David Attenborough’s Two Fostered Sisters

In the nine months before the start of World War II, 10,000 children, nearly all Jewish and most from Germany and Austria, came to live with foster parents in Britain in a rescue mission co-ordinated by the British Government. It became known as the Kindertransport (Child’s Transport). It was formed to stop these children being taken away by the Nazis.

Some of the people who responded to the appeal for help were Sir DavidAttenborough's parents.

Helga and Irene Bejach arrived in August 1939 from Berlin, when David was 13 years old. They looked frightened, thin and unhealthy. Their house in Germany had been smashed by Nazis with guns. Their father would later be killed. Their mother had already died.

Helga, who was 10 years old and Irene, who was 12, had been picked up by David’s mother Mary at a train station in London.

The plan was for the girls to stay with a family in the UK before travelling to America, where they had relatives.

Even though David, and his brothers Richard and John, were all quite young, they realised how shocked and frightened the girls were and they took them into their family. They saw them as sisters.

Richard once said: “Initially, they were very reclusive, but they grew into attractive and confident young women. They helped shape our lives. We went on holidays together, and played together as brothers and sisters, and I adored them.”

Helga and Irene stayed with the Attenborough family for seven years before moving to America to join relatives, and both married there and had their own families.

Richard would talk on the phone to them at least once a month, for the first 20 years after the war, and would see them when he went to America or they came over here.

Helga and Irene eventually died. Irene died in 1992 and Helga in 2005.

Their elder sister, Jotta, who had been a year too old to get a visa to escape to England, incredibly survived the war in Germany and then travelled to America to join her sisters.

She is still alive, aged over 100.

Last February, Helga’s daughter, Bev, and her husband and children came to England to meet their mother/grandmother’s ‘English family’ and to visit the places where she had lived. They and the whole Attenborough family got together in David’s garden one afternoon. Richard Attenbrough’s son, Michael, said: “It was a very moving and unforgettable tea.”