

The Search for Sally Bein



Relatively late in his life, only 14 years ago, Ronny Dotan [born 1946 in Tel-Aviv] discovered he had relatives who were murdered in the Shoah. Until then he had no special interest in the Shoah, which he knew about only from studies and history books. Once becoming aware that some of his relatives were murdered in the Shoah and that his family chose to ignore this meaningful personal legacy, Ronny felt hurt and frustrated about having been spared that knowledge. He began to act to commemorate the Shoah as a personal and national undertaking.

Ronny and his life partner Matanya Ruge [born 1964 in Potsdam] initiated a project to bring an original German cattle wagon from Germany to Israel, one which was used by the DR [Deutsche Reichsbahn] for the deportation of Jews.

This wagon was set in January 2014 in the city of Netanya. The wagon is now a state-recognized national educational and historic site and hosts visits, groups and various audiences for a lecture on "train wagons used in the Shoah" in which Ronny tells his personal story and the story of the specific wagon on display.

Through a random occurrence in 2017 Ronny heard about a boarding school for special-needs Jewish children who suffered from physical and mental illness or family problems and who were all murdered in the Shoah along with the staff.

Ronny and Matanya were surprised that an institution for Jewish children with special needs existed in Germany before the Shoah. Since they both specialize in special Shoah commemoration stories ["Stolpersteine" and more], they took on the challenge and decided to investigate it.

This is how they were exposed to the touching and unknown story of the Jewish disabled children's institution, which was located in the small town Beelitz near Berlin. The institution was established in 1908 for mentally disturbed Jewish children by the Jewish Community (DIGB) and B'nai B'rith Germany with the goal of teaching them to live normative lives in the community. The institution was operated by Sally Bein. He worked together with his wife Rebeka and the staff until the Nazis deported the last inhabitants 34 years later, in 1942.

Sally, who was an expert in hearing disorders and speech therapy, came to the field of treating children with mental and physical difficulties (today we call it "special needs") without previous experience. He acquired his experience during his work and became so reputable that physicians and educators from across Europe and even from Palestine came to study his methods. He was so dedicated to his work that he never took vacation and was even hospitalized for few days due to overwork and exhaustion.

The staff was relatively small and included three educators, a cook, one teacher's assistant, one caretaker and a gardener who also served as the handyman. Everyone was involved in education beyond working hours. Even the children needed to do chores, obviously according their abilities.

The institution operated according to Jewish tradition (Kosher food, Shabbat and holiday observance etc.), serving some 240 boys and 140 girls during its years of operation. The ages of the children ranged from 6 to 24. Each study cycle was for about two years and the studies were customized according to the student's needs and abilities. Since there were no lesson plans for children with disabilities, Sally wrote them by himself and after the approval of the Brandenburg Ministry of Education, the children were taught according to these curricula.

During their stay at the institution the children acquired social skills, organization abilities, learned about hygiene, got work experience (carpentry, cooking, gardening etc.), took part in football competitions, [Maccabi Berlin] or chess tournaments [Emanuel Lasker Club], as well as Jewish and general studies.

Starting in 1933, after the Nazis came to power, the local authorities tried their best to limit the institution's activity by raising various claims and did their best to disrupt its operation in multiple ways. Among other things, the local authorities complained that the institution is a stain which negatively affects the peaceful little town, including tourism, and should therefore be removed.

Obviously, the wish to drive the Jews out of the town fit well with the Führer's order to cleanse Germany of Jews. Gradually, activities were reduced, financial support was disrupted, and the authorities acted to prevent any support for the institution.

Sally understood the "hint" and one of his two daughters, Hanna Lotte, was sent out to the British colony of India (all the Bein family held immigration visas to India since 1938). But Sally, his wife Rebeka and younger daughter Lisa Karola decided to stay with "their" children. On the 14 April 1942 twenty-four residents and a few staff members were deported to the Warsaw Ghetto. Further information about their fate is unknown. On Shabbat, 13 June 1942 all remaining children and staff were boarded on deportation transport No. 15 to the "East". The transport included Sally who likely realized what their fate will be. The trip ended in death camp Sobibor and all were killed upon arrival.

According to a recorded testimony, one of the town residents wondered about the evacuation of the crying children from their residence to the local train station, escorted by shouting policeman. He turned to one policeman from the convoy who he knew beforehand and asked him to explain the scene. The policeman shouted at him to turn back and to forget what he had seen.

So, trains and deportations were also the fate of the wards of Sally Bein, like the train brought to Netanya by Ronny and Matanya.

Parallel to their investigation of the story of the boarding school in Beelitz, Ronny and Matanya contacted the high school in Beelitz, which has been named for Sally Bein since 1997. The central building of the school remained in place since it operated as part of the "children's village" and contains a memorial room about the story of the building and its inhabitants. Other rooms and facilities serve the pupils of the gymnasium.

While undertaking research in Germany they also tried to locate in Israel any information about a boy who was sent to Bein's school from Palestine, since there were no appropriate places for children with special needs in Pre-State Israel at the time. The name of that child was Manoach Kleinmann who suffered from some personal difficulties and possibly also from mental disability, and for that reason he was sent to Sally Bein's institution. He was not the only student from

Palestine. But the twist to Manoach's story is that in 1927 he returned to his family in Palestine, apparently due to non-payment.

After two years of investigation Ronny and Matanya discovered Manoach's date of death in Palestine and visited his neglected grave in the Mount of Olives Cemetery in Jerusalem. No details about the family were found in the records, besides the name of his father Yeshayahu.

The questions regarding his parent's address or other part of his family were still left open. Various leads led to a house at Nachalat Binyamin St in Tel Aviv. Documents at Chevra Kadisha (burial company in Tel Aviv) indicated that Manoach's mother, Malka, was buried in the Kiryat Shaul Cemetery near Tel Aviv. Ronny and Matanya confirmed the information.

The grave of Manoach's father, Yeshayahu, was discovered in the Nachalat Yitzhak Cemetery also close to Tel Aviv, adding pieces to the puzzle.

At the same time, an 85 years old man who lived as a child with his parents in an apartment in the building on Nachalat Binyamin St. some 70 years ago, was found. He said that as far as he can remember, Manoach's parents Malka and Yishayahu had a disabled child and a daughter named Miriam. Ronny and Matanya found leads to the late Miryam and to one of her sons, Shai, living in Ra'anana. All he knew was that the parents of his mother had a mentally ill son, but he could not add further information. Other information – including a photo of his uncle taken in Beelitz at the end of 1920 – was new to him.

As for Sally Bein, Ronny and Matanya found some distant relatives in Israel, and discovered photos of him, his wife and their daughters. A woman in Germany who holds a photo album which tells a lot about the daily life at the institution [taken by the teacher Arthur Feiner] was also found, along with many letters from the children's' families and documents telling confirming that Sally was a man of dedication and hard work, who saw as his life mission the improvement of the abilities of the disabled children in order to enable them to live more fulfilling lives.

Ronny and Matanya are still working to expose more details of the 400 children who were privileged to get their education from Sally Bein in Beelitz and about this humble educator who was ahead of his time. With the aim of exposing the story to more and more people and preventing it from being forgotten, they have begun a film project and a written version of Bein's story to be printed under the famous imprint "Hentrich & Hentrich" in the format of "Jüdische Miniaturen."

All of Dotan and Ruge's activities are performed on a voluntary basis and supported with self-funding and donations, which are welcome.

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