

# From Berlin to New York via Leicester: The long journey of the Attenboroughs' 'adopted sisters' (Part 2)

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This article continues the moving story of sisters Irene and Helga Bejach who arrived in Leicester from Berlin on a *Kindertransport* just before the outbreak of the Second World War, and who became the 'adopted sisters' of Richard, David and John Attenborough.

## *The Attenboroughs and the University of Leicester*

In October 1931 Frederick Levi Attenborough had been appointed as Principal of the University College of Leicester, later to become the University of Leicester. With his wife, Mary, and their three young sons, Richard aged 8, David 5 and John 3, the family moved into College House on the edge of Victoria Park. College House was built in 1872 as a home for the Medical Superintendent of the former Leicestershire & Rutland County Lunatic Asylum. The entire site along with 37 acres of surrounding land had been gifted to the Borough of Leicester by Thomas Fielding Johnson a retired local textile manufacturer in 1919 for a new University, and in 1921, Leicester College admitted its first nine students. Frederick Levi Attenborough became the College's second Principal and remained in post until 1951, with College House being the Attenborough family home for twenty years, and as such it was the adopted home of Irene and Helga Bejach for seven of those years. It is still used today, now by the University of Leicester's Department of Mathematics.

When Irene and Helga arrived in August 1939 it was not a complete surprise to brothers Richard, David and John. Their parents would often take one or two boys who had never seen the sea with them on annual family holidays to Wales. Richard recalled: 'There were always other children in the house who were in some way disadvantaged. Fred and Mary were constantly looking for ways to address the problems of poverty, injustice and cruelty'. (1)

Fred Attenborough had academic interests in Germany, and became well aware of the deteriorating situation for Jewish academics in the country during the late 1930s. He chaired a committee to bring Jewish academics to Britain, some of whom came to Leicester. As David recalls: 'Such refugees were only allowed into this country if they had jobs here. So the University College offered distinguished scientists from Germany posts as laboratory assistants which they held until

such time as they could either get something more suitable in Britain, or were able to continue on their journey to the United States'. (2) Places were also facilitated for refugee students. The Academic Committee Minutes of the University College give a flavour of the positive action being taken to assist academic refugees, for example, the Minutes of the meeting held on 15th March 1939 record the recommendation that 'in the event of refugee students coming to reside in Leicester, they should be allowed, if they wish to continue their studies, to attend courses at the College without payment of fees'. (3) One of the academics the University College was hoping to assist out of Germany was Dr Curt Bejach. David Attenborough recalls: 'My parents agreed that before he managed to escape they would take his two daughters, Irene and Helga-Maria, and give them a home until they could continue to New York where they had an uncle'. (4) Irene and Helga duly arrived just three weeks before war was declared. Their father and older sister, Jutta, however, were now trapped in Germany.

## *Wartime Leicester and beyond*

When it became clear that the girls' onward journey to New York would have to be postponed indefinitely due to the outbreak of war, Fred and Mary explained to the boys that 'it was their wish to take the girls permanently into the family and to treat them as their daughters. They would become a family of seven as opposed to five and they would all be treated alike'. (5) Richard Attenborough conceded that this sudden change to family life caused tensions, 'but we felt excited rather than compromised'. (6)

Within a month of arriving in a country where they knew little of the language, the two sisters had to accustom themselves to the idea that their new host country was at war with the land where their father and sister still lived and with ever-increasing personal risk, and that they would have to settle into a new school for the start of the academic year. All three Attenborough brothers attended Wyggeston Boys' Grammar School and the school records for Wyggeston Girls' Grammar show that Gisela M. Irene Bejach and Helga Maria Bejach entered the school on 13th September 1939. (7) Helga's daughter, Beverly, says that her mother was 'hyperactive' at school, but in general both girls flourished at Wyggeston. (8)

Although they had grown up in a non-religious environment in Germany, Helga and Irene were always aware of their half-Jewish heritage. At College House whilst no religious rituals were observed by the family, the Attenboroughs employed Jewish chambermaids from time to time who were provided with a room to celebrate key events in the Jewish calendar such as Pesach (Passover). Irene and Helga were allowed to observe these rituals, and whilst they did not participate, this was their first real contact with Jewish religious rituals. (9)



*Helga practising ballet in the garden of College House. (Reproduced by permission of the Florida Holocaust Museum, USA.)*

Helga found Leicester “exciting” and found a strong role model in Mary Attenborough. Helga said of life at College House: ‘They were a most extraordinary family, really brilliant. As well as being intellectual Auntie Mary was wonderful at looking after the house, good at everything. Uncle Fred was stricter. Two gongs would sound at mealtimes, one to wash your hands and one to be at the table and we all toed the line. They were so supportive of my passion for ballet. David and Irene were the same age and they fought but he was very nice to me. He would bring me books on ballet from the library. We were really so lucky’. (10)

