

AJR VOLUNTEER'S NEWSLETTER – EDITION ONE SUMMER 2018

The articles in this newsletter have been written by Julie Manseck.

ARSP & Me



My name is Julie Manseck and I've been the intern at The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) since September 2017. I'm from Ingolstadt, a small town in Bavaria and I turned 19 in February this year. After finishing school, I decided to take a gap year and therefore applied for a voluntary service with the German charity organisation, Action Reconciliation Services for Peace.

Being aware that the consequences of German National-Socialism are still being felt by some and can only be overcome through intense dialogue and understanding, ARSP works towards empathy between generations, cultures, religions and people based on living historical memory. Central to this aim are their international long term services of peace sending 180 young people to 13 different countries each year. Being considered bearers of the message for a more humane world ARSP volunteers are assigned to partner projects which work with elderly, handicapped or socially disadvantaged people, in the fields of historical and political education and anti-discrimination programmes. One of those projects is offered by the AJR and is what I have been working on during my gap year.

As an AJR intern my everyday work is incredibly diverse: on some days I'm in the office answering emails and sending out and receiving applications from people who want to become AJR volunteers. I'm at the Sobell Centre every Tuesday to assist the AJR members there. I also attend the AJR outreach group meetings in Radlett, Edgware and Ealing and the Kindertransport lunches once a month to give a helping hand wherever needed. Apart from that I visit four AJR members at home and we spend some time together talking over a cup of tea. I'm still very excited about getting to know the members I visit. I find out a little more about their life stories with each visit. I feel privileged to be able to sit and have a conversation with them and I learn a lot from the opportunity.

So you can imagine how thrilled I was when I got the letter from ARSP telling me that I would get the chance to spend one year working for such a good cause, combining reconciliation regarding history and giving something back to society, especially to those who were harmed by the terrors of the Second World War and Nazi persecution. Making a contribution to this, even if it would only be a small one, has been an ambition of mine ever since we learned about this period in history at school.

During my voluntary service I have learned a lot, not only about Jewish and English culture - moving out for the first time to take on my first real job in a foreign country was indeed a huge step for me.

Jewish Awareness Training

Carol Hart, Head of the AJR volunteers team, and Claude Vecht-Wolf from the Computer Help Programme invited a group of interested people to an evening all about Judaism, giving valuable and instructive insights to Jewish culture, customs and traditions in everyday life.

The evening kicked off at 6pm with a group of 20 people sitting in the boardroom at the AJR office in Finchley. There was great anticipation, the attendees not knowing what to expect from a three-hour event which would give an elementary but thorough introduction to Judaism. The group was not disappointed as an unusual presentation packed with lots of interesting facts and background information was to follow covering a broad variety of topics, including Kashrut, the Synagogue, Jewish food in general, the Jewish home, festivals, life cycle events and Shabbat.

With both hosts being observant Jews from an orthodox upbringing, the participants of the Jewish Awareness Training got the unique chance to hear from a personal point of view what celebrating Shabbat each week and observing Kashrut in everyday life really means. Moreover, the hosts were also the right choice when it came to talking about Synagogue and the latest discussion topics among the Jewish community as Claude is currently training to become a Rabbi and Carol is a member of her Synagogue's executive.

The event consisted not only of the two hosts sharing their extended knowledge and personal experiences, but also of a multimedia presentation with much illustrative material, music and videos alongside a Jewish style dinner. Unsurprisingly, Jewish food figured prominently in the topics talked about during the session and so the participants were truly delighted to literally be given a taste in Jewish culture. The explanations about the usual Friday night Shabbat dinner were illustrated by some Kiddush and Challah, followed by the traditional plate of chicken soup. The main course composed of an assortment of typically Jewish dishes such as potato kugel. Finally, the dinner was topped off with the culinary highlights of Rosh Hashanah, apples with honey and honey cake while talking about Jewish Festivals at the end of the evening.

