

DIGITAL SHOWCASE FOR CHEDER PUPILS' WARTIME WRITING

Discovered: How youth saw WWI

BY BARRY TOBERMAN

► A REMARKABLE insight into the thoughts of young Londoners during the First World War has come to light through a London Jewish Cultural Centre digital resource project.

Painstakingly illustrated poems, essays and cartoons are among a treasure trove of material contained in two bound volumes of work by pupils of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue religion school in 1915 and 1916, when the shul was in its original premises in Hill Street. They had been gathering dust in storage boxes until discovered by Sharon Lewison, a former archivist at the St John's Wood shul.

Now the digitised work is about to become a showpiece addition to LJCC's We Were There Too site, recording the contribution to the war by Jewish Londoners, both on the battlefield and on the home front. The resource is backed by more than £400,000 in Heritage Lottery funding.

Project director Alan Fell says the

material is of immense historical importance. "It shows how kids were caught up in the propaganda of the day.

"As far as we can find out, there is nothing like this in the world — a contemporaneous record of the views of young Jews. It has a resonance to what is happening in the world now."

Adds the project's Mandy King: "You can get stuff about soldiers. You might find a bit about women, particularly if they were in the Auxiliary Corps. This is the missing link.

"These are extraordinary impressions of the time."

The project team got wind of the material quite by chance. Having contacted around 150 congregations to promote the resource through means such as articles in synagogue magazines, follow-up calls were made last summer to 20 larger shuls.

Mr Fell recalls: "When IJS asked if we would like to see the children's books, we knew what we had found without Kew [the National Archives] telling us.

"The fact that an annual report of a religion school was so willing to reproduce such material showed the mood of the time. The standard of literacy is amazing. I don't know if kids today could write like this. Scholars will beat a path to it."

Ms King adds: "It was like gold dust

KAISER BILL

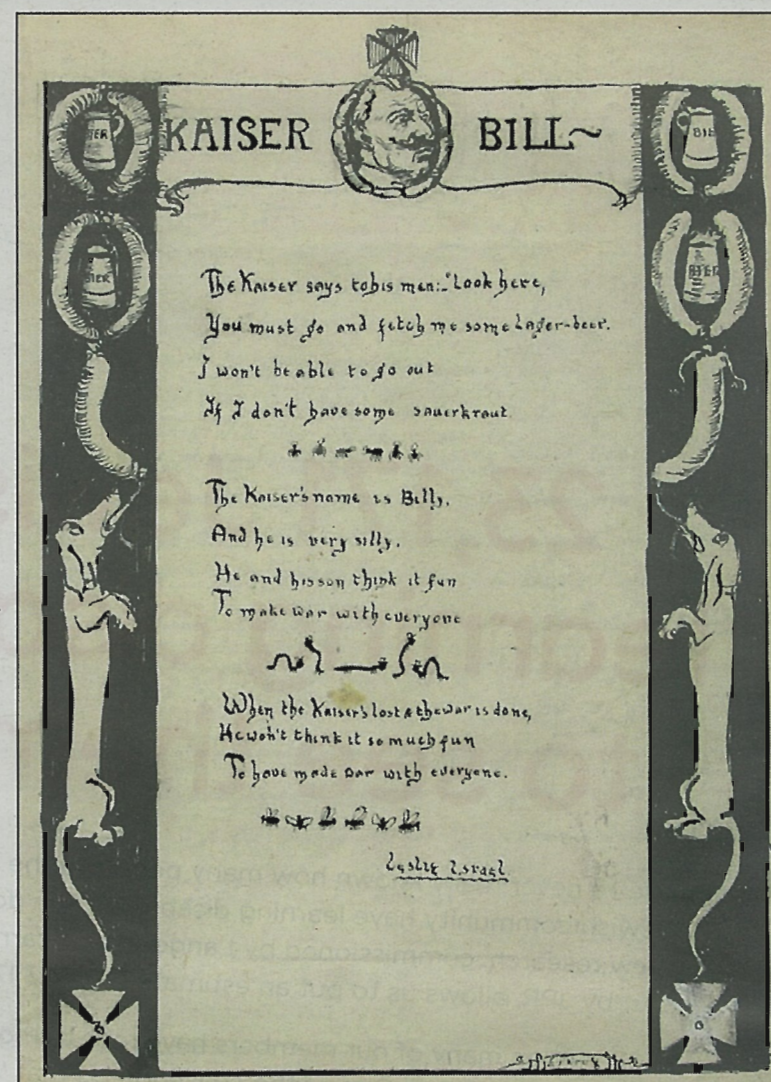
The Kaiser says to his man:
'Look here
You must go
and fetch me
some lager
beer'