Richard Attenborough said that sharing the family home with Helga and Irene in wartime Leicester strongly influenced the future themes of his artistic work and his portrayal of human rights issues in particular: ‘Instead of hearing of the horror of racial prejudice, anti-Semitism and brutality in theory we heard it first-hand’. (11)

Once in Leicester, Helga and Irene talked very little about their former life in Germany, and they were ‘not particularly overjoyed’ even when they received mail from Germany. (12) This may have been in part a ‘defence mechanism’ to suppress their anxieties, but Helga admitted that new interests and activities at school, particularly dance, helped her to look forward and not to the past. (13) She said that dance absorbed her and ‘became my salvation’. (14)

Irene and Helga, aged 16 and 14 respectively, both left Wyggeston on 28th July 1942. Irene’s ‘occupation or further training’ plans were ‘to attend De Montfort College’. (15)

This institution no longer exists, but in 1942 it was known as De Montfort Secretarial College, and was located in Lloyds Bank Chambers, 9 High Street, next to the Clock Tower, in Leicester city centre. (16) The intention was presumably for Irene to undertake vocational training as preparation for any future career.

Helga’s future plans were ‘to live with grandmother – Uxbridge High School’. (17) This is something of a mystery as Helga’s natural grandmothers were not in England at the time. Helga had presumably expressed a wish to leave Wyggeston at the same time as her older sister. Although the earliest state school leaving age at the time was 14, the Attenboroughs, and presumably Helga herself, were no doubt keen to channel her energies

into pursuing some form of continuing education. Records also show that shortly before Helga and Irene left the Wyggeston, Fred Attenborough wrote to the School of Ballet, 79 Wildwood Road, Hampstead, London, on 14th May, explaining the situation of the girls and saying of Helga that she ‘is now 14 and is consumed with a desire to become a ballet dancer. We have sent her to the local school of ballet, the teacher of which is very much impressed by this child and has offered to give her free tuition while she is in Leicester. She is convinced that the child is very good indeed’. (18) There is no record of any reply or any evidence that Helga went to Hampstead.

Helga had first become acquainted with the traditional Jewish ‘hora’ dance on the boat from Holland to England, and this seems to have stimulated her interest in dance, which was to become a life-long passion. Both girls would have had the opportunity and encouragement to see live theatre and to embrace the arts during their stay with the Attenboroughs. Mary Attenborough was actively involved with the Little Theatre in Dover Street, Leicester, and Richard’s thespian beginnings focussed on the same venue from an early age.

It is not known if Helga ever attended Uxbridge High School, but she did at some stage during 1942-43 attend the small private school, Chalfont Lodge, at nearby Gerrards Cross for at least one term. This is evidenced by a report card at the end of the summer term, which records that

Helga had made 'satisfactory progress' and that her conduct was 'very good indeed'. She also displayed 'a keen and intelligent interest' in English Literature. (19) At first Helga was probably living with an aunt, who had moved from Hampstead to Chalfont St Peter during the Blitz. Later she moved into the school as a residential 'boarder', 'back in the jurisdiction of the Attenboroughs'. (20)

In late 1944 and into 1945-6, Helga visited and stayed at three different addresses in Boscastle, Cornwall. In 1944-5 she was enrolled as a student at the innovative Ginner Mawer School of Dance and Drama which had been evacuated from London to Boscastle during the war. Helga was to become a devotee of modern dance, this suiting her physique and personality more than classical ballet. (21)

### *The effects of war in Leicester*

There had been a small influx of Jewish refugees into Leicester from Central Europe throughout the 1930s augmenting the existing community. Many in the 'host' community did not however find it easy to integrate with the new arrivals. (22) There was also a significant influx of Jews from other large cities in Britain, such as London and Manchester, as they sought a 'safer' refuge from bombing. Leicester appealed to a number of immigrants because it was an important European centre of hosiery, textiles and fashion, the so-called '*schmutter trade*'. (23) One refugee from London to Leicester quoted her family's removals man as saying: 'You'll find a better class of Jewish people in Leicester than in the East End'. (24)

Fairly soon after war broke out and with the effects of rationing starting to be felt, households with access to a garden were encouraged to 'dig for Victory'. College House at the time had a reasonable garden area and was 'surrounded by a great deal of open ground presumably to allow for the future expansion of the College. There was a large paddock (in which there was at one time a horse). My father used this paddock to grow vegetables and soft fruit and to keep a pig and chickens'. (25) Helga



