



# HELEN MARK MEETS THE WINDERMERE BOYS

The touching story of The Lake District Holocaust Project

**S**am and Ike sat next to each other in an apartment in Manchester. Both now in their 90's their story is about extraordinary human resilience. In the summer of 1945 Sam Laskier and Ike Altman were among the 732 Jewish child survivors of the Nazi concentration camps that the British Government said they would accept into the UK to recuperate. Mostly orphaned and traumatised by the horrors of the camps, the loss of their families, slave labour and deprivation on a level we can't begin to imagine, 300 of them were taken to The Lake District. Between 8 and 16 years old, they became known as The Windermere Boys, though a few girls were included. Hearing their story first hand for Radio 4's Open

Country was a very emotional experience but their strength and spirit was inspiring. Ike rifled through a box of photos, "That's us on the Windermere Steamer boat." It showed 8 teenagers, arms around each other, smiling at the camera. "Many of us had come from different concentration camps. We had somehow survived but our parents, brothers and sisters were taken away from us, sent to other camps, shot or gassed. So at the Lake

buses were waiting for us. We were a nervous lot during all that, having experienced transport to camps, we were most fearful. We were taken into buildings at the Calgarth Flying Boat Factory. "We couldn't believe what we were seeing! Proper beds each, clean sheets, a pillow. And toilets! And new clothes! It was unbelievable for us. We hadn't seen anything like that for many years. Then in the bright morning sunshine we opened the curtains and saw

an immense sense of freedom and we walked and walked over the place, in such fresh air. It was wonderful, but in our hearts and minds it was still very hard for us. At night especially – so many crying, through nightmares, so much distress. Even though they said we'd be fed every day, we'd stuff our pockets with food to stash away. You never forget the pain of starvation." Sam and Ike were kind and gentle, concerned not to

upset me with horrific details of the camps but instead to think about how they

All aged between 8 and 16, their strength and spirit was inspiring

District we all became like brothers and that helped us." Thinking of them he busied himself searching through photos but I saw his tears. "They flew us," Sam explained, "on old Lancaster Bombers to Carlisle. It was dark when we arrived and

beautiful Windermere. We had come from the worst of places, from hell to paradise." "We were so well looked after by medical teams, some of us were not well. But the local people, they were so wonderfully kind to us wherever we went. We felt

survived, went on to find new lives and some sort of normality. "We had 3 months at Windermere, yes a tiny bit of our lives, but such good memories. We will never forget how it felt to be among people who actually cared about us."



They put our beds outside



Collecting buttons

## Kevin Coulter And Mendel's Story Of Kindness

**F**rom Manchester we headed to the Lake District and the Calgarth Park Residential Home. In 1945 it had been a hospital where Kevin Coulter, as a teenage lad, had been a long-term patient. "It was back in the day when they thought fresh air was best and they'd leave us outside in our beds. Many's a time I woke up and there'd be snow on my covers!"

"One day a tall, robed man came to me and said, 'This is Mendel'. From behind him stepped a tiny boy. 'He's seventeen like you,' said the Rabbi, although the boy looked more like eleven. He was very ill with Typhoid and TB. I was handed a Polish/English dictionary and after a few months we conversed freely and became very close. He told me things he'd never told anyone, about the camps and how his family were taken away, his mother, his father, his two brothers and two sisters.

"You can't grasp it, can you?" said Kevin, in his strong northern accent. "My heart goes out to him even now. Mother came to visit me once a month and she'd sit between Mendel and me and hold his hand. I'd see tears running down his cheeks and he wouldn't let go of her hand." As if still picturing the scene, he added, "No. He wouldn't let go... We had nine months together in hospital, then Mendel was moved and I only discovered recently, through the Lake District Holocaust Project, that he was alive and living in Philly! He'd married and had family and when we spoke on the phone... well, I'm man enough to admit it, I broke down like a baby."

The image of his mother's simple but powerful gesture of kindness will always stay with me.

## Trevor Avery Ldhp And Buttons Remembrance

**T**his story of child survivors might have been lost but for Trevor Avery. "About 15 years ago while researching the Flying Boats Factory at Calgarth an elderly gentleman told me, 'this is where the children from Auschwitz came'. I had no idea what he was talking about and I wanted to find out more".

So now, through the small team involved in the amazing Lake District Holocaust Project, there's a hugely significant archive and exhibition.

"Many found it hard to talk, it was so disturbing. They'd lost all they held dear, become slave labour under the Nazi regime, near starved to death."

Trevor led us to The Lakes School at Troutbeck, built on the site of the former flying boat factory. It's where a pupil, Bliss, found it hard to understand the scale of deaths in the concentration camps. So she and her teacher Laura Allen collected buttons to represent a person. Their idea spread and soon buttons arrived from all around the world. "We've at least 6 million buttons, many with personal stories attached. Plans are afoot to commission a memorial sculpture made of buttons."

It's a simple but poignant way to mark the suffering of others, with a permanent museum and exhibition centre now within reach there will always be a remembrance in The Lake District of the Windermere Boys.



## Want To Volunteer?

This summer an archaeological dig will take place on the site of Calgarth Estate, the location which was home to 300 Jewish child Holocaust survivors. Led by world renowned archaeologists Caroline Sturdy Colls and Kevin Colls, it includes cutting edge technological surveys to identify what remains of the estate hidden below ground. For the child Holocaust Survivors these hostels were utterly luxurious. There are opportunities to get involved as volunteers. Please email [info@ldhp.org.uk](mailto:info@ldhp.org.uk) for more information.



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