I won't be able
to go out
if I don't
have some
sauerkraut

The Kaiser's
name is Billy

And he is very
silly. He and his
son think it fun
To make war
with everyone

When the
Kaiser's lost and
the war is done
He won't think it
so much fun
To have made
war with
everyone
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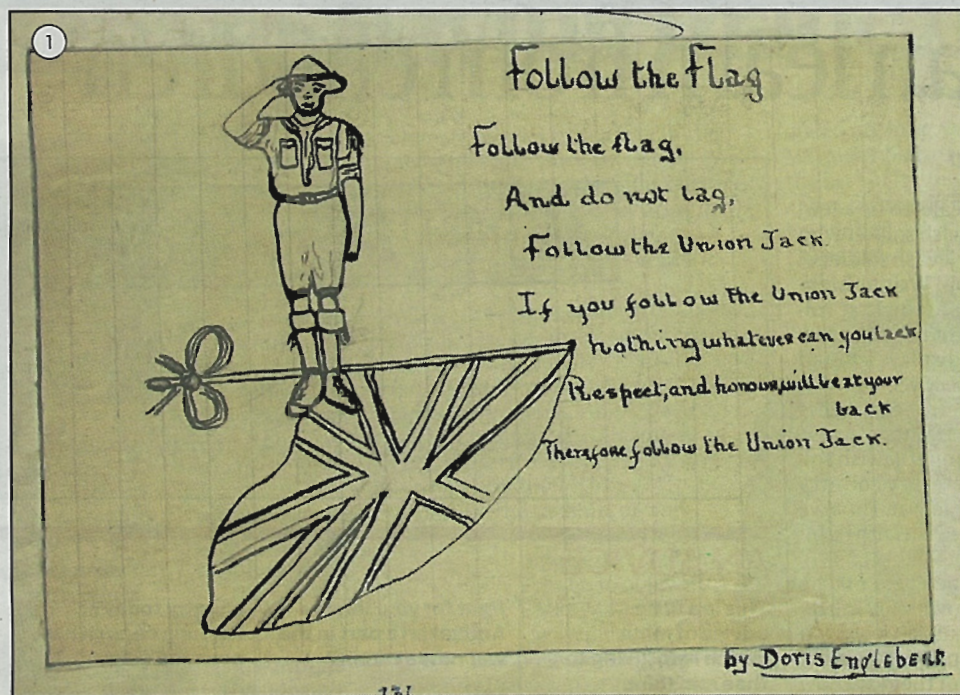
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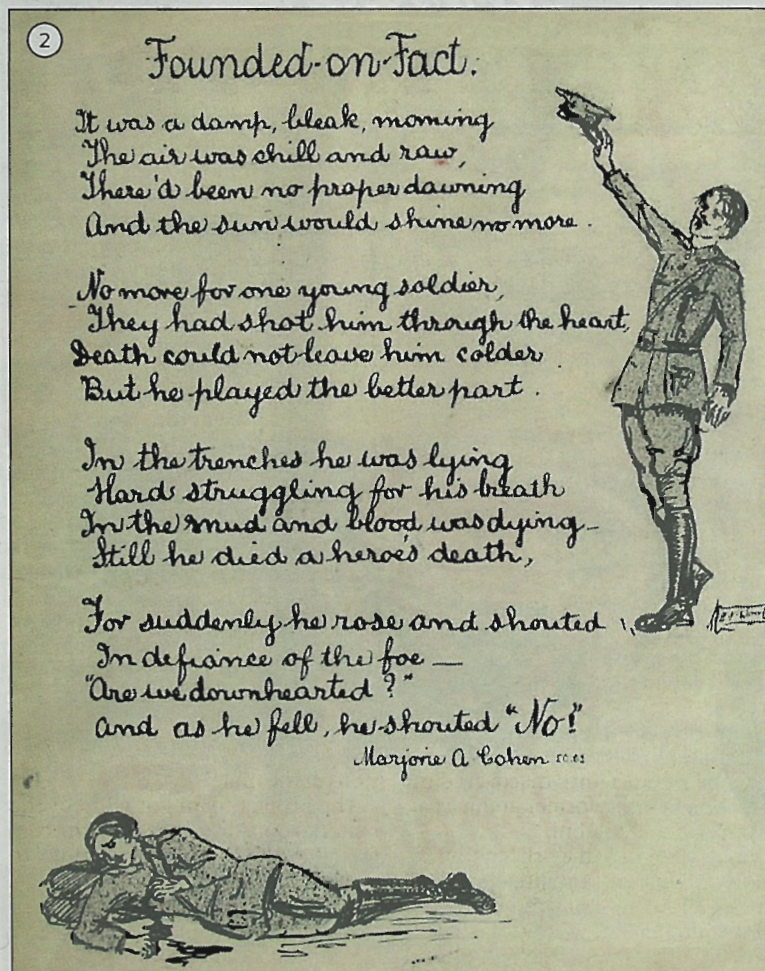