The Jewish Awareness Training was not a typical lecture-styled informative event and the casual, relaxed atmosphere during the session quickly created a stimulating setting open for questions emerging from the audience. The developing discussions covered a wide range of topics, from converting to Judaism and Synagogue politics to commonly known myths and Jewish pop music.



Profile of a Volunteer: Viv Mann

Viv is a retired book keeper and AJR volunteer based in Scotland. She started volunteering with the AJR Individual Befriending Programme nine months ago and usually spends 90 minutes to two hours each week on it.

Viv regularly visits one person, who she describes as 'a lovely elderly lady'. The pair were matched by Agnes Isaacs, the co-ordinator of volunteers in Scotland and have built a good rapport since they began meeting.

Viv's mother was a German Jewish Refugee herself and lost a lot of her family in the Holocaust, so Viv was brought up knowing well about the terrors of Nazi-Germany and the Shoah. Because of her background as a "2nd Gen" Viv decided to start volunteering for the AJR when she saw a leaflet looking for volunteers and befrienders and has been very happy with her choice ever since:

"I really enjoy my visits and I can see how happy she is when I come."

She and the AJR member she visits get on very well. Viv mostly lets her lady lead the conversation and tries to give her new ideas to think about. They often talk about what is going on in the community or look over some photos Viv has on her phone. Volunteering has been a positive experience for Viv and has become an important part of her life.

"I think it is a very good idea to befriend our members and bring them some happiness, companionship and change of conversation as a visitor to those who live alone."

Although Viv spent many years working in voluntary roles for various committees she went through specialised training for AJR volunteers in order to prepare for her new role. Not only does she receive regular support from her co-ordinator Agnes but also from her family and friends who are happy that she enjoys her new voluntary role.

In addition to her work as a volunteer for the AJR Viv has now also joined the AJR as a member.



Profile of a Volunteer: Julie Martinez



Julie has been volunteering for the AJR as part of the Computer Help Programme run by Claude Vecht-Wolf.

Julie, who was born in Columbia, initially moved to London for her studies in international business. Now she is working in payroll and volunteers for the AJR on a regular basis.

Feeling the need to help people Julie researched volunteering opportunities when she came across the AJR. Although she and her family have not been affected by the terrors of Nazi oppression in any way Julie has always been very interested in the topic when she learned about it at school and university. She was especially interested in the Computer Help Programme as she enjoys working with computers and solving all sorts of IT problems.

Julie visits Mr. W. Although it is often part of being a Computer Help volunteer Julie doesn't necessarily feel like a befriender. Mr. W. has a very busy social life and also needs time in between their meetings so Julie visits him every two weeks. They take a professional, but also friendly approach. Mr. W. is always very charming and welcoming during Julie's visits and is happy to see her.

When she arrives they go to his computer where Mr. W. has already prepared a list of things he needs help with. As they process the list he takes notes so that he can practice what he has learned on his own afterwards. Also Julie thinks constantly of new IT skills and interesting functions she could show Mr. W.

Building a relationship with the client is very important for her so that they both can feel comfortable and approachable in the situation. Julie really enjoys her visits. For her it is satisfying to help someone with the knowledge she has.

Julie finds it very interesting to befriend a Holocaust refugee on a regular basis and feels enriched by the opportunity: hearing the impressive life stories of people who had to start a new life from scratch and had to overcome such difficult times has helped Julie reconceive her own values and problems.

At first, Julie's family and friends were surprised when they heard about Julie's voluntary work and wanted to know more about her motivation. But as Julie explained her thoughts and the reasons for her commitment they were excited and even inspired to start volunteering themselves.

Julie visited the former concentration camp in Auschwitz with her family and Polish friends. For her it was a sad and also strange experience to walk through the memorial site even though the space is empty. She didn't expect the intense atmosphere and feeling that she found there.

Although Julie has never experienced antisemitism herself, she thinks that it is still a big problem today. Bearing this in mind, she is saddened by the thought that society is going back to those antiquated opinions rather than evolving and overcoming these discriminating structures not only concerning religion but regarding people who are different in general.

