

WARTIME REFUGEES IN DORNEY

When I was looking at the 1939 Register, recording all those living in Dorney on 29 September 1939, I was intrigued to see two women servants with German names living in Dorney Reach. This seemed odd, as we were by that time at war with Germany, and I wanted to find out more.

The two women were working as servants for Victor Lefebure, who was living in the house called Longwaters in Dorney Reach with his wife and three children. Victor was a chemical engineer of some renown. As a young captain in the Royal Engineers during the First World War, he carried out one of the most successful gas attacks of the war for the French at Nieuport in 1916. Subsequently his expert field knowledge of chemical warfare and his fluency in French saw him promoted to be British Chemical Warfare Liaison Officer with the French. For his services he was awarded the OBE and received honours from the French and Italian governments. After the war he became an industrial chemist but retained an interest in chemical warfare. He published two books which increasingly focussed on the importance of disarming the capability to produce chemical weapons and became an advocate for world peace.

Dorney was not the main home for Victor and his family; their permanent residence was in Golders Green in north London. Maybe the house on the banks of the river Thames offered a tranquil retreat, a place of safety for them in the early days of the war. Longwaters had an acre of grounds and a separate boathouse, which by 1951 had been converted to residential use and was still occupied by the Lefebure family. In September 1939, the household included a governess for the two younger children, and two domestic servants, housemaid Otilie Muller and cook Olga Kalb. Otilie was divorced and Olga was single; both women had been born on 10 August 1895.

A couple of months later, the two women were granted exemption from internment by the British Government as aliens. Tribunals had been set up to determine if an enemy alien should be interned or exempt from internment. Their record cards at the National Archives confirm their dates of birth and state that they were born in Vienna and were of German nationality. They were refugees and did not wish to be repatriated. Otilie's normal occupation was a music teacher while Olga had been an assistant in a jeweller's shop. Both were now domestic servants employed by Mrs Lefebure at Longwaters.

Keen to discover more of their backstory, I guessed that they were probably Jewish and turned to a website specialising in Jewish genealogy. This showed me that Otilie and Olga were indeed Jewish. They were twin sisters and had two older brothers. Their parents had both died before the tumultuous events which hit Viennese Jews in 1938.

At the beginning of 1938 there was a thriving Jewish community in Vienna, numbering 175,000 or nearly 10% of the population. Although a few of them had already left, mainly for Palestine, the majority were carrying on their lives as normal.

This all changed in March 1938 when German Nazi troops occupied Austria and annexed it to Germany – the *Anschluss*. There was an outburst of anti-Semitism in Vienna and Jewish people were attacked and humiliated. In May 1938, the German racial laws were applied in Austria which rendered Austrian Jews stateless with no rights. Those who could sought to leave. Others were arrested and sent to Dachau concentration camp in Bavaria. This is what happened to Oskar Kalb, brother of Otilie and Olga. He arrived in Dachau by train on 24 June 1938 and was transferred to Buchenwald on 23 September.

In Vienna conditions for the Jewish population deteriorated. Kristallnacht in November 1938 saw synagogues burned down and Jewish businesses vandalized and ransacked. More Austrian Jews were arrested and sent to Dachau and Buchenwald. By mid-May 1939, nearly half of Austria's entire Jewish population had emigrated. In May 1938, the British Government had introduced visas for Austrian refugees to restrict numbers; their consulate in Vienna was besieged by Jews anxious to escape, there were queues and backlogs, and many applicants were unsuccessful. But a more lenient approach was taken towards Jewish women entering Britain to work as domestic servants resident in private households. This must have been the route taken by Otilie and Olga.

The process of selecting Jewish women in Vienna for entry as domestic servants was supported there by a Jewish communal organisation and by the Society of Friends. Either might have been the means by which the Kalb sisters found refuge in the Lefebure household. Living in Golders Green, the Lefebure family would have been aware of the plight of European Jews through their neighbours. They also had some connection to the Society of Friends; Victor and his wife Mary had married in a Friends' Meeting House.

Otilie and Olga probably did not spend many years working for Mrs Lefebure. Certainly by 1945 they were living in Luton, and then moved to Islington. They were living in Camden by the time Olga died in 1979, followed by Otilie in 1985.

I feared what might have been the fate of their brother Oskar, incarcerated in Buchenwald. However, I was pleased to discover that he and his wife had obtained immigration papers for the US in Marseille in July 1942, and they had sailed from Lisbon three months later, arriving safely in Baltimore to start a new life.

At a time when there were quite a few strangers living in Dorney, not least children evacuated from London, I wonder what the locals made of the two middle-aged refugees from Vienna. I hope they were made to feel welcome, and that the peacefulness of the Thames Valley was some comfort to them at a time of great upheaval in their lives.

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