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FOLLOW THE FLAG

Follow the flag
And do not lag
Follow the Union Jack
If you follow the Union Jack
Nothing whatever can you lack
Respect and honour will be at your back
Therefore follow the Union Jack
By Doris Englebert



1. Follow the Flag by Doris Englebert 2. Marjorie Cohen's illustrated poem Founded on Fact. 3. Sybil Izbicki's painting A heartfelt sorrow — why wasn't I born a man? 4. Judgement Day (The Kaiser grounded by sin), a painting by Alice Engelbert. 5. The main illustration for Playing Soldiers, a story by Doris Ries

— the heirloom you keep in the bank and never look at. Who would have thought that a synagogue would have two volumes of work by children showing their feelings about the war. And who would have believed they would have kept it.

The war-related material appears among more general items in *Side Issues of the Religion Classes*, basically a review of the year. Indeed, the first volume opens with an annual report including comments on class behaviour. "There has always been a tendency towards levity which has need to be abolished." Pupils are also admonished for scribbling on the walls — "this is absolutely inexcusable" — and absenteeism is questioned. "Attendance leaves much to be desired as the reasons for staying away are very doubtful."

But the yearly report is immediately followed by the first of the war pieces, *Founded on Fact*, a powerfully illustrated poem by Marjorie Cohen.

It includes the lines: "No more for one young soldier/ They had shot him through the heart/ Death could not leave him colder/ But he played the better part." The poem concludes: "For suddenly he rose and shouted/ In defiance of the foe/ Are we downhearted? And as he fell he shouted 'no!'"

In a war-related poetic alphabet, Marjorie Moos goes from "A for the airman who floated around/ B for the bomb that he dropped to the ground" to "Y for the youth of our land gone to fight/ Z for the Zeppelins plucky at night". Charles Brill's *A Routed Army* is a descriptive account of "a terrible battle and defeat of the enemy in Belgium",

based on the experience of a Belgian refugee who had visited him.

Doris Ries's story, *Playing Soldiers*, begins with "Uncle Dick" returning from the front and presenting Tom and Molly respectively with a scout's and nurse's uniform. The children resolve to have a war using their toys, with Tom on the lookout for spies. "But soon poor Tom got shot through the head. Then Molly came and took him to the hospital where he still lies in great pain with a bandage around his head."

