its unique history, including the stay of the Boys from December 1945 to mid-1947.

Harry Spiro walked in and remembered playing table tennis in one of the reception rooms. Wendy said that one of the Boys, at that afternoon tea 12 years ago, had "recognised a tree where he had had his first kiss". Upstairs, the Boys had shared bedrooms, four to a room, but "complete luxury" compared to the conditions in which they had lived during the war.

Jan (once Janek) Goldberger, the oldest of the three surviving Loughton Boys, is a feisty 94 who recalled with a tear the night war broke out. "There was bombing in Krakow and so

we – my parents, my two older brothers and my younger sister – tried to get on the very last train out of town. My grandparents came too, but they just couldn't make it. The Germans caught up with us and said, 'Well, you can all go home now.'" He spread his hands in eloquent dismissal.

Jan's elder brothers, at his parents' urging, ran away. The rest of the family ended up in a small town where Jews were rounded up on a daily basis. One night Jan, aged 12, and his father, were in bed "when the Germans burst in and tore me from his arms". Years of different concentration camps followed until he, like many of the other Boys, spent the dying days of the war in Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia, until liberated by the Russians. He never found out what became of his family.

Taking part in Sunday's celebrations were many Second Generation sons and daughters. Robyn Frydman and her husband had come from Florida to honour the memory of Robyn's father, Loughton Boy Gerson Frydman, who became known as Jeff. He had been born in