Profile of a Volunteer: Helen Henley

Helen Henley started volunteering for the AJR 10 years ago. Her friend Vera, who runs the monthly AJR Pinner Group Meeting, was looking for a helping hand while at the same time former AJR Outreach Coordinator Esther Rinkoff launched the monthly meetings at Alyth Gardens. Becoming a volunteer at these meetings seemed like a great opportunity to Helen.

Coming from a German upbringing Helens' parents fled to England to escape Nazi persecution during the Third Reich. Additionally, just having retired Helen felt the need to give something back to society. So being reminded of her background as a "2nd Gen" Helen was thrilled to meet people like her parents and to work for a good cause at the same time. Within the scope of the group meetings she could combine both and still be able to fit it in her busy schedule as a new grandmother.

For almost 11 years now Helen has been attending the Alyth Gardens and Pinner Group Meeting once a month. She arrives earlier than the attending members to help set up the venue and prepare either lunch or tea. She welcomes the guests as they arrive and depending of the purpose of the meeting either helps the speaker who was invited for that meeting get ready for their talk, or just socialises with the attendees. Normally the talks are about Jews in different countries or books such as biographies.

Helen finds it particularly rewarding to chat with the AJR members at the meetings and loves to interact with them as they are always very appreciative of her efforts as a volunteer, as well as being inspirational and strong people. One of her favourite meetings was the "antiques road show" which her friend Vera organized, when everybody was asked to bring an object which reminds them of their past and to present it to the group.

Over the years volunteering at the group meetings has become a very important part of Helen's life. She has formed a bond with the regular attendees and plans to go on volunteering for as long as she can.

Although Helen's parents and grandparents were directly affected by the terrors of the Holocaust and the Second World War Helen didn't learn about this part of history from them but at school. She has been to Germany several times and went to visit Berlin and Wannsee but actively chose not to visit a former concentration camp as it would be too traumatic for her.



Profile of a Co-ordinator: Jennifer Aizenberg

The Memory Loss Programme was launched in 2013 to enhance the lives of the AJR members who are affected by memory loss and therefore feel lonely or isolated and would greatly benefit from the support of a volunteer befriender.

Jennifer Aizenberg is the Memory Loss Befriending Project Co-ordinator at AJR. She has spent 12 years working for Jewish organisations such as Jewish Care and two Synagogues as a social worker or councillor where she also gained experience in the field of volunteer administration. Having experience of working with different age groups and deep respect for the AJR as an organisation and for the people who work there, Jennifer joined the team at AJR in 2016.

Currently around 25 volunteers befriend AJR members as part of the project run by Jennifer and there are always new applicants. As befriending people who are affected by memory loss or dementia is a delicate issue, Jennifer has to select and train her volunteers carefully.

Jennifer recognises the importance that potential volunteers are aware of the significance of the boundaries of their new roles. She looks for friendly, flexible and understanding volunteers who really want to listen and find out about the people they visit. In order to create an environment in which both her client and the volunteer can feel safe and comfortable, Jennifer prepares the volunteer by suggesting possible activities, going through volunteering policies and guidelines, giving background information on their match, going through different scenarios and types of dementia and finally introducing them to each other. These precautionary measures pay off as Jennifer very rarely has to intervene once a volunteer-client-pair is matched.

Apart from that she has to be in constant touch with her volunteers and clients to make sure everything is alright. That's why she often arranges meetings, offers monthly supervision, updates spreadsheets in order to keep track of everything that's going on and organises joint projects with similar schemes. But for Jennifer, the most important part of her work is being responsive and nice to people, to just hear them. She enjoys meeting everybody, be it someone who is doing an amazing job or somebody who is having problems in the current situation. She is always delighted when a pairing is of success and helps to improve the client's life, even though it might be invisible to an onlooker.

During her time at the AJR one of the lessons Jennifer has learned from her work is to have respect for those who try to be part of society and life despite being impaired by memory loss. She still feels very privileged to be allowed into people's lives and to have a job that is so positive.

When Jennifer is not at work she likes to read, walk by the sea or play table tennis and badminton.

