Late donor to Jerusalem orphanage to be honored
Childless Holocaust survivor left savings to orphans

By Susie Davidson
Advocate correspondent

When Joseph Fischer passed away two years ago, he left his savings to The Diskin Orphan Fund (Béit Diskin) in Jerusalem. It was a fitting bequest, as Fischer himself was an orphan of World War II. He left no immediate family, as his entire family was killed in the Holocaust, and he never married or had children.

Born in Romania, Fischer settled in Boston after the war. The survivor community of Greater Boston became his new family. Before his passing, he lived at the Hebrew Senior Life complex at 100 Centre Street in Brookline. According to AJJHS (American Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors & Descendants of Greater Boston) President Janet Stein, Diskin really did not know Fischer, and never expected to receive any gift.

"Because Joseph, like my own father, was an orphan of the war who had lost everyone, I was not surprised when I heard where he left the money – but apparently they were," she said, recalling that over 30 members of the local Holocaust community came together at his funeral, to ensure that there was a minyan.

Fischer’s gift came at a critical moment and enabled Diskin to continue their mission. To show their appreciation, the organization erected a headstone on Fischer’s grave, to be unveiled this Sunday morning (Aug. 16) in West Roxbury. Following the unveiling, Diskin will also host the Joseph Fischer Memorial Tribute Luncheon at Young Israel of Brookline.

One speaker will be Mark Ettinger, who visited Fischer regularly in his apartment over the past few years, and spoke at his funeral. "It was part of a Jewish Family and Children’s Services program where children of Holocaust survivors volunteered to visit other Holocaust survivors,” explained Ettinger, who is Vice President of Linguistic Systems, Inc. and lives in Needham. “After all those visits and countless hours, I considered Joseph a friend,” said Ettinger.

Ellen Krechmer of Methuen first met Fischer in early 1991, when she interviewed him as Oral History Chair of One Generation After, an international oral history project. Fischer’s recorded testimony can be found in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

“He had an extraordinary recall of places, dates and numbers,” recalled Krechmer in an email. "He was able to draw upon a detailed map of Eastern Europe in his head to not only recount his experiences, but [also] describe the location of his story in relation to major cities, rivers and other landmarks, while providing a colorful overlay of historical events.”

Fischer was born in 1924 in Bistritz, Transylvania. Both he and his brother, David, were trained as tailors from a young age. "During the war, he was one of thousands of Jews forced into slave labor battalions assigned to the Hungarian army, which was supporting the Nazis in their assault on the Soviet Union," wrote Krechmer.

In the summer of 1942, Fischer and his brother left Hungary for this purpose, and were forcibly marched 1000 miles to the banks of the Don River. There, they helped repair roads and build materials needed by the army. "But in January, 1943," Krechmer recounted, "the slave battalion scattered, as Hungarian soldiers retreated before the Soviet advance." Fischer lost track of his brother in the ensuing chaos, and never saw him again.

"Fischer was next assigned to a reorganized slave battalion that fell back toward Germany as the Nazis’ eastern front was attacked by the re-energized Soviets,” wrote Krechmer. "Fischer's battalion was pushed back into Poland, and he was near Warsaw at the same time the ghetto was under attack by the Germans.”

When the Soviet army ceased advancing, Fischer and his group were marched back to Hungary, and then to Austria. There, he and thousands of Hungarian Jews were turned over to the SS and imprisoned at the Mauthausen and Gunskirchen camps. "He had marched thousands of miles, from Hungary to Romania, Ukraine, Russia, and Poland, to end his wartime wanderings of near-starvation and extreme deprivation in a death camp in Austria,” Krechmer lamented.

Following liberation by the Americans in 1945, Fischer remained in a displaced persons’ camp for several years until the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society was able to send him to New York, and put him on a train to South Station.

He was met by someone helping Jewish immigrants who took him to Roxbury, where he rented a room. "The day he settled in
Boston was a Friday, and on Monday he went to work sewing in a factory on Essex Street,” wrote Krechmer. “He didn’t know a word of English, could not find his way to work, needed to negotiate unfamiliar trains and buses, didn’t know the value of American money – it was a brutal landing for someone who had already endured so much suffering.”

Alone and lonely, Fischer knew how it felt to be an orphan. He saved the meager wages he earned while working for 30 years in a garment factory, some of which will now provide for children who are likewise alone in Israel.

The deadline to reserve places at the luncheon or seats on the buses is Thursday, Aug. 13 at 9 p.m. The public is invited to attend the unveiling for Joseph Fischer at the Roxbury Lodge Cemetery, 776 Baker Street, West Roxbury on Sunday at 10:30 a.m. For further information, please email AAJHS at aajhs@BostonHolocaustSurvivors.org.

The late Joseph Fischer from his oral history recording.