



Barbara Paul

A look back on the brave Jewish men

'ENGLAND HAS BEEN ALL SHE COULD BE TO JEWS. JEWS WILL BE ALL THEY CAN BE TO ENGLAND'

THIS was the sign above the offices of the Jewish Chronicle in London in August, 1914. The Jewish community of Britain was being asked to fulfil its patriotic duty to its country.

But how would Jews respond?

The First World War (1914-18) had a massive impact on the 20th century. Empires and monarchies were destroyed, new independent countries were born and millions of people were killed or displaced.

Over the course of the war, 45,000-55,000 Jewish men served in the British Armed Forces.

Approximately 9,000 were casualties, of whom over 2,500 were killed or died of their injuries.

Around 50,000 names are recorded in the British Jewry Book of Honour. These statistics mean that 13-14 per cent of the Jewish community served in the military – a considerable number when compared to the overall figure of 11-12 per cent for the general British population.

By 1914, the Jewish community of the United Kingdom was a mixture of communities; some had integrated well into British society while others were still speaking Yiddish and trying to find their place.

Out of a total population of over 41 million, the Jewish community numbered 250,000-300,000.

At this time, antisemitism was common across Europe and in the UK, and stereotypes of Jews were frequently seen in literature and newspaper cartoons.

Compared to mainland Europe, Jews were relatively well treated in Britain and enjoyed freedom of worship. However, Jews were most likely to be identified as

being "foreign" and to suffer prejudices and discrimination in social attitudes.

Jews were able to join the British Army before the First World War and there is evidence of many receiving awards and commendations during campaigns such as the Boer War (1898-1902).

A certain Lieutenant Frank de Pass took up his commis-

sion in 1906, and in October, 1914, was the first Jewish recipient of the Victoria Cross – the highest award for gallantry.

When preparing this article, I requested archive information from shul members and received several fascinating and moving replies.

Leon Phillips wrote of his mother's uncle, London-born Ben Rotenberg, who was a lance-corporal in the Duke of Edinburgh's Wiltshire Regiment, 2nd Bn.

Ben survived some major battles, fighting at the Somme and the Hindenburg Line.

However, sadly, one day his parents received a letter – written in pencil, possibly by his commanding officer or a comrade – which described how Ben had been wounded by enemy fire.

He had been sent for first aid to a dressing station, where he was ordered to a hospital behind the lines.

However, he refused to go and returned to the trenches, only to be killed in action at the Battle of Arras, aged just 24, on April 9, 1917.

Ben is buried at Neuville-vitasse military cemetery in France . . . and the square Portland headstone clearly shows the Star of David.



STEPHEN Cohen's grandparents Philip and Rachel Hantman. On Philip's lap is Stephen as a baby, with his older brother Leslie. The photo was taken in 1957 – a year before Philip was killed in a road accident

PICTURES: 'WE WERE THERE TOO'



TRENCHES: Barney Jacobs around 1918

Another family history story came from shul member Tony Jacobs, who has created his own web pages to record the story of his paternal grandfather from Manchester, Barney Jacobs.

Barney was born in 1895, the son of Eastern European immigrants. Having survived the trenches, fighting the Turks in Salonika – formerly Thessaloniki – Barney returned home from the war, married and settled in Kings Road, Prestwich.

At the age of 89, he told his grandson Tony the amazing story of how in 1918, on duty as a signaller, he narrowly escaped enemy fire and shrapnel from exploding shells as he made his way in



MAJOR BATTLES: Ben Rotenberg

great trepidation down the line, having been given permission to attend a rare synagogue service six miles away.

He was the only Jew in his company.

Due to his absence the following day, a Welshman with the same surname replaced him in a bombing raid led by 30 men.

That young soldier was fatally shot returning from the enemy line.

Once again, Barney's life had been miraculously spared.

However, when some of his friends heard the surname Jacobs, they believed he had been killed and collected his belongings to return to his



DEDICATION: Volunteer Florence Oppenheimer nursed 2,000 sick and badly-injured patients. She later became famous as cookery writer Florence Greenberg

amazing contribution of and women in Great War

parents. Fortunately, the truth came out in time, and Barney's parents were thankfully spared that dreadful telegram which was sent to thousands of parents informing them of the tragic loss of their sons in the conflict.

Another shul member with a story is Stephen Cohen.

His maternal grandfather, Philip Hantman, was born in 1896 near Minsk in Belorussia and came to Manchester around 1900.

He served from 1914-20 in the Labour Corps, which involved building roads and railways, and transporting the injured or dead away from the front lines.

