

2016-9

Stumbling Block of Social Housing Stalls O'Devaney Gardens

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Recommended Citation

Sirr, L. (2016) Stumbling block of social housing stalls O'Devaney Gardens. *The Sunday Times* 11.09.2016
doi:10.21427/j33j-re96

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In 1993, my 80-year-old grandmother Elsie took me and my cousins to Berlin, to introduce us to the city of her childhood. She showed us the site of the family's synagogue, which the Nazis burnt to the ground, and her father's consultancy rooms, which had been targeted during the 1933 boycott of Jewish businesses. When one of my cousins and I suggested that we adopt the family name we formerly had in Germany, Elsie said no – it would make us targets for anti-semitism. This was the first response: unforgotten pain, anger and fear.

She also took us to her family's small wooden lake house in the village of Groß Glienicke, just west of Berlin. There we were greeted by the occupant, Wolfgang Kühne, and soon he and Elsie were happily swapping stories. She pointed out the patch of ground where she and her sister had once played tennis and the veranda where she'd entertained her husband-to-be.

He showed her the part of the garden through which the Berlin Wall had been built and the improvements he'd made to the kitchen.

As we left, Elsie told us that the house had been her "soul place". She was glad that someone was still enjoying the property, she added, and had no intention of taking it from them. This was the second response: compassion and hope.

Two responses. It's always two responses in my family.

A few weeks after our return to England, my girlfriend, Debora, and I walked to Elsie's flat in north London. My grandmother was very much the matriarch of the family, and I was here to ask her permission. A few minutes later, Elsie was sitting in her rocking chair and we were perched on the small sofa next to her. "Zo?" she said in her thick German accent.

"Wat do you want?" I paused, intimidated. "Granny," I said, "I have something important to tell you." Another pause. "Debora and I are getting married."

I thought she'd smile, maybe even wish us "mazel tov". Instead, she uttered an ugly guttural noise before saying: "Zo, Hitler haz von."

Three months later, on a blue-sky afternoon in June, Debora and I were married under a tall ash tree in Wiltshire. Our family and friends sat on a semicircle of bales of straw. Elsie, who despite her initial response was enthusiastically conducting the service, said a few words of blessing, then asked us to repeat our vows. Here was hope, love, the future.

In my family, such cognitive dissonance is not confined to my grandmother. In 2013, I received an email from a resident of Groß Glienicke: "You must come urgently to see the lake house." A week later, I was standing outside the small wooden structure, shocked by what I saw. It was overgrown by bushes and trees. The windows were broken, the floor was littered with drug-taking detritus and discarded beer cans, and graffiti was scrawled across its walls.

At the local government office, I was told that not only did they own the property, they planned to knock it down to build new homes. I felt sick, that feeling when a small child falls off a swing.

The only way to save the lake house, they said, was to persuade the monument authority to add it to the list of historic buildings. To do this, I had to clean up the house and show support from the



Deutschland 93

When the author Thomas Harding visited his exiled Jewish grandmother's lake house near Berlin, not long after reunification, it was the start of a journey through his family's history and its tangled links with modern Germany



community and, more important, from my family.

A week later, I was sitting in front of a group of relatives at my aunt and uncle's flat near Hyde Park. Having told them what I'd learnt about the house, I asked them for help. I was expecting support, perhaps even thanks. Instead, I was met with incredulity and anger.

"How can you save a house in Berlin when you live in England?" one cousin asked. Another suggested the house had never been important to the family. My father then said: "Do you really expect us to put our hands in our pockets..." I finished the sentence for him: "... when the Germans stole the house from us in the first place?"

Two months later, in April 2014, 14 members of my family flew to Berlin for the Big Clean-up Day. Along with 60 residents of Groß Glienicke, we removed the trash from the house, filling a 30ft-long container. By the day's end, it was possible to imagine what life might once have been like at the lake house.

