

# "Noah's ark"

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two deaths. One girl was killed in a road accident and another died from heart failure. Among other cases were appendicitis, cancer, burns and minor accidents in the home. There were six mental cases and all girls were sooner or later repatriated. Seven girls were reported missing, some of whom fortunately could be traced.

Financial assistance was given to 48 girls (4 rail tickets, 8 air tickets, £295.2.1d. in cash, £103.6.9d for fines).

The Committee are extremely grateful for the assistance given to the Welfare Office by the Swiss Embassy, in particular Consul F. Adams, Dr. Ch.

Bruggmann and Vice-Consul Ch. Abegglen, by the Ministers of the Swiss Churches in London and by the Swiss Benevolent Society, not only for their financial support but for the help given by their Secretary, Mrs. Sharp, and the Swiss Hostel. They also very much appreciate the support of the Editor of "The Swiss Observer" and the services rendered to them by the Auditors. London, May 1971

E. Knoll,  
Hon. Secretary.  
E. Senn,  
Welfare Officer.

enough to give the creeps to the most hardy visitor.

### A show of superhuman patience

When morning prayer was over, the children separated into three classes under the intensive care of highly qualified nurses. I sat as unobtrusively as I could in one of the classes and could see for myself the truly remarkable degree of patience and devotion with which a nurse was inculcating in her three subnormal patients the most elementary things. Of her three little patients one was an aphasic child. Somewhere in his brain the connection permitting normal speech was broken, with the result that his understanding of things was impaired. His only vocabulary so far was the word "no". For weeks the nurse had painstakingly been teaching him how to say "yes".

I was assisting at what seemed to be a session near to the goal when the child would actually be able to say the word "yes". The nurse, or mistress, as we should call her, was relentlessly repeating "yes", beating the rhythm with two sticks. The child was swaying his head constantly and thoroughly enjoying his tuition. When he produced a sound approaching the correct pronunciation of "yes" the mistress would congratulate him effusively, encouraging him to repeat what he had just done so well. Sometimes he remained without responding, turning his head around. Then the mistress would repeat in a firm voice "Yes! Yes! . . . Say Yes", Robert! . . . No, "Yes"! (taking a mouth piece to drum the word in his ear) "Yes! Yes! Yes! (the child is suddenly distracted) "Look at me, Robert! . . . Say "Yes"! "Yes"! . . . (at which point Robert says the word almost right) "Good boy, Robert! Well done! . . ." And so it goes on—not for too long, however, because the pupil

# “NOAH’S ARK”:

## The Remarkable Life Work of a London Swiss

Many resident Swiss of London, and more particularly the parishioners of the Swiss Church, know of the remarkable work which Miss Alice Hoffmann de Visme, daughter of the late Rev. M. R. Hoffman de Visme, is doing with psychologically disturbed children.

As related in these columns some two years ago, she has founded with her own means a small day centre for children and young adults either emotionally disturbed or suffering from brain damage, aphasia, psychosis or autism, who have been rejected from other specialist establishments and for whom the normal outlet would be the almost certain deterioration of an institutional establishment.

Miss Hoffmann kindly allowed me to be at her "school" during a normal working morning.

### The face of abnormality

For anyone who has never been close to abnormal children, the first encounter can be disturbing. When I entered the classroom the children were singing to the sound of a piano, or rather ululating, humming, giggling, twittering and moaning. They gazed at me with gaping faces. A beautiful little boy seated near to me stared at the strange visitor curiously. The morning's work had just begun at *Noah's Ark*. After a short break Miss Hoffmann sat at the old piano again and played a morning hymn. It was accompanied by the cacophonia of a happy class.

One child was gesticulating, another was swaying his head in all directions, another sat looking dumbly before him, another laughed, another buzzed, a little girl just sat quietly and smiled. A coloured child was thumping on the table. The eldest in the class, a 22-year-old boy who had been in Miss

Hoffmann's Day Centre for 12 years sat looking ponderously before him.

The other children present were younger, their average age seemingly under ten years old—all except a girl of Greek origin with a beautiful dark face. She was the only inmate of *Noah's Ark* for which any care within a group was totally inappropriate. She was being specially looked after by one of the nurses in the corner of the room. Her appearance corresponded to the images of madness which horror films and the tales of Edgar Alan Poe have generalised. She was suffering from schizophrenia and epileptic fits and was fortunately still under the influence of the high powered drugs administered to her at the beginning of every day. What was particularly queasy about her was the sight of her skinny and hairy limbs which were immensely strong as well. Coupled with her sad and demential expression, it was



Miss Hoffmann and her assistants at work during a morning class

soon tires and the mistress has to let him free to play and turns her attention to another child, a shy little girl suffering from severe emotional disturbance.

To her she teaches the elementary movements of everyday life, in this case picking up coins from a box and placing them back in good order. She is quiet and sweet, accomplishing the chores of her education obediently. The third child in the room, a severe case of autism, was also very subdued this morning. He was looking at a picture book, rashly flipping the pages and starting the same book over and over again. He had a pile of books close to him, which was a symptom of his extreme possessiveness. The mistress told me that if one of these books, for which he had no present use, were removed, the child would break out in a temper tantrum.

