

RABBI JULIA NEUBERGER

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD – A TESTIMONIAL

Miriam Rothschild took in some seventy young people, largely boys, in the early war years. She took the most difficult and oldest children from the camps in which they had been placed on arriving in England on kinder transports, and she also took in other children whose parents were interned or who had made their way to England through other routes. Her reputation at the Refugee Committee was that of an unlikely saint. These children had the run of the house, of the garden, and she ensured they got an education. But most of them had had such a tough time already - some of the older ones had already been in concentration camps - that they found it difficult to respond well to her kindness and generosity. Typically, this did not discourage her.

She carried on being willing to host them at home, to pay for their education, to support in later life those who needed it, post-war, and to encourage those who could face it to discover what happened to their parents.

Though many of these young men were deeply damaged, most recognised her immense contribution to their well being. Some stayed in touch, whilst others recounted to those who worked with them later through the Central British Fund or other relief agencies how they met the redoubtable Miriam Rothschild, and how she had been a welcoming and friendly face when they first began to get settled.

There are two other important elements to her achievement. First, she recognised the need of many of the young boys would have for psychological help, and arranged for that to be provided if they wanted it - to the great benefit of some of them, who talked of it afterwards with wonder. This has to be seen against a background of a period, and a mood, when people thought life too short and stressed for such luxury as psychotherapy.

Second, though she was not religious herself, she made provision for kosher food, and for religious instruction and support, for 'her' children. Rabbi Italiener was one of the rabbis she befriended, and he, more than most, gave emotional support to the young men, as well as being a lifelong admirer of Miriam's and a grateful recipient of her generosity before he got himself established. In her honour, he left her the travelling Torah scroll he had brought with him from Germany - which now sits in the South London Liberal Synagogue, having been given by Miriam to my father, Walter Schwab, to find a proper and fitting home after Rabbi Italiener's death.