*Believed by David Attenborough to be taken in Cornwall. Back row Fred, Helga and probably W. G. Hoskins. Front row, unknown lady and Mary. (Reproduced by permission of Beverly Waldman Rich.)*

later recalled that '(John) and I had the job of feeding the chickens'. (26) As a major industrial city Leicester was always a likely target for German bombing raids, although it did not suffer the same level of damage and fatalities as neighbouring Coventry. Irene and Helga, however, could not have failed to notice various activities on their own doorstep which would have reminded them of the ongoing threat and danger. The iron railings and fencing around Victoria Park were removed to be recycled as scrap metal for the war effort, whilst by 1941 several acres of the western end of the park in front of College House had been transformed into temporary allotments.

On 14th November 1940 Coventry had been attacked by the Luftwaffe. Just five days later on 19th November 1940 Leicester was attacked on the same night that Birmingham was hit. Around 550 houses were destroyed, over 4,000 were damaged and over 80 industrial premises were either demolished or disabled. The area worst hit was Highfields where most of the 108 fatalities and 200 injuries were sustained barely half a mile from College House. Leicester's Synagogue was also badly damaged. The following night, Wednesday 20th November, another smaller raid came even closer to home for Irene and Helga. With wartime anonymity, the *Leicester Mercury* noted: 'A Midland town that had suffered in the bombing of Tuesday-Wednesday night stood in preparedness last night and for many hours suffered intermittent bombing. The raid was by no means as severe as in the previous night, but casualties were caused....A German plane dropped a flare to light up its target, and then a large bomb fell in a park. The blast from

this bomb caused a great deal of damage in houses surrounding the area'. (27) Two parachute landmines had been dropped - the first destroyed a factory in St. Saviours Road, Highfields, which was producing parts for RAF Spitfire fighter planes, and the second damaged beyond repair the large pavilion in Victoria Park, which had been erected in 1876. Later intelligence reports revealed that the intended target of the second landmine was in fact a secret radio transmitter, which was housed in the nearby University College. (28)



Part of Victoria Park, Leicester, converted to allotments during World War II. The World War I Memorial is in background. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.)

#### *Murder and forced labour in wartime Germany*

Following the departure of Irene and Helga to safe refuge in England the situation deteriorated for their father, Curt and sister, Jutta. Jutta had wanted to study medicine in Berlin but was now barred from doing so on account of her Jewish heritage under the 'Rassegesetze', or race laws. She worked in an office for a while and then as 'Zwangsarbeiterin', or forced labour, in a parachute factory. In a letter dated 3rd June 1941 Curt writes from Berlin to Helga in Leicester explaining that Jutta will be returning home at the end of June after four and a half months away. (29) In the same letter Curt refers to Helga's forthcoming fourteenth birthday and bemoans the fact that he is not able to send any gift to her except a small photo of Jutta. Curt makes the effort to remain upbeat and says that they are now starting to make preparations for their 'Ausreise' (emigration). They were apparently on a waiting list for a US visa, and he writes that with luck, they might all be reunited by the end of the year. (30)

Between 8th June 1942 and 17th September 1943 Curt Bejach, a doctor by profession, was sent as forced labour to work in his downgraded capacity as a 'Behandler', or medical assistant, at Waldlager Britz, a camp in Brandenburg, which housed prisoners of war and foreign forced labour workers. Shortly after Curt returned to Berlin on the night of 22nd-23rd November 1943, most of the old *Hansaviertel* was destroyed in Allied bombing raids, including the Bejach family home in Claudiusstraße. Fortunately neither Curt nor Jutta were there at the time, but they quickly had to make emergency housing arrangements. Curt moved into the home of a colleague, Dr Georg Braun, in Berlin-Charlottenburg, whilst Jutta stayed with a friend from school, Birgit von Harbou, the niece of a German

film-maker and screen writer, Thea von Harbou, in a Berlin suburb. Jutta continued to see her father during this time. On 18th December 1943 a message was sent from Jutta on behalf of herself and her father via the German Red Cross to Irene in Leicester, saying they were both well and wishing Irene a happy birthday. The message arrived on 25th January 1944, three weeks after her birthday, with Irene replying in early March that she and Helga received regular correspondence from Uncle Hans in New York. (31) Irene would not have known at the time she replied that her father was by then no longer in Berlin.

