

The Centre for Holocaust Education and Scholarship
Teachers' Workshop
Identity Charts
"Greta Fischer"

Fischer, Greta (1909–1988) Child welfare worker with the Special Child Division of the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Agency who provided care for hundreds of orphaned and displaced children following World War II.



Born Greta Fischerova in 1909 in Budisov, Czechoslovakia; died in Jerusalem, Israel, on September 28, 1988; youngest of six children of Leopold (a veterinarian) and Ida (Mayer) Fischerova; trained as a kindergarten teacher in the 1920s; graduated McGill School of Social Work in 1955; never married; no children.

Fled from Czechoslovakia (1939); first worked as a nanny in London, England, then with Anna Freud in the Wartime Hampstead Nursery; joined UNRRA Team 182 (1945) and was sent to Germany to establish an international children's center; served as chief child welfare officer at Kloster Indersdorf in Germany (1945–47); social worker for the Canadian War Orphans Project, Jewish Family and Children's Welfare Bureau in Montreal (1948–53).

Smoke was still curling from the ruins of a vanquished Germany when Greta Fischer arrived in July 1945. Roads were clogged with barefoot, hungry refugees and freed prisoners of concentration camps. Dressed in khaki battle dress and driving an army lorry, Fischer was indistinguishable from the American soldiers, whose tracks she followed, except for the white UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency) letters embossed on the scarlet flashes stitched on her shoulder and cap. Barely six

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miles away from where she finally parked her truck, near the walls of an abandoned monastery, the stench of the crematoriums still hung over the death camp of Dachau.

Fischer and her team of seven multilingual child welfare specialists had arrived in Bavaria to deal with a new kind of debris of modern war—"unattached or unaccompanied or stolen and lost children." No one could agree on a single word to name a condition so bizarre, and no one knew how many children there were. All that was known with certainty was that there were thousands of non-German children lost in the chaos.

This was the first time in history that the nations of the world had agreed to pool their resources to rescue and aid all the victims of aggression. Though far from being a high official in the vast enterprise that was UNRRA, Fischer knew that on its success depended not only countless lives but the future of international cooperation as an instrument of peace: it was a test of whether the world could cooperate in saving and rebuilding lives as well as it had in killing.

It was astonishing to see what a miracle could be worked for children orphaned by the Holocaust when the right thing was done.

—Greta Fischer

Greta Fischer's victories were small but profound ones, registered in her influence on the desperate young lives she touched. In her later years, she became well known for gently deflecting people who spoke of her as a heroine, often wondering aloud, "What is heroism?" and then answering, "Nothing more than the struggle to endure and overcome the circumstances that make us who we are. I happened to have lived in an unfortunate period of history."

Greta Fischer recognized at an early age that her vocation lay with caring for children, and she trained to become a kindergarten teacher. Born in Budisov, Czechoslovakia, in 1909, the youngest of six children, she managed to escape when the Germans overran Czechoslovakia in 1938. Fischer was among the fortunate few who were permitted to enter England where she found a position as a nanny, the only work then allowed women refugees. In London, her talent for working with children was quickly noticed, and she was recommended to Anna Freud and invited to join her staff.

The experience of working with Anna Freud and the high regard she earned during those years led to Fischer's assignment with the Special Child Division of UNRRA and to her subsequent posting to Bavaria. Fischer and her co-workers of Team 182 lost no time in searching for a building to convert into a center for the care of children. The only suitable structure they could find was the abandoned 19th-century monastery of Kloster Indersdorf.

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Within a short time, the kitchen was repaired, the larger rooms scrubbed and turned into dormitories, the smaller ones into classrooms. The graceful spire of the Kloster, rising high above the village and visible from a great distance, soon became known throughout Europe as a beacon of safety to orphaned and displaced children.

While most of Team 182 was billeted in the village, Fischer (officially a child welfare officer responsible for programming) lived in the Kloster. Many nights were spent trying to snatch a couple of hours sleep while looking after 25 to 30 babies demanding to be fed and comforted. It also meant that she was frequently the first member of the team that the new children would meet. The faintest drumming of small fists on the monastery's ancient door, even in the dead of night, would bring Fischer running from her bed, down the winding stairs and along the drafty corridor to the entrance. Pushing open the heavy door, she might find a group of young teenagers shivering in its shadow as a car or truck drove away; occasionally the darkness would reveal a single, lonely child looking up at her with frightened eyes.

As the only center devoted entirely to the rescue and care of children, Kloster Indersdorf might be home at any one time to 300–350 Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant children of 22 different nationalities, covering an age span from birth to the late teens. Once the absolute basics of shelter and food had been provided, it became urgent to help the older children tell their stories—stories of pain and suffering beyond the scope of a civilized imagination, but which had to be told. Fischer struggled to find the inner resources to try to understand and communicate with these children, whose personal histories were so far removed from the kindergartens and nurseries of her previous experience. Fischer learned to function with just the right amalgam of empathy and numbness. "To cry with the children would not have helped them," she said many years later.

Quite apart from its emotional demands, the workload taken on by the team was extremely heavy. But Fischer's comment on the matter was a laconic, "Being so busy every minute helped to keep us normal." A visiting journalist praised the workers at Kloster Indersdorf: "Here one sees men and women from seven different countries far removed in habits and customs who are working together in harmony with a spirit seldom seen."

Team 182 worked hard to give the children as normal a life as possible, and educational and social programs of surprising variety were improvised under Fischer's responsibility.

When something was needed for her children there was no bureaucracy too strong to be challenged or flouted by Fischer, and she collected a number of official reprimands for obtaining supplies through improper channels. In later years, Fischer could laugh about escapades such as the "faulty telephone connection" which somehow caused her to hear that there was room for one more child at a time when the Kloster was officially

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full. Or the time she was threatened with a prison sentence for concealing a baby pig which some children had taken for a pet.

She acquired the ironic nickname "Step-and-Fetch-It" for some of her unorthodox methods of procuring supplies and felt flattered when she was reprimanded for obtaining supplies from the army that it did not have. The success of her foraging (and her sewing skills) can be seen today in snapshots of her well-nourished children smiling for the camera, each one dressed in overalls made of red Nazi flag fabric and trimmed with blue-and-white checked material once used as bed linen by camp guards.

Fischer and the children expected their stay at Kloster Indersdorf to be short, merely a processing step before moving homeward or to new lands, and for many it was. But there were no homes for the Jewish children to return to, and no new lands wanted them. Looking back nearly half a century later, Fischer said, "It took the two long years of 1945 to 1947, of pleading, of waiting, of trying to convince the world of the Jewish children's membership in the human race. The world was closed to these children; nobody wanted them. Each nation was fearful that the children would have been so damaged that they could never be assimilated into normal life and would always be a burden on the state."

In the summer of 1947, persuaded by the Canadian Jewish Congress who accepted full responsibility for their care, the Canadian government granted permission for 1,000 child survivors of the Holocaust to enter the country. Since the agreement only allowed one small group at a time to enter, it wasn't until January 1949 that Fischer arrived in Montreal accompanying one of the last groups of child survivors to leave Kloster Indersdorf for Canada.

The above information is found at: "Fischer, Greta (1909–1988)." Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia. *Encyclopedia.com*. (September 21, 2017). <http://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/fischer-greta-1909-1988>