
BENNI AND BELLA AND RUTH

Jenny Sheridan unpicks the story behind two benches on Wandsworth Common

What could link a Holocaust survivor, her murdered parents and Wandsworth Common? This article relates the search for answers and the story of their lives.

First, the detective work. In my frequent walks on Wandsworth Common I noticed a bench between the railway line and the pond dedicated to the memory of Benni and Bella Spanier and their daughter Ruth.

All love for Benni and Bella Spanier who were killed in Auschwitz in 1944 and Ruth, their daughter, who escaped Nazi Germany on Kindertransport, arriving in England, aged 11, in 1939 and for those who have lost their lives or been impacted by war
'Rage, rage against the dying of the light.'

Moved by this sentiment and the quotation from Dylan Thomas, I sometimes sat and watched the ducks from the bench, and wondered who Benni and Bella Spanier had been, and why they were commemorated here.

On a later walk, I stopped to read the wording on another bench, this one on a hillock overlooking the lake. This too was dedicated to Benni and Bella, with the addition of Ruth and Robert Wing, and signed with love from Anna and Ben.

Cherished memories of Robert and Ruth Wing and Benni and Bella Spanier whose lives and work enriched and brought happiness to so many.
'And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest'

With our love, Anna and Ben

Intrigued, I contacted the Friends of Wandsworth Common's history group. Who were these people and what was their link to the common? Was Ruth Wing the same person as Ruth Spanier? Ace sleuth Philip Boys and his colleagues sprang into action. Starting with Wikipedia and extending to a Jewish research centre in New York, German and Jewish history websites and even Nightingale House in Balham, he unearthed some of Ben Spanier's life in Berlin. And he discovered that the 'Anna' on the benches lives near the common.

Ben Spanier, known as Benni, was a well-known and distinguished actor and



theatre director in pre-war Germany. Born in 1887, he acted and directed in Frankfurt and Berlin. In 1899 he married Bella (who may also have been an actor); their daughter Ruth was born in 1926. In 1933, when restrictions on Jews were tightening, Ben was forced to leave the state-supported theatres where he had worked. While Bella worked in a factory, he scraped a living working on theatrical productions with the *Kultur Band*, (Jewish Cultural Association) but the family had to move to a small two-room flat with a shared kitchen. In 1943 Ben and Bella were deported to the camp of

Theresienstadt, where he directed and appeared in several plays along with other Jewish actors. On 12 October 1944 Ben and Bella were deported to Auschwitz, where both were murdered immediately after their arrival.

Ruth Spanier, Ben and Bella's daughter, survived them. She was enabled to escape and travelled to the UK on the *kindertransport* in 1939.

There the trail linking these Holocaust victims to Wandsworth Common might have run cold, but for a request for information to Enable Parks, who, after doing all due diligence, were able to inform Philip that Ruth's daughter, Anna, lived near Wandsworth Common. Philip made contact and discovered that she has a son called Ben.

Vivacious

Anna kindly agreed to meet me in her house off Bolingbroke Grove. I was keen to find out what happened to Ruth, the 11-year-old who escaped her parents' fate by boarding the last Kindertransport to London. Anna describes her mother as 'a very attractive, vivacious, complex woman. She had polio as a small child and spent some weeks in an iron lung at a critical time in her psychological development. She had been brought up in quite a privileged atmosphere and was used to a lot of attention, but was then sent away from her parents on a train and never saw them again.'

Ruth told her daughter little about her childhood experiences, 'like many Holocaust survivors. When she arrived she stayed first with a rabbi, then was sent to Scotland to a sort of kibbutz before returning to London as a teenager. I don't think she went to school past age 14.'

In London, Ruth worked in Selfridges, where she met and married Anna's father. The marriage did not last and, following a divorce, she married Robert Wing. 'She was never short of male admirers. She was beautiful and very social and could command a room.'

Robert Wing, a distinguished scientist, 'was 13 years younger than her. He adored her, although she was very domineering. He was soft and gentle, she was spiky and amusing. As she got older, her early traumas became

more apparent.' In a 2009 interview, Ruth said 'Throughout the war years it never entered my head that I would never see my parents again.'

Robert and Ruth Wing lived in South Kensington and in Chelsea throughout their married lives but often visited Anna and her son in Wandsworth. Anna lives in Morella Road, coincidentally also the home of Louise and Ida Cook, the opera-loving sisters who helped at least 29 Jews escape from Germany before the Second World War.

Although Ruth kept her past largely secret from Anna and her son Ben, they both feel its impact. They visited Berlin together a few years after Ruth's death. Two stolperstein or stumbling blocks have been placed outside Benni and Bella Spanier's last home. Stolperstein are brass plaques set in the pavement outside the homes of Jews murdered by the Nazis; they bear the names and dates of the individuals who lived there. Similar stones have been laid in other countries where Jewish and other minorities were persecuted, including Italy, Poland and Ukraine.

Finally, I asked Anna why she had commemorated her mother, her

stepfather and her grandparents on Wandsworth Common.

'Being brought up by a Holocaust survivor had such an effect on me. I spent a long time deciding how and where to memorialise them. Eventually I thought, well, Robert and my mother often visited me from over the river in Chelsea and we'd go for walks on the common. It was their place as well. It gives me pleasure to see people sitting or picnicking on it. It's one of the best things I've ever done.'

'My mother adored her grandson Ben, and he was close to her. Ben (who was named in tribute to his grandfather) is now in a new, quite serious relationship and I was so touched when he told me that he and his partner shared their first kiss on the bench dedicated to his great-grandparents.'

On 27 January this year, Holocaust Memorial Day, a stranger tied a bunch



Previous page: Bella, Benni and Ruth Spanier. Above: the benches in their memory on Wandsworth Common

of daffodils to the bench by the pond. Benni and Bella are not forgotten.

I would like to thank Anna for sharing her memories of her mother. Thanks too to Philip Boys and the heritage group of the Friends of Wandsworth Common.