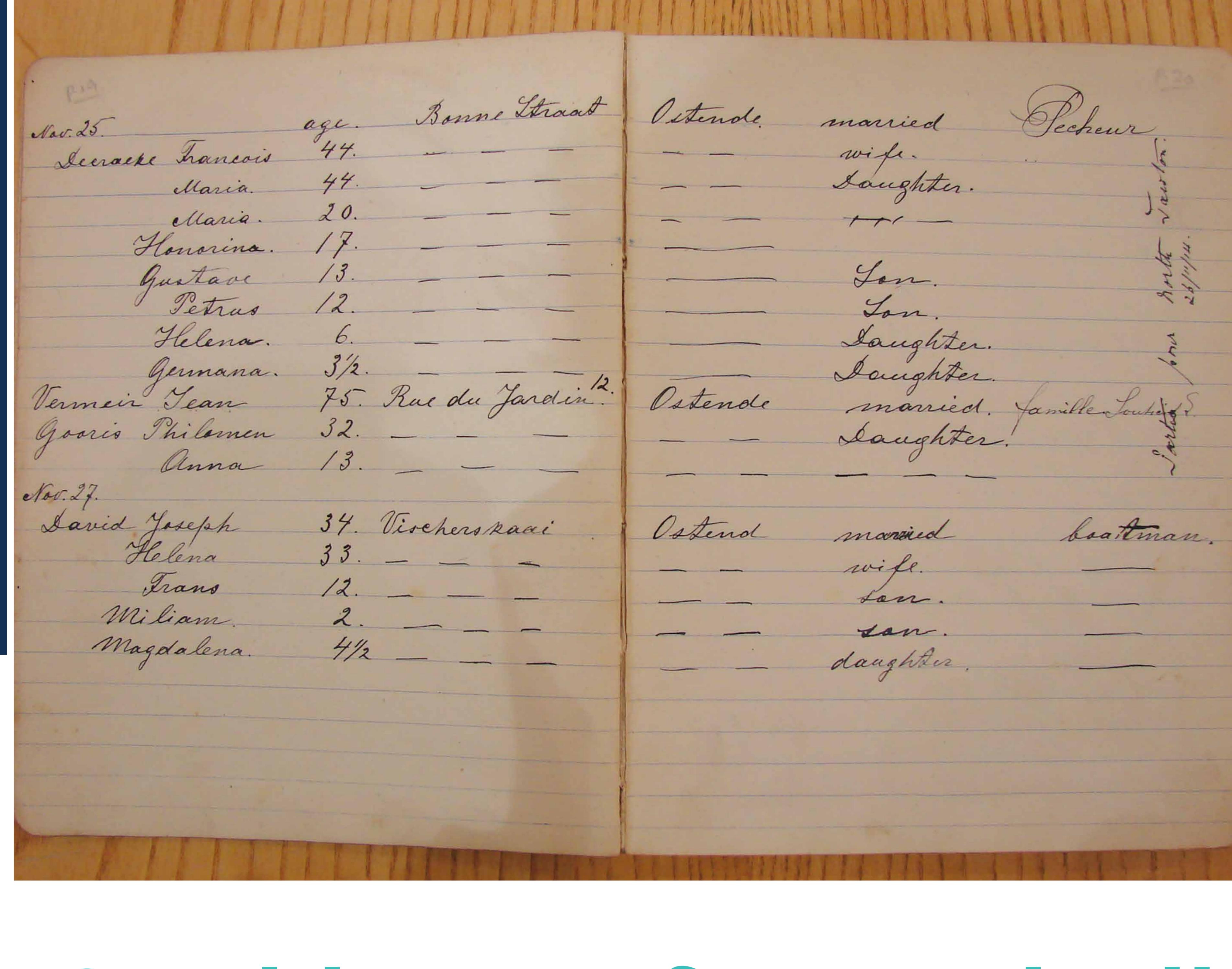


Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots: Okehampton



Seeking Refuge, Finding a Home Refugees in Okehampton

Over the course of the twentieth century, Okehampton has offered a safe refuge for various groups of people unable to return home.

During the First World War, Belgian refugees were housed in the town and surrounding villages. One house in North Tawton is known as Belgium House to this day.

Housing, clothes and food were provided by locals and money was raised to support the refugees during their stay. On the 20th November 1914, it was reported that:

'At the [Okehampton] Drill Hall an enjoyable entertainment has been given in aid of the Belgian Relief Fund. There was a crowded house. The concert realised over £13...'

(Devon and Exeter Gazette)

Following the Yalta agreement at the end of the Second World War, many Poles found themselves unable to return home,

after the eastern regions of Poland were annexed by the Soviet Union. In response, the Okehampton Polish Naval Camp was transformed into a Resettlement Centre, which equipped Polish residents with skills for living and working in Britain. They received English lessons and vocational training in areas such as agriculture, building and mining.

In September 1980 Okehampton Town Council agreed to offer new homes to three families of Vietnamese 'boat people' (who were in fact from Cambodia). Two public meetings were held when early opposition to the plan was expressed. However, a local support group was formed to collect household goods and to raise funds for the refugees, and by early 1981 the three families had arrived and settled into their homes on the newly built Giblands estate.

"I didn't think about travelling as I never wanted to leave Syria. I wasn't really scared but I thought about how I will be moving to the UK without knowing anyone there, and without knowing the language. However, when the news of travelling came I accepted it without hesitation."

Malek, Syrian, Okehampton resident

Top photos: Left: Register of Belgian refugees (image: Devon Heritage Centre). Right: News article about boat people coming to Okehampton.

Right inset: Aleksander Szypko (a member of the Polish navy) retrained for a new life in the UK.

Bottom photos, left to right: Marriage of a Land Girl to an American soldier (1944); Okehampton Castle; US troops on parade during WW2.

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