### The mystery of autism

Autism is a strange illness which was recognised as distinct from cretinism or mental debility only 10 years ago. In fact, many of the 5,000 autistic children in Britain today are highly intelligent. Like aphasic children, they are unable to express themselves. However the missing link lies at another, and probably more emotional level of the brain. They suffer from perceptual problems and obsessions.

The little boy in the class had a master obsession, which was that of *twisting* things. I witnessed this for myself an hour later as I sat in the garden on a truss for the children to climb on beside the swing. For an hour the child sat on that swing, ignoring my presence totally, and nearly wrecked it by twisting it with all his strength.

Miss Hoffmann told me that probably no more than two per cent of autistic children had been cured but that one could go a long way towards it with adequate education. Her eldest pupil, the 22-year-old autistic youth I have already mentioned, could express himself from time to time in snippets of sentences. Miss Hoffmann had doubts that a surgical cure could be found for autism and didn't believe that the physical roots of the trouble could be sufficiently well localised. The mistress had drawn her own conclusions from years of work with autistic children. She felt that autism was a kind of pathological inhibition and that the inability of an autistic child to communicate with anyone was due to an inner fright of his own failure to communicate and be like other people.

### The efficiency of love

Whatever the cause of autism may be, and for that matter of any of the other afflictions of abnormality,

there is something to which all these unfortunate children respond to: It is *love*. However badly-wired or faulty the computer of their brains may be, mentally handicapped children are able to know when they are loved and this is sufficient for their happiness. Miss Hoffmann and her assistants not only believe, but *know*, that although they are not able to communicate with their children by normal discourse, they achieve with them in intimate and mutual communication.

For Miss Hoffmann the explanation lies in her belief that if normal human beings have a *soul*, then mentally handicapped children are also endowed with a soul—but a soul which is improperly imaged by their mis-carried bodies. On no account, believes Miss Hoffmann, should a mentally deficient human being be compared to an animal, even if his IQ is lower than that of an ape.

The pupils of *Noah's Ark* will probably never be able to take part in normal society because there is at present no cure for their deficiencies. But by enjoying the human respect and love which is usually expended on normal people they are undeniably *happy* and live in the most suitable conditions to develop whatever limited gifts they have. When possible, *Noah's Ark* prepares young children who would otherwise be technically useless at least to the stage where they can work in sheltered workshops.

### Midday meal with the children

After the morning work, the children left for a walk in the neighbouring park. The young schizophrenic girl joined the colony under special accompaniment and scared a man out of his wits in the see-saw playground. An hour later the children came back to *Noah's Ark* where Miss Hoffmann had prepared them a welcome meal. After much running about and movements to the toilets the children settled down for lunch.

I sat and ate with them. To my left was the severely autistic child. His concentration was entirely directed to the contents of his plate. When he had finished his dessert and finding he

wanted more, he grabbed for the jelly dish without the slightest restraining movement. When he had finished that he dived for the pot again. It eventually had to be withheld from him in order to leave something for the mistresses. The child put on a sulky and forlorn face, not understanding why this should happen to him.

The tot to my left was the gayest in the bunch. He was a West Indian (there were two others at *Noah's Ark*, a reflection of the high proportion of coloured children in the Haringey area) beaming all the time but not saying anything intelligible. Although he had intelligence, his brain damage prevented him from expressing it in a normal way. Nevertheless, eating with children who gaped at their strange visitor and didn't show much understanding of what he was trying to tell them, I felt that I was in a decidedly *human* environment and was most inclined to share Miss Hoffmann's convictions on the essential humanity of the mentally handicapped child.

### The importance of this work

*Noah's Ark* is a personal venture started 17 years ago. It has been described as "valuable" by the health authorities because it responded to a most urgent need for the non-residential care of children to whom very few proper human facilities are otherwise opened. Most of the children fall under the Mental Health care of the N.H.S., a few under Education. Now the Borough is planning to pull down the street in order to build a primary school. Miss Hoffmann hopes that she will be given the necessary support to move into larger and more modern premises elsewhere.

She has the support of a board of trustees who will do their utmost to secure both the official and unofficial aid which will allow *Noah's Ark*, a registered charity, to continue its vital and wonderful work elsewhere. If any reader wishes to help this work, he can send a donation to the *Noah's Ark Trust*, 31 Shaftesbury Road, London N19 4QW. A visit there will show just how much care deficient children re-



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quire and are getting.

A devoted mistress will spend months of patient and affectionate effort just to teach a child to say the single word "yes". However small by normal standards the results of this almost exclusive attention may be,

these results are there and the smiles on the faces of the happy children of *Noah's Ark* is perhaps the most important result there is to be obtained. That the mistress whom we saw at work should have said that this work was "rewarding", shows just how intimately

she and the other personnel at *Noah's Ark* are convinced of the humanity and ultimate value of the small and helpless creatures to which they have devoted their lives.

(PMB)

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