His work ethic and record were worthy enough for his commanding officer to write a supporting reference for Philip's naturalisation application to be granted shortly after his military service ended.

Philip, who worked as a tailor after the war, tragically lost his life in a road traffic accident at the age of 62.

Holy Law member Geoff Kuhillow tells a story of his grandfather Louis Povidler.

After arriving from Kaluszyn, Poland, in 1900 or 1901, Louis settled in the Stocks Street area of Cheetham Hill and later in Elizabeth Street.

Grateful for the freedom his new country offered,

Louis dutifully enrolled in the army when the Great War began in 1914.

But by a stroke of luck, he was spared the hell that broke out in mainland Europe.

His commanding officer heard that Louis was a tailor – and a good one at that. And the shrewd CO had a brilliant idea.

He sent Louis to sit out the conflict in Ireland, making clothes for the commanding officer's wife and children.

And on his army tunic was sewn a scissors insignia with the letters RT – Regimental Tailor – denoting his skills on the sewing machine.

"That story has lived with me since I was a little boy," says Geoff. "And I've no reason to believe it was embellished at all by the retelling over the decades since."

A further area of interest in the Great War is the role played by Jewish military nurses and doctors in hospitals at home and abroad.

There was no NHS in 1914, but most towns and all cities had hospitals with trained medical staff. This was funded by individual donations and generous sponsors.

In 1866, the British military decided that nurses should be formally appointed to military general hospitals. In 1902, the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nurs-



DAME HILDA LEVER: Contracted septic poisoning

ing Service (QAIMNS) was formed by the War Office.

Such nurses were educated, single, had completed three years' training and were aged 24-35. By the end of the war, over 2,200 of them were serving full time.

One such volunteer was Florence Oppenheimer. Born

born in Salford in 1884. Despite her privileged background – her husband Arthur Lever was made a baronet in 1911 – she shared her husband's strong sense of service and duty and volunteered to be a Red Cross nurse.

Tragically, she contracted septic poisoning while nursing the wounded in a London hospital and died in 1917.

Dame Hilda Beatrice Lever is commemorated in a window in York Minster. In total, 100,000 served in nursing roles during the First World War.

Roughly five out of six of those who served in the British forces did return home at the end of the war. Of the five million who returned to civilian life, around two million came back with some physical disability and bore the mental scars, too, of horrors they had witnessed.

By the end of the First World War, Jews had served in the army, the Royal Navy and the newly-formed Royal Air Force.

In addition, women served in the nursing services and auxiliary units.

Sadly, across the battlefields of Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere, the Star of David can today be found among the countless neat lines of cream headstones in the Commonwealth War Grave Commission cemeteries.

In 1918 the Jewish community of Britain mourned

its tragic loss of life by erecting memorials in synagogues and cemeteries, thus immortalising the loyalty and patriotism shown by thousands of young Jewish men and women in the service of their country.

You may have noticed the WWI memorial board, erected after much research some years ago, outside the ohel at Rainsough cemetery.

Today, unique stories are being recorded and preserved as part of the Heritage Lottery funded "British Jews in the First World War – We Were There Too" project.

Launched in London in 2016, the project has a dedicated team in the North-West, based in Whitefield.

It is overseen by project manager Rodney Ross,

First-hand knowledge now gone

assisted by an administrator, a researcher and volunteers.

As well as being a history and heritage project, there is an all-important education portal accessible to primary and secondary schools, enabling pupils to further their knowledge and understanding of the Great War.

This vital work in schools beyond the Jewish community encourages a sensitive awareness of the role played by British Jewish soldiers and nurses in WWI.

A century on, first-hand knowledge has disappeared. However, personal recollections can still be captured through stories passed down as family history, along with letters, diaries and memorabilia, which have survived in attics and old photo albums.

If you have any First World War family stories, photographs, medals and artefacts, here is an opportunity to ensure they can be documented and preserved as surviving evidence of Jewish individual and group experiences for future generations.

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LOUIS: Tailor's scissors displayed on his tunic

Face to face with war horror

in 1882 into a large middle-class Sephardi family, she made the perilous journey into the war zone of the Middle East in July, 1915.

On board the hospital ship *Alounia*, she came face to face with the sheer horrors of the war.

Florence was one of 10 exhausted nurses who, with a small team of doctors, attempted to tend to almost 2,000 desperately sick and horrendously badly injured patients.

Although her military contribution is largely unknown, Florence later became famous as cookery writer Florence Greenberg and lived well into her 90s in London.

Nurses paid a heavy price for their war service, frequently contracting pneumonia and other diseases.

Beatrice Hilda Lever was