

The Chivers Estate, Sedge Fen, and the Refugees from the Nazis.

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From April 1933 in Germany and then Austria in March 1938, and continuing in occupied countries, Nazi persecution of the Jews threatened young and old alike, depriving them of possessions and livelihoods. Property damage and destruction and violent physical attack were common and the likelihood of eventual arrest and detention grew. In despair many Jewish people decided to flee Nazi persecution seeking shelter and the possibility of new lives in other countries. A considerable number sought safety in Great Britain but with the outbreak of WW 2 escape became almost impossible.

Early refugees from Nazi persecution were often taken in by humanitarian and religious groups who had to guarantee that financial support or the means of self-support through work was available to the refugees in order that visas could be granted. Just before the war, and briefly at its beginning, Great Britain allowed refugees into the country through a gradually tightening visa system.

Shippea Hill Estate, Sedge Fen,

The Chivers family from Histon, Cambridgeshire, came from the protestant Quaker tradition in which care for fellow human beings was fundamental to their faith. Messrs Chivers and Sons had a large chicory, soft fruit and root vegetable farm and processing factory on Sedge Fen, known as Shippea Hill Estate, right next to the Cambridge – Norwich railway line. A railway siding ran from the factory directly to the main line at Shippea Hill Station.

The estate accommodation was described by Mansfield and Boye:

“There was a shortage of accommodation (in 1909). On the whole of the estate there were only 18 cottages, and there was only one building which could really be described as a house”.

“In 1922 there were 42 cottages and 2 houses capable of housing 300 people in dormitories and mess rooms. In the same year 150 men and 50 women were employed and at fruit picking time 200 extra men and women are required”.

From: ‘A Description of Messrs Chivers and Son, Shippea Hill Estate, Sedge Fen, Lakenheath, Suffolk in April 1922’. Wilfred S Mansfield and D Boye. Transcribed by Roy Silverlock from the original in Cambridge Central Library.

By 1938 the estate was large, with twenty buildings including glasshouses, propagating buildings and also a herb drying building. Apple and plum trees covered hundreds of acres; additionally, there were fields of soft fruit and chicory. Prior to the war workers came from a wide local area including Littleport and Soham and were brought in each day on an open top double decker bus during fruit picking time.