That night, we all met at the village hall. The mayor started. Reminding the audience of the horrors of the Holocaust, he played audio recordings of Hitler and Himmler calling for the extermination of the Jews. This was the "truth" of truth and reconciliation. It acknowledged the first response. Without it, neither I nor

my family would have felt comfortable in that room.

Then it was my turn. With the help of a friend who translated my words into German, I ran through the history of the house.

At one point, I showed a picture of Elsie in her tennis whites – white shoes, white trousers, white shirt. "Who is that?" someone asked. Before I could respond, my father said in German: "That is my mother, Elsie." There was stunned silence.

After a few seconds, someone asked: "You speak German?" Now standing up, my father said he did, though not very well. Continuing in perfect German, he spoke for 10 minutes about the family's history and how moved he'd been to meet all the open-hearted locals that day (like clockwork, the second response).

Something changed in the room. No longer was it "us", the returning German-Jewish refugees, and "them", the local Germans. We had become a community, hoping to build a better future.

Then, on June 23, came the EU referendum in Britain. I stayed up all night, anxiously watching the results. When, at about 5.30am, it was announced that "leave" had won, I was distressed and depressed.

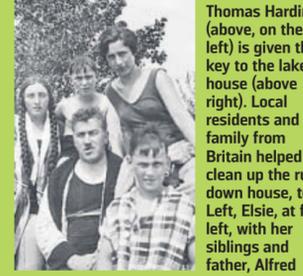
It was now likely that British people would no longer be able to live or work in 27 European countries. This felt like a real loss for me, even more so for my teenage daughter.

Later that morning, a friend called from Berlin. Liking our plan to transform the lake house into a centre for education and reconciliation, the German federal government had announced that it would provide €140,000 towards its renovation. So, at the very time Britain was pulling away from Europe, the German government was trying to bring us together.

That same day, I looked online to see if I could apply for the restoration of my German citizenship. According to the German constitution, as a member of a family who had been persecuted by the Nazis, the process should be fairly simple. I wrote to the German embassy to make an appointment.

When I told my father about my email to the embassy, he said that Elsie would be turning in her grave.

Later that week, though, he stayed up till two in the morning searching through old boxes and files to find birth and marriage certificates. He was helping with my application.



Thomas Harding (above, on the left) is given the key to the lake house (above right). Local residents and family from Britain helped to clean up the run-down house, top. Left, Elsie, at far left, with her siblings and father, Alfred

Again, two responses. The first instinctual and negative. The second more considered and positive. Both genuine, both worthy of respect.

My grandmother and her relatives were forever grateful to the British people for taking them in. Indeed, they threw a "Thank you, Britain" party in 1986 to commemorate this indebtedness.

Yet my grandmother never got over how she had been treated on her arrival in London.

My father told me she detested being seen as a refugee, and wanted to be evaluated by her actions, rather than her German accent. A single person, but two responses to her refugee status.

Over the past two years, nine of my sister's Syrian nephews and nieces have arrived in Germany. (She married a Syrian Kurd 25 years ago.) They are some of the more than 1m refugees who have recently been welcomed by Germany. One of these nephews is Amin, who has

been helping us to clean up the garden of the lake house.

One morning, after I had watched him cut up some fallen trees with a chainsaw, I asked Amin what it was like now in Germany.

He told me he hated being treated like a refugee. In contrast, before the Syrian war, he travelled through Europe and was seen for what he was/is – an aspiring, hardworking young man.

Yet he is grateful to Germany for taking him and his family. This will be his home now, and he will make the best of it.

Elsie and Amin's responses are so similar, despite being separated by 80 years, suggesting that this business about

NO LONGER WAS IT 'US', THE RETURNING GERMAN-JEWISH REFUGEES, AND 'THEM', THE LOCAL GERMANS

home, belonging, loss and identity is not about being Syrian, Jewish, English or German, it is all part of the human condition.