In December 1943 a Nazi party circular authorised local security police to deport Jewish spouses of formerly 'protected' mixed marriages if those marriages had

been ended by divorce or death. As a widower since 1931, Curt Bejach was deported by train from the goods station in Moabit, Berlin to Theresienstadt Ghetto on 10th January 1944 with 351 fellow prisoners, where like many deported Jewish doctors, he was forced to continue working in a medical capacity as long as his strength held up. (32) On 17th July 1944 Curt sent a typed letter from Theresienstadt to Jutta saying that he was still receiving correspondence intermittently, and he had received the card celebrating and depicting Jutta's recent marriage. Jutta, now aged 22, had married Axel Grosser, like herself half-Jewish. Jutta was to recall that they took their marriage vows on a copy of the Bible, unlike many young German couples at the time, who swore their vows on a copy of Hitler's 'Mein Kampf'. (33) A letter in English dated 8th May 1945 from Jutta and Axel to Irene and Helga explains that they are now living near Hamburg. (34) Jutta says that they have not heard news of their father since October 1944, but 'at all events we will try to come out of Germany'. In fact it would be another five years before Jutta and Axel finally left Germany and the three sisters were reunited after a ten-year separation. After eight months at Theresienstadt, Curt Bejach was deported on 29th September 1944 with around 1,500 other prisoners to Auschwitz where he was murdered barely a month later on 31st October. (35) Irene and Helga would not learn their father's fate for certain until well after the end of the war.

#### *Emigration to America*

At the end of the war, plans were resumed for Irene and Helga to carry on to America. In a letter to Uncle Hans in New York from a Mr Hohmer, Regional Secretary of the Refugee Children's Movement in Leeds, dated 9th October 1945, Hohmer explains that it was impossible to predict at that stage when the girls might sail as the shipping situation

was only just beginning to return to normal. He had, however, met Irene and Helga in Leicester and assured Hans that the girls 'are a success in every respect'. He also wrote that the girls in turn had 'every reason to be thankful to Mr and Mrs Attenborough for all the care and excellent education they have provided for the girls'. (36)

An abstract from the US Department of Justice 'List or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the United States, List no. 50', shows that Irene and Helga, by now aged 20 and 19, travelled on the Cunard liner *SS Aquitania*, which left Southampton on 27th October 1946. Helga's Certificate of Identity issued by the Home Office in London, shows that she was 'admitted permanent' at New York on 2nd November 1946 and that she was allowed to take the basic allowance of £10 for travelling expenses. (37) Irene is described in the *Manifest* as a 'short-hand typist' and Helga as a 'student'. Their nationality or country of origin is listed as '(Germany) Stateless'. Their last permanent address is listed as 'England, Leicester'.

Irene and Helga disembarked in New York on 2nd November 1946, after spending the first two decades of their life in a Europe disfigured by intolerance and genocide in their German homeland, but also marked by an immense humanitarian gesture, which had sheltered and nurtured them in wartime England. Their destination in New York was the home of their uncle, Hans Egon Bejach, the oldest of the Bejach brothers, and his wife, Frieda. Hans had managed to emigrate from Germany in 1939, and he was practising as a doctor in Chambers Street, Lower Manhattan. Frieda had worked as a seamstress in order to help pay her husband's business costs. (38) Their home was in West 69th Street in the Upper West Side of Manhattan, between the Hudson River and Central Park. Irene soon found work in New York using the secretarial skills she had learnt at college in Leicester. She had a brief first marriage which ended in divorce. Then in 1960 aged 34, she married Sam



Taken at College House mid-1940s. Back row David, Sheila Sim, John and Richard. Front row Fred and Mary. (Reproduced by permission of the Florida Holocaust Museum, USA.)

Goudsmit, aged 58, whom she had met when they were both working at the Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island. Both Irene and Helga had maintained contact with all the Attenborough family following their emigration in 1946, a 'family' bond which was strong enough for Sam to fly from America to England to ask Fred Attenborough for Irene's hand in marriage. (39)

Samuel Abraham Goudsmit was a major figure in American physics. He was born in The Hague into a Dutch Jewish family in July 1902. He studied physics at Leiden University in Holland where he obtained his doctorate in 1927. One of his significant and historic contributions to the field of

theoretical physics was his postulation of electron spin in 1925, achieved jointly with his colleague, George Uhlenbeck. The detailed mathematical theory was later worked out by Wolfgang Pauli in 1927. Dr Goudsmit moved to America in 1927. Dr Goudsmit became widely known after World War II when it was learnt that he had been scientific director of the secret Allied wartime mission, known as Alsos, whose task was to follow the Allied advance into Europe and find out whether or not the Germans were making an atomic bomb. Whilst in Europe in the wake of the German retreat, Sam visited the ruins of his childhood home in Holland. His parents had been taken to a concentration camp where they were both murdered. He had apparently arranged for his parents to emigrate to America just before the Germans invaded, and he later blamed himself for not having worked faster to achieve this goal. (40) After his official retirement Sam became a visiting professor at the University of Nevada. Irene and Sam moved briefly to Reno, Nevada, where Sam died of a heart attack on 4th December 1978. After Sam passed away Irene moved back east and settled in River Vale, New Jersey. (41)