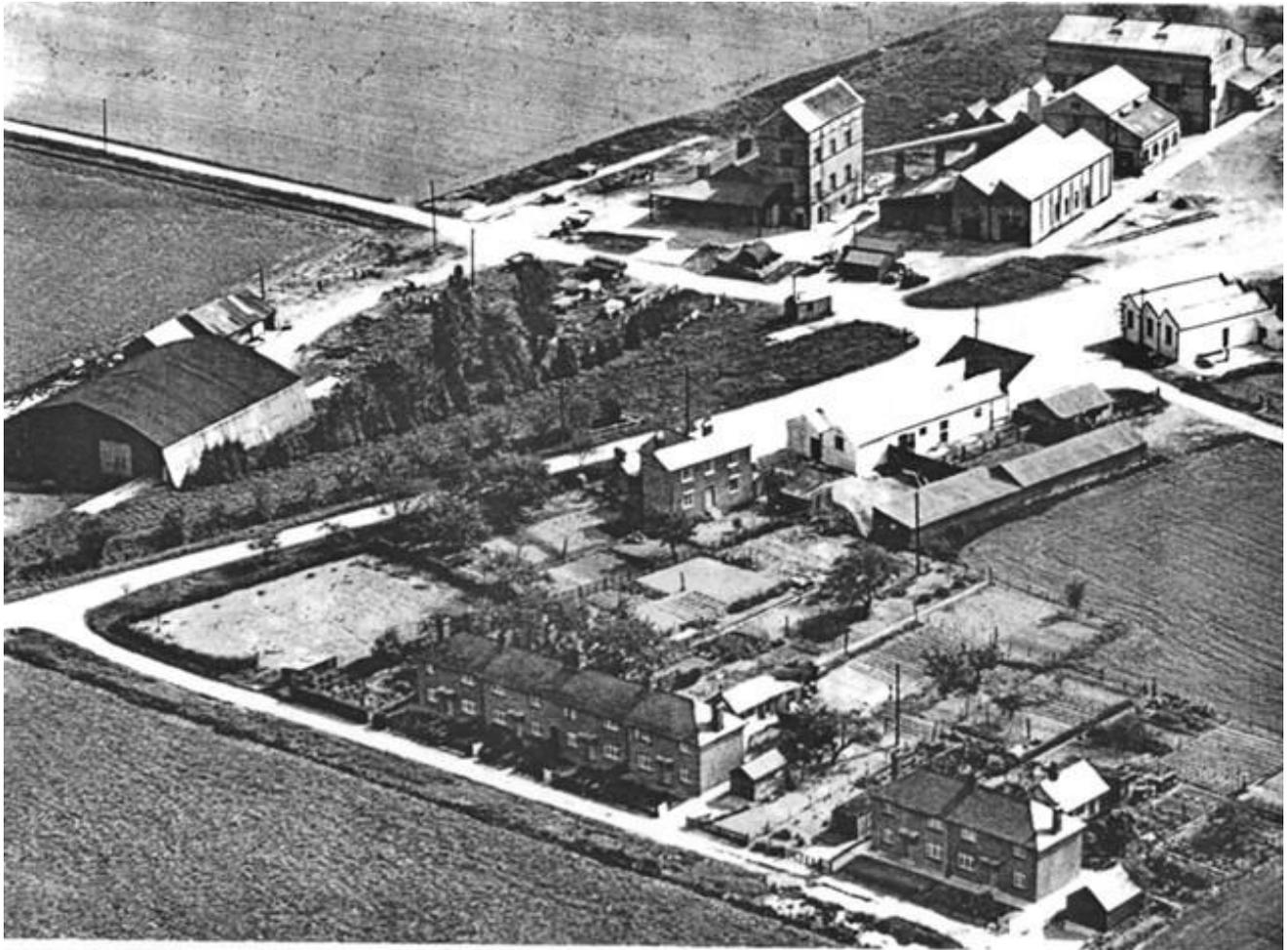
Source: Roy Silverlock: Sedge Fen Topics.

Labour-intensive crops required a considerable labour force, recruitment of which was made more difficult by the approaching war and soon evacuees from towns and cities; single women, or women, whose husbands were serving in the forces, were employed as well as ‘locals.’ The urgent need to increase fruit and vegetable production led Chivers to offer a place for foreign refugees to stay and work, and by September 1939, their labour force had been augmented by refugees fleeing Nazi oppression.

1939: Life on the Estate:

The earliest refugees lived in small estate cottages. When young men arrived a large house in the village was made available. A canteen and club room had previously been provided for the work force, also some sports facilities, and by the beginning of the war Sedge Fen was a thriving community. The highly regarded factory manager, Mr F Howe, lived in a house on the estate with his wife.

Source: ‘Sedge Fen Local History Topics’ and ‘Memories of Sedge Fen: Harry Bye’. 1930-1950. Silverlock.



The Corn and Grass Drying, Milling and Grain Storage Premises (Lot 14); Lodge Farmhouse and Homestead (Lot 15); and Six Cottages

Aerial photograph of part of the factory, circa 1953. Probably part of a sales brochure for the estate.

We have been unable to trace the photographer or the publisher and would be grateful to receive any information so that due credit can be given.

The 1939 National Register shows 26 refugees living on the Chivers Estate, later increasing to 34 of which 24 were men, 9 women, and one girl aged 11. The refugees came from Germany, Austria or Poland: most of the men were skilled manual workers from a variety of trades. The rest, with two exceptions, had either domestic or clerical experience. The exceptions being a hosiery manufacturer and a student. All except two women, worked as agricultural labourers. In June 1939 a refugee doctor joined the group. From time to time some refugees were transferred to other farms and some were moved to internment camps.