When I asked Amin why he was helping to restore the lake house, considering that he had so much on his plate – applying for a residence permit, taking mandatory German lessons, helping other refugees – he was quick to reply.

"Because I am a member of the family." Then he added: "I hope someday in the future, when I return to Damascus, that there will be people to help me fix up my house."

In my family, it's always two responses. And it's taken me a long time to accept this; to not react to one or another, to see both as a part of a great whole.

The House by the Lake by Thomas Harding is published by William Heinemann, £18.25 at Easons. Follow him on Twitter: @thomasharding

To find out more about the lake house, visit alexanderhaus.org



Stumbling block of social housing stalls O'Devaney Gardens

Last week, Dublin city council (DCC) resolved a dispute with its own councillors over the regeneration of O'Devaney Gardens, a council estate behind Arbour Hill in Dublin.

Named after Bishop O'Devaney, who was hanged at Arbour Hill in 1612 as a friend of Tyrone rebel chief Hugh O'Neill, O'Devaney Gardens is a 1950s corporation-built estate of 300 flats in 12 (originally 13) blocks.

The complex was typical of its time, built when political parties from all sides quite rightly supported local authority housing construction. The scale of the blocks, the inner-city location, the design of the individual flats (small for the number of children that Irish families were having at the time) and the communal facilities can be seen in many similar council developments throughout the city.

Over the decades it has fallen on hard times. A decline in traditional industrial jobs has brought high unemployment in the inner city.

1960s, the population of the inner city declined rapidly as people moved to new suburbs, which meant the closure of schools, institutions and other facilities.

Ireland was quite new to the concept of social housing when O'Devaney Gardens was built, and so there was limited understanding of the implications of factors such as tenant mix, which is still a problem.

The main stumbling block to

the latest regeneration plan is that councillors want the redeveloped O'Devaney Gardens to be a public rent-only estate, whereas DCC wants the proposed 479 planned units to be a mixture of social and private housing.

Under the councillors' proposal, all new housing on the site would be rented from DCC. Half of the new homes would be rented to applicants on the council's housing waiting list and

the remainder would be rented to households earning above the social housing threshold, but with "demonstrated housing need", who would pay higher rents in line with their income.

So was there an issue – from a housing practice perspective – with the councillors' proposal for an essentially mono-tenure, low-income development? Yes and no seems to be the answer. On the no side of the answer, despite often-misguided public perceptions, many mono-tenure council estates experience no problems whatsoever and are desirable places to live. From the council's perspective, having all the housing units in an estate under their control should also make management of the development much easier.

National and international experience has shown, however, that there can be issues with not mixing tenure and income in housing developments.

First, in developments and areas where money is scarce, it becomes difficult for local residents to support essential



O'Devaney Gardens, from the 1950s, is typical of the era's council flats

services such as shops and sports facilities. It's surprising how many people need to live locally to make viable even a small enterprise such as a pizza shop. As shops and services aren't used, the shops close and authorities reduce funding for community and other services.

The shops that survive every

crisis are betting shops, branded grocery stores and take-aways. It takes more than these, however, to make a sustainable community.

Secondly, areas of low income can too easily become stigmatised – often unfairly – which has knock-on effects when job-seeking, for example. A bad reputation for an area is easily

acquired, but difficult to divest.

Finally, where money is short and unemployment high, communities naturally tend to turn to each other for support, thus limiting their exposure to wider social networks that may be useful for jobs, credit, educational opportunities and so on.

There are also benefits concerning demographic balance, the promotion of tolerance of social difference, the broadening of educational influences on children and exposure to alternative ways of life.

The councillors' proposal was a logical and valid one in a city with thousands on the waiting list for council housing, and the agreement reached of 30% social, 20% affordable and the remainder private is a good one.

As the area around O'Devaney gentrifies, it could probably take more social housing but total public rental would not have worked here in the long-term. DCC could still lose control over who occupies the private housing element, which may well end up in social use anyway.

LORCAN SIRR ON THE HOME FRONT

