

LONDON JEWS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

BY PAULA KITCHING

Some stories of Jewish men and women who supported the British War effort in the First World War, discovered and recorded for Heritage Lottery Fund project, London Jews in the First World War - We Were There Too

We Were There Too has been collecting and preserving stories of British Jews who served both in the Armed Forces and on the Home Front, 1914-1918, on a new website www.jewsfww.london.

The lives of these men, women and children were in danger of being forgotten by subsequent generations as memories fade and memorabilia is discarded. Now, recorded in over 1,000 Personal Records digitised on the website, their names and contribution will be remembered and provide an insight into life at the time for this recently arrived Jewish community.

Some of the people mentioned below were honoured with medals, but many were not. They were 'ordinary' men and women whose service and sacrifice deserve recognition.

Emily Hartman was born in Sheffield in April 1895. During the War she became a nurse, and, on 20th April 1918, joined one of the Sheffield VAD units. She worked in a hospital in Manchester before being transferred to a military

hospital in Bermondsey in London. While there she contracted influenza and died on the 20th October 1918. She was buried at Ecclesfield Jewish Cemetery, Yorkshire.



Emily's senior officer wrote to the family "I take a personal interest in all of our members, and knowing the splendid work done by Miss Hartman, I should like to convey my very deepest sympathy in your sad loss."

Emanuel Bigofski was born in Stepney in 1897. In 1901, his father, Barnett, is listed as a bootmaker, working from home. By 1911, Barnett had become a butcher, living in Tottenham with his wife, Sarah, and daughters Celia, 20, and Pauline, 16, in 5 rooms above the shop.

Most of the rest of the family lived in another house around the corner. Becky, 23,

a dressmaker, Saul (Solomon) and Emanuel, 14, and Louis 10, all listed as students.

In early 1915, Emanuel and Solomon travelled to the USA on the SS St Louis 3rd, giving their occupations as butchers. Emanuel returned some months later and enlisted on 2nd November 1915. He served with the Labour Corps, was injured during the third Battle of Ypres and died on the 9th October 1917. He is buried at Lijssenthoeck CWGC cemetery, Belgium.

William Mack D.C.M. was born in Edinburgh in 1890 with the surname Kurtzman. He changed his name before joining the army as a volunteer in Glasgow in 1915 when he also married Catherine Goldberg.



William served with a Scottish regiment, the Seaforth Highlanders, and rose to the rank of Sergeant. In 1917, having taken part in activities that resulted in him being recommended for the Distinguished Conduct Medal for Gallantry, he was injured in an accident, died and was buried at St Pol Communal

Cemetery Extension, Pas de Calais. His DCM was awarded posthumously.

With no children or grandchildren to remember him or visit his grave, William's story might have been lost forever. Now, preserved on www.jewsfww.london we will remember that he was there too.

British Jewry Book of Honour
Jewish Chronicle - In Memoriam, 13th July 1917

"The death, from wounds, has occurred of Sergt. William Mack (Kurtzman) of the Seaforth Highlanders. His widow has received the following letter from a Chaplain attached to the Seaforth Highlanders, 'We are feeling sad about it. To think that Sergt. Mack has been so long with us and has come through many a dangerous battle and then has lost his life twenty miles back from the line by accident is unspeakably sad. I have known Sergt. Mack all the time he has been here. I know how well he did and how precious he was in his department. He was the great helper of every officer under whom he served and they all thought very highly of him'.

The Lieut. Colonel of the Company has sent the following letter, 'Your husband has now been awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for gallantry on the 11th May, a decoration which I know he thoroughly deserved and earned well.

I am sorry to say that the award was not made in sufficient time for him to know about it himself. It may please you to know that the award of the DCM is sparingly granted and is only given for specially gallant and meritorious conduct..."

Distinguished Conduct Medal Citation

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. During the mopping up of a village he organised scattered units into bombing groups, and personally led them, helping to capture five offices and 50 other ranks. He was of the utmost assistance to his company.