The refugees were accommodated in Sedge House, a large house on the estate. It had a billiard room, which was often used for social and religious events, a dining room and dormitories. A female refugee, Mrs Orbach, acted as housekeeper and provided meals cooked in the 'continental' manner.' (As yet no trace of this house has been found and it is likely that it was demolished in the 1950's when the Estate was broken up and sold).

The manager, Mr. Howe and his wife, both made the refugees as welcome as possible and went to considerable lengths to encourage social integration with the other workers. This went a long way towards the building of a relatively normal life. No time was lost in establishing links with the local community.

Sporting events were arranged between the refugees and other workers with occasional parties, quizzes, football matches with local teams, and concerts taking place, culminating in the performance of a play, 'According To Plan', in aid of the Russia Fund in June 1942 at the Peace Memorial Hall in Lakenheath.

Some refugees married in Newmarket. Another couple travelled to marry in a London synagogue. Two refugees became members of the Lakenheath Home Guard and remained so until the platoon was disbanded and some women joined the local WI. For many of the refugees the freedom to follow their religion in safety was of immeasurable importance.

Several events were featured in articles in the local press:

REFUGEES MARRIED:- The wedding of two German refugees took place at the Jewish Synagogue, Cricklewood, London, on Easter Monday. The contracting parties were Miss Lisa Hurtig and Mr Heinz Kowski. The bride was attended by Mrs Kaithe Felbril and Miss Dita Fotenberg. The best man was Mr Leo Hillel. The future home of the happy couple will be at Sedge Fen, on the estate of Messrs. Chivers and Sons Ltd.

Bury Free Press. Saturday 30th March 1940.

SEDGE FEN. A pleasant evening was spent at the Social Centre on Thursday, when a table tennis tournament was arranged between the members of the Brotherhood and refugees who now reside on Messrs Chivers estate. *The Brotherhood was quite outplayed by the refugees and lost by a wide margin, 24 games to 12. *This may have been an association of local men or employees of Chivers.

Newmarket Journal Saturday 27th May 1939.

And eighteen months later:

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE.

Wednesday was the occasion of the holiest observance of the Jewish religion, "The Day of Atonement," and those belonging to that religion fasted from Tuesday evening until Wednesday evening. During this time three services were held in the billiards room at Sedge House, this having been suitably decorated for the occasion by Mr. S Orbach. The services were conducted by Mr. S Orbach, a refugee, and Mr. L Seagul.

Bury Free Press. Saturday 18th October 1941.

Two refugee families:

THE ORBACH FAMILY.

Father: Sucher Zygfryd Orbach. b in 1902 Rudzol, now in Ukraine. A hosiery manufacturer.

Mother: Simche Lea Orbach. Known as Lola, b 1902 in Krakow, Poland. Housekeeper at Sedge House.

Son: Friedrich Willy Orbach. b 1925 in Chemnitz, Germany. Later William (Bill) Morton. TV editor and producer.

Daughter: Stella Orbach, b 1928 in Chemnitz. Married name Shinder.

Anti-Jewish business and property laws threatened the Orbach stocking making business. By 1938 conditions had worsened seriously and when on holiday in Czechoslovakia (This was a way of getting out of Germany), Lola and the children remained there, determined not to go back but Sucher returned briefly to try to tidy up his business affairs. Soon they were reunited and flew to Brussels, then, aided by a relative, on to London on a visitor's visa. They lived for a while in a flat in East London.

After experiencing the early part of the Blitz in London in 1939 the family ended up at the Chivers Farm as part of a group of German and Austrian Jewish refugees. Sucher could speak English, and probably because of his business experience soon played a leading part in the refugee community. He fulfilled where possible religious duties in addition to painting and decorating the billiards room and taking part in numerous social activities as well as working on the land. He appears to have enjoyed excellent relations with Mr. Howe.