The volumes were discovered some years ago in old boxes on top of a cupboard during a rebuilding programme at LJS. They were rehoused in a damp area of the basement until being "rediscovered" after Ms Lewison became archivist in 2014.

Funding was arranged for their restoration and the books have gone through an extensive preservation process.

For Rabbi Alexandra Wright, the LJS senior minister, the find is "very exciting. It is an extraordinary thing to look at. One is often assaulted by the words of adults. You don't often have the views of children."

"What comes through is the uncertainty of the time but also a resilience and humour. It is very moving."

"We should listen to their voices and recognise their fear, their courage and their loss of innocence as war consumes their world. There is much we can learn from children, then and now, if we look at life through their eyes."

"Young people are trying to get to

► CONTINUED ON P12

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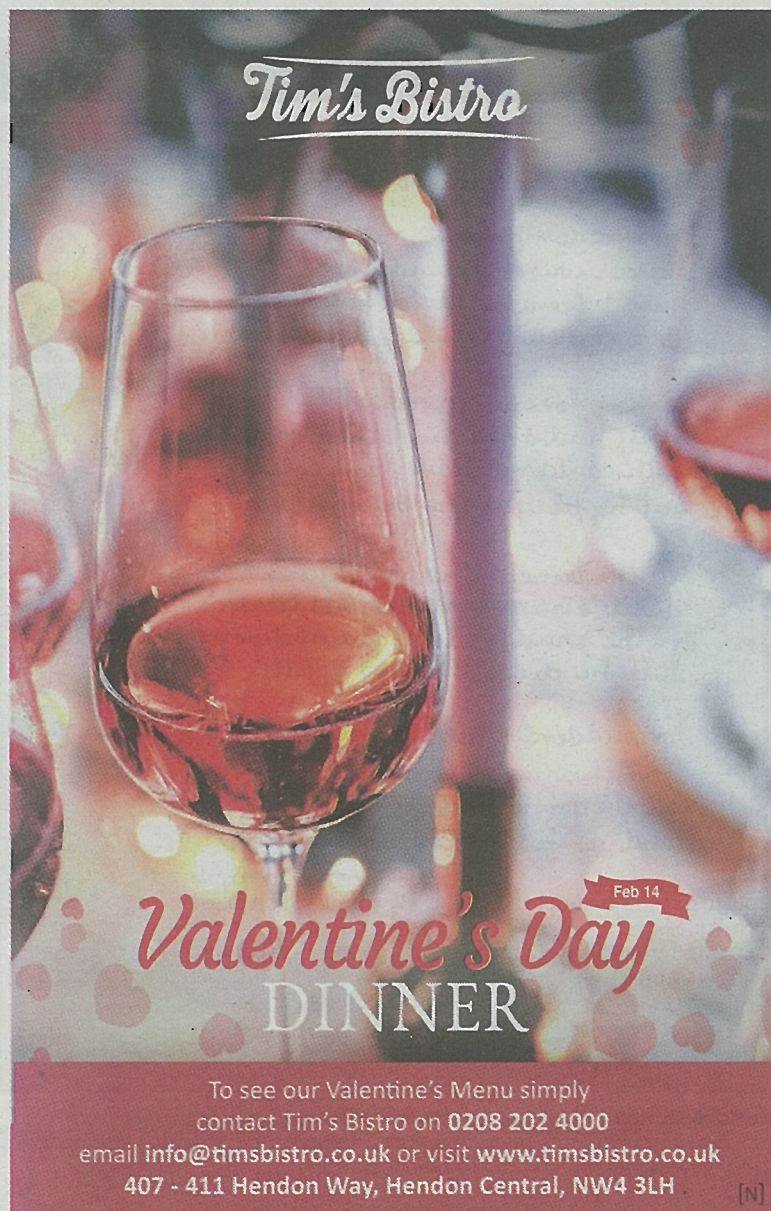


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CHEDER PUPILS' WARTIME WRITING

'We can learn from children'

◀ CONTINUED FROM P11

grips with what it means to be a Jewish soldier — and a Jewish soldier who may be fighting other Jewish soldiers."