Hyman Lush, born in Poland in 1890, arrived in the UK in 1906 using any one of the different spellings of his surname; Lushinsky, Lushinski or Luszynski - and lived with his grandmother at a variety of address across East London from Commercial St to Stoke Newington.

Hyman was a dedicated member of the St John Ambulance before the war and volunteered for the Royal Army Medical Corps as soon as war was declared. He served as a medical orderly, initially at Connaught Hospital, Aldershot, where he worked with wounded German prisoners, and then in Mesopotamia and the North West Frontier. A photograph shows Hyman with other RAMC staff and German prisoners in 1914-1915. Hyman is the central kneeling figure in the front row. The signed photograph testifies to the friendly relations between the medical staff and their German patients despite rising anti-German sentiment in Britain.

In his diary, Hyman recorded how he acted as unofficial interpreter (probably mostly

in Yiddish), helping to record the Germans' particulars when they arrived. He was kind to the Germans, chatting and buying them chocolate and cigarettes. Many of them signed his autograph books with friendly messages.

Hyman's grandson, Dean Lush, recorded his story:

It is remarkable to consider Grandpa, a recent Jewish immigrant from Poland, serving as a British soldier in these far-away and alien places, and to reflect on all that this would have meant for him. The many documents and photographs that he kept from the period shed a fascinating light on his experiences. They cover, for example, two particular episodes which relate to questions of Jewish identity.

First, during WW1, the Tsarist government strove to track down many of the Jews who had left Russia to recall them for military service. Grandpa secured exemption as he was by this time a naturalized British subject serving in the British Army, but other Jews were in a more difficult position. Grandpa's brother, who had not become naturalized and was involved with the Jewish trade union movement, met with the then (Jewish) Home Secretary, Herbert Samuel, to discuss the problem.

Secondly, Grandpa made many visits to the Jewish community in Basra, Mesopotamia. There he encountered an "Oriental" Judaism at once strange and familiar. Here are some quotes from his letters home:

16/04/17 - "I have been down to Basra on pass... the last day of Passover... although I am only a private one of the richest Jews in Basra sent his private landau to take me back

to the hospital...[My host and his brother] showed me round the town. Then [we went] to a coffee shop (Jewish) where they all congregate & play [backgammon?] regardless of it being Yomtov. I was struck with their disregard of religion."

23-4/04/17 - "Then one thinks here I am thousands & thousands of miles away from home, & yet I can find more than one roof to shelter me & food... even sleeping accommodation provided free of charge & feel absolutely at home. I have been told the other day by a Christian friend, that Jews help one another more than gentiles. I now believe it is true (didn't then) for can a gentile find the same hospitality I doubt it."



12/12/17 - "For New Year we got two days leave... [and went into Basra and participated in] a quaint custom in vogue here. Instead of our custom of going to the synagogue after meals to say Psalms & Mincha, the Jews here congregate in a friend's (generally better off than his neighbours) house... In the shady part of the courtyard a group of men & boys are sitting singing Psalms. Those of us who could read Hebrew joined in. In a few minutes time I suddenly noticed that I was the only one reading the Psalms, & that all the others had stopped & were listening, evidently curious to hear how a European pronounces the Hebrew. I read on... two pages & still the others made no effort to begin so I told the Persian Jew, as best I could make him understand, that

I am not a Chazzan, would he mind reading now."



Dorothy Behrman nee Englebert was born in London in 1904. A child during the war, she attended the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in North London with her parents. In 1915, her Sunday Religion school drawings and essays were included in a book of children's work of that year. She was known as Doris to her family.

Forgotten for nearly 100 years, the book survived, along with a similar one from 1916. They contain very rare examples of the war seen through the eyes of London's Jewish children. Now digitised, the volumes can be viewed on the London Jews in the First World War website. After the books came into public view, Dorothy's relatives were found, and her story has now been recorded alongside her childhood perceptions of the war.

More information relating to the lives of the people described in this article along with hundreds more can be found in the Personal Records section of the website www.jewsfww.london

If you have a family story from the First World War period and would like to preserve it, please use the online facility to upload the information into the digital archive or email contactus@jewsfww.london