Mrs Orbach, Lola, became the housekeeper at Sedge House where the young men lived. She later became a member of the WI.

Stella

Stella went to Sedge Fen School. She passed the 11+ and went to a school in Ely which had been evacuated from London. Aged 15, she decided to leave early and trained as a secretary in Cambridge where she lived at the hostel which had been established for Jewish teenagers at 25 Parkside, Cambridge by a Jewish charity. She was very happy there. At the end of the war she returned to London to live with her parents. She became a British Citizen along with her parents in 1948 and married in 1949.

Friedrich/Bill Morton

Friedrich was 14 on arrival. Too old for school, he will have worked on the land. After the war he changed his name to FREDERICK WILLIAM MORTON (Bill) and became a British Citizen in 1947. Like many young Jewish men he joined the British Army, probably in 1947-48 but could have been earlier(?). He served in Germany as an interpreter and attained rank of sergeant major. It was quite common for ex German refugees to change their names before returning to their homeland as part of the allied forces, presumably to give some protection against hostile survivors of the war. He made a successful career in television becoming an editor and director of several well-known programmes.

Sources: **Stella Shinder**. <https://www.ajrrefugeevoices.org.uk> Stella Shinder interview by Mike Levy 2015.- 'Parkside Refugee Hostel'. Keystage Arts and Heritage. ukholocaustmap.org.uk

Friedrich Orbach/William Morton: Research by Suffolk Archives. Also-Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database. US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

THE WEHSLEY BROTHERS.

Fritz Israel Wehsley. b 1913 in Vienna. Student. Land worker at Sedge Fen.

Karl Israel Wehsley. b 1916 in Vienna. Locksmith. Land worker at Sedge Fen. Present on the 1939 register. Karl was married. His wife is referred to as Mrs Wehsley in newspaper cuttings. They were members of the Austrian Communist Party and fled for political reasons.

The Wehsleys were prominent members of the community, said to be 'leaders'. Mrs Wehsley, a member of the WI appealed on behalf of the Russia Fund at the Lakenheath concert. Both men joined the Lakenheath Home Guard. The Wehsleys returned to Vienna after the war.



KARL WEHSLEY



FRITZ WEHSLEY

Photos taken from the Home Guard platoon photograph. Lakenheath Heritage Group Photographic Archive.

The Newmarket Journal article of December 9th 1944 recorded the final parade of the 2nd. Cambs. and Suffolk Batt. Home Guard. Amongst the speakers Private Karl Wehsley gave this tribute: as he spoke the war was still being fought. Other speakers were the Lord Lieutenant of Cambridgeshire, and the Commanding Officer of the Battalion.

“FAREWELL TRIBUTES TO

HOME GUARD.

Impressive Scenes at Final

Parade.

“Good-bye and God Bless You.”

“For giving us the opportunity to do our bit,” said Pte. Karl Wehsley, of Lakenheath, who was the next speaker. “I as a Free Austrian, express my sincere gratitude to the Home Guard which has made this country free from invasion. My country was the first to experience Hitler’s aggression. We failed to resist because the fifth column stabbed us in the back and collaborated with the Germans. But Britain, when faced with invasion, was united, and the Local Defence Volunteers showed that this nation was not willing to lose her freedom.

By your united action, you have ensured also that Austria will be liberated and be a free and independent country again.

We Austrians who have had the privilege to serve in the Home Guard, and those thousands of my fellow countrymen who are serving today in H.M. Forces realise that to make Britain safe and ensure her victory means also the fight for the liberation of Austria. This spirit of unity, the spirit of the L.D.V – let us preserve it to ensure that a new brotherhood of nations will arise founded on true democracy and security which will surely repay all the sacrifices made.”

The Home Guard was first known as the Local Defence Volunteers- LDV.

In 1950 the estate was broken up into 27 lots and sold. Included in the sale was an ‘exceptionally attractive private residence.’ Whether this might have been Sedge House is unknown. We would welcome information about the possible site of this house.