In America Irene did not pursue any formal further education, but she was 'smart as a whip, and could hold her own with all of her husband Sam's colleagues (who you can imagine were quite intellectual)'. (42) Irene had very strong convictions about public health and the environment. At one stage she worked for The Planned Parenthood Federation of America, echoing part of her father's role as a *Stadtarzt* in 1920s and 30s Berlin. (43) Irene passed away on 25th May 1994, aged 68. She was 'probably one of the kindest and most generous people that I have known. When she died quite suddenly in 1994 I felt a huge void as did our family'. (44) Irene had no children from either marriage, although she was devoted to Helga's children and to Jutta's son, Rene. (45)



Helga and Irene in England 1944-45, location unknown. (Reproduced by permission of the Florida Holocaust Museum, USA.)



Telegram from Richard Attenborough and his wife Sheila Sim to Helga in New York on the occasion of her 21st birthday, 21st August 1948. (Reproduced by permission of the Florida Holocaust Museum, USA.)

Helga found work in New York as a telephone operator. She met her future husband, Herman Waldman, a clinical psychologist, on a 'blind date' in 1952 and they married in 1954. (46) Helga continued to pursue her 'passion for dance', encouraged by Herman. After teaching modern dance at the Rockland Center for the Arts in West Nyack, New York, for many years she became the Center's Director of Dance Education. She also continued her pursuit of formal further education and obtained a B.A. from the Rodger Williams University when she was in her 40s and later a Masters in Occupational Therapy in her 50s. After retirement the Waldmans moved to Florida in 1989. Helga had converted to Judaism through the influence of Herman and his family, and became an active member of the local Reform temple when they retired to Florida. (48) Helga also became actively involved with the Florida Holocaust Museum in St Petersburg, Florida, where she frequently gave talks to school children about her experiences. (49)

Helga passed away in 2005 and was survived by Herman who still lives in Florida. She was also survived by two daughters, Beverly Rich and Hilary Waldman, and six grandchildren. Beverly is the mother of four and works as an advanced practice nurse in child and adolescent psychiatry



Herman and Helga Waldman with Richard Attenborough and his daughter, Jane, on Richard's 50th wedding anniversary, 22nd January 1995. (Reproduced by permission of the Florida Holocaust Museum, USA.)

and also teaches at a college. She is married to Harlan G. Rich, Associate Professor of Medicine at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. Hilary was a journalist for about 30 years and studied for a Masters Degree in Public Health as a mature student, with a particular emphasis on 'underserved populations'. (50) This recalls the pioneering work of her grandfather, Dr Curt Bejach, in Berlin during the 1920s and 1930s described earlier. Hilary now works in internal communications for a large hospital in Hartford, Connecticut. She is married to Joseph O'Brien, also a journalist, and the couple have two teenage children.

Jutta eventually emigrated to America with her husband Axel Grosser, in 1949 when she was almost 28. The delay in leaving Germany was due to tighter controls on immigration into post-war America and the priority given to refugees who had survived the concentration camps in Europe. Jutta and Axel settled in New York. They had one son, Rene. They divorced in 1967. Jutta worked for a medical textbook company, Grune and Stratton, in New York, and became the company's vice-president for medical books and operations when she was in her 50s. (51) She lived in an 8th floor apartment in Madison Avenue for many years and moved to upstate New York after the events of 9/11. Jutta still lives in New York State, now aged 93.

#### Postscript – Berlin 2015

The Modernist *Landhaus*, or villa, designed and built by Erich Mendelsohn for his friend Curt Bejach in Berlin-Steinstücken in 1927, survived the war and is now considered to be a nationally important architectural monument of its time and style. It is today used as the base of the Erich Mendelsohn Foundation. In 2011 the civic authorities in Berlin Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg named the health centre in its area *Curt Bejach-Gesundheitshaus*, official recognition after 86 years of the pioneering role of Dr Curt Bejach in establishing the *Gesundheitshaus am Urban* in the same area in 1925.



Irene, Jutta and Helga in New York area 1950. (Reproduced by permission of the Florida Holocaust Museum, USA.)



The new Health Centre in Berlin named after Curt Bejach. (Reproduced by permission of Helga Lieser, Bezirksamt Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg von Berlin 2014.)

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