

## **THE PAULINENSTIFT (PAULINE FOUNDATION) ORPHANAGE**



Ruth Geistlich who survived with her friend, Esther Ascher, who perished. The Paulinenstift Girls' Orphanage in Hamburg.

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The Paulinenstift Girls' Orphanage in Hamburg, an institution under the supervision of the Jewish Community and the welfare institutions of the city of Hamburg, opened its doors in 1856.

The girls received six years of vocational training after which they were granted an official document certifying that they had finished their studies, but only after they had left the orphanage and on condition that they comported themselves in the manner expected of young Jewish women at that time.

In 1920, the Public Council appointed Gertrud Benzian to be the director of the orphanage. Her approach was that the role of the home was not only to provide food and clothing to the girls, but also to educate them to be independent women. It was her opinion that the girls should not be secluded and kept apart from the world around them. The girls were allowed to visit schoolmates, to stroll around the city in small groups, to go out shopping and to visit museums or take part in other cultural events, budget permitting.

The Nazi rise to power in Germany in 1933 brought many changes both in the staff and in the day-to-day life. Some staff members emigrated from Germany to various destinations during the 1930s. The streets became unsafe for Jewish children, and therefore they avoided going out except when necessary. Providing food to the girls became a problem, but the main difficulty was the concern of the staff and the children who came from outside Hamburg for their families. The rumors about the hardships, harassment and

attacks on the Jews throughout Germany were very troubling. The staff worked hard to protect the children physically and emotionally, but the most effective protection was when a child received an emigration visa and left Germany with Youth Aliyah.

In the summer of 1940 Hilda Cohen became the orphanage manager. Her main responsibility was the on-going struggle to find financial support, food and security for the children. At the same time, the orphanage staff continued to be punctilious about the daily routine, to observe the religious holidays and remain hopeful.

On 25 October 1941 some of the girls were deported to Lodz along with a group from the nearby boys' orphanage and other children. In November 1941 another group of children from the orphanages was deported to Minsk and Riga. The girls who were left joined the boys who remained in their institution at 3 Papendamm Street.

On 11 July 1942 a transport departed from Hamburg, headed for Auschwitz; it included Hilda Cohen, her staff and the last of the children still living in the orphanage. Ruth Geistlich was the only girl from the Paulinenstift who survived the Holocaust.