In this regard, Rabbi Wright highlights a contribution to the first volume by Nina Goldstein titled *My opinion of the War*, which displays a broad and considered perspective.

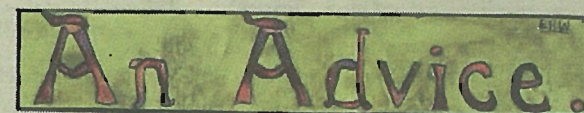
Nina wrote: "This European War is interesting from all points of view, especially the Jewish [one]. Jewish soldiers are fighting for every country engaged in this terrible war. Thus we find members of the Jewish faith fighting against each other."

She continued: "The cities on the Eastern Battlefields are mainly inhabited by Austrian and Russian Jews who are naturally suffering very terribly and many thousands of them are now homeless."

"Another interesting point for the Jewish people is the break up of the Turkish Empire, which must come about through their foolishly trying to fight the Allies. As we all know, Palestine at present belongs to Turkey and one of the results of the war may be that the Holy Land may once again belong to the Jewish people."

Rabbi Wright also observes that the wartime reflections address issues of identity among those who had come to Britain from the Continent.

After the war started, her own great-



by Alice E

This is a little advice of mine
Which I am giving to thee and thine.

AN ADVICE

This is a little
advice of mine
Which I am giving to
thee and thine
When in the paper you
are reading
Of the war which is now
proceeding

Think of those who are
fighting for you
And keeping your
freedom for you too
Why have not you some

fight for your land
And taken a part in the
war now at hand?

Are you afraid of the
bullets that spin
Over the field till your
body they win?
Surely it is not the
courage you lack
Surely you don't want a
prop at your back

Can't you enlist for your

country today?
For long enough has
been the delay

Now keep the flag flying
And go on lads trying
For when the fight is
done
And your freedom you
have won
Be thankful you've
helped in the winning

By Alice Engelbert

E Weil's illustration to a poem by Frank Lewis, *Us Cools From Zoomerzet*

grandfather would not allow German to be spoken in the house.

LJS has managed to track down a descendant of one of the contributors in South Africa. It is engaging with older congregants to ascertain if any are related to the wartime writers.

For the moment, the intention is for the volumes to remain in the synagogue archive. "We have other very precious things among it. But it is also very significant for us as it gives an early glimpse of our 106-year history."

Dr Tim Powell, senior adviser to the National Archives, says the volumes "splendidly" showcase the work of the LJS pupils while affording "a sense of popular perceptions of and reactions to the war among a section of the youth of London."

"The Liberal Jewish Synagogue is to be commended for conserving these volumes and seeking to make them accessible to a wider, contemporary audience."

For the *We Were There Too* site, the volumes have been digitised with magnification option and page-turning software.

In general, the project team reports huge interest in the venture from community members, with roadshows around the capital resulting in a rich seam of memorabilia about Jewish servicemen.

"We have become the *Antiques Roadshow* of the Jewish community," Mr Fell says. "People come to us with bags full of documents."

"We're uploading 200 personal records and hope to have 500 up by summer. Families like it because it is professionally presented and saved."

The material is also becoming an integral part of welfare charities' reminiscence work with elderly clients.

There have been many fascinating finds. "Through contact with Tower Hamlets Library, we have unearthed information on tribunals for exemp-

tion from service. The requests were often submitted by women from large religious families on behalf of their husbands — and were usually declined."

Mr Fell also recounts being contacted by a man living on kibbutz whose hobby is collecting Haggadot. "He claims

to have the only remaining copy of the Haggadah produced for Fort William — the major military base in Calcutta — for Jewish servicemen in the British Forces in Punjab in 1917."

To access the LJS material, go to www.jews4ww.london and click on *The First World War through the eyes of London's Jewish children*. If you have a story you would like to preserve on the site, email contactus@jews4ww.london



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