

# ETCETERA

## 'Finchleystrasse's' Cosmo cafe recalled as 'a place of hope and resettlement'

**Launches and events take place this month recalling the days when 'Finchleystrasse' and its famous Cosmo Cafe were a sanctuary for Jewish émigrés.**

The cafe itself will be recreated in an immersive singspiel - half spoken half sung - at St Peter's Belsize Park conceived by opera director and set designer Pamela Howard.

Meanwhile the Hampstead Jazz Club in the Duke of Hamilton pub hosts Viennese political cabaret on Thursday, sketches songs and letters in memory of Hampstead's Laterndl Theatre which was set up by a group of exiled Austrians.

And the Association of Jewish Refugees - a self-help organisation founded in Finchley Road in 1941 to support around 70,000 Jews fleeing Nazi oppression, launched its archive of oral testimony.

It includes memories of the time when Belsize Park's boarding houses teemed with refugees, and bus conductors would announce 'Finchleystrasse, passports please' to passengers alighting at Swiss Cottage.

Many survivors settled in north London bringing with them their food and vibrant culture. Cafes, synagogues and refugee-run businesses sprang up to cater for their needs, a world recreated in Howard's *The Ballad of the Cosmo Café* in collaboration with Central School of Speech and Drama and The Royal College of Music. It's a highlight of the year-long *Insiders/Outsiders* arts festival paying tribute to the rich intellectual and cultural contribution that the refugees made to Britain.

Opened in 1937, on the site of what is now Sprinkles ice cream parlour, the Cosmo was originally a coffee bar frequented by Sigmund Freud after his arrival from Vienna in 1938. From the mid 50s until its closure in 1996, it was run by Adi and Herta Manheimer



Marion Manheimer whose parents owned The Cosmo Cafe in Finchley Road outside in 1960 picture courtesy Marion Manheimer

who served generous portions of Wiener schnitzel and beef goulash. It's said the Viennese would sit on one side of the cafe, and Berliners on the other, as intellectuals and artists gathered over kaffee und kuchen.

Howard recalls passing by daily while a student at the Slade. "In 1960 I had my first student flat at the far end of Finchley Road.

"Every morning I walked to Swiss Cottage Station and passed the steamed up windows of the Cosmo. As I looked inside I saw elderly people all dressed up talking, reading and four elegant ladies playing cards."

Plucking up courage to enter she started sketching the ladies "as a compulsive observer of human life" and fell into conversation with an old man who told her he

was a Polish artist who had been in England for 30 years. "He sat down and began telling me about all the people in the café. I realised this was a home from home for the many emigrants fleeing from persecution. Austrians, Prussians, Hungarians, Spaniards fleeing Franco's regime... they all found refuge in the Cosmo. Finally I learned that it is always possible to restart your life, however difficult."

Howard directs the ballad which is written by Philip Glassborow, and says it is "not a documentary, but an invented collection of memories set to music". Audiences enter as customers, and sit at tables while eight senior performers tell their stories in speech and song, conjuring Freud's ghost, the Polish artist and the

ladies in furs. Howard intends the piece as an optimistic story of resettlement and hope, bringing to life the café patrons, who embraced new lives in a new land while savouring the tastes of their exiled homelands.

**The Ballad of the Cosmo Café is at St. Peter's Church Hall, Belsize Square Nov 16 and 17 at 3:00pm and 7:00pm; Tickets: £16 from eventbrite.com**

Tales of hope and migration are also alive in the audio visual testimony archive launched by the AJR last week. Belsize Park-based archive director Bea Lewkowicz has gathered 250 interviews with survivors including North Londoners; artist Milein Cosman, photographer Dorothy Bohm, author Eva Figes, and actor Andrew Sachs.

"I started in 2003 and we were lucky to capture this amazing oral testimony including from an older generation who were adults during the War," she says. "We have 54 people born before 1920. It not only focuses on the Holocaust but on their entire lives, what they did after the war, the community they built, where they lived and what were their feelings towards Austria and Germany, and about being British?. Finchley Road was a wonderful example of community and many refugees talk with nostalgia about life along it, how it was terribly important to hear music they knew, and eat in the Cosmo and Dorice cafes."

A map created by the AJR shows organisations including the Cosmo, Freud Museum, Belsize Square Synagogue (founded by



One of Pamela Howard's sketches for her imagined regulars of the Cosmo Cafe

German Jewish refugees) Stella Mann's Dance School and small businesses, selling sausages, or typewriter repairs or the Regent's Park School in Maresfield Gardens.

"It's unbelievable," says Lewkowicz. "During the war the big empty houses in Belsize Park and West Hampstead became boarding houses. The refugees came and settled, there were cultural activities, concerts at Belsize Park Square synagogue or the Austrian club. The majority arrived between 1933 and the outbreak of war in 1939 with many Austrians arriving after the Anschluss in 1938."

Lewkowicz says many were from assimilated backgrounds. The AJR helped them to find employment or retrain, then apply for the citizenships that were eventually offered in 1947 and 48.

Prejudice sometimes sprang from the British who "didn't understand they were Jewish and considered them German," but Lewkowicz says: "It was a difficult time but every story is individual and everyone deals with it differently. It's the small memories where oral testimony is so powerful, where you really share someone's story."

In the archive Margaret Simmons recalls meeting Hitler in 1934. "He asked her son where he was from and he said 'I am from Koln'." And Daisy Hoffman from Belsize Park asked to be known 'as a Londoner, no, say I am a Hampsteadite please'.

**The archive is at [ajrrefugeevoices.org.uk](http://ajrrefugeevoices.org.uk). On November 25 the AJR unveils a commemorative plaque to artist Milein Cosman on her former home at 50 Willow Road, Hampstead.**



Highgate resident and archive contributor Lilian Levy as a child after arriving in London and the Association of Jewish Refugee's map of 'Finchleystrasse' pictures courtesy Lilian Levy/The AJR

