

LONDON JEWS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR *We Were There Too*

Jews' Free School 1st World War Magazines

In 1900 the Jews' Free School in Bell Lane, London was probably the largest Jewish school in the world, giving an education to 4000+ girls and boys; approximately one third of London's Jewish children were educated there. Therefore it is fair to estimate that one in 3 of the Jewish boys in London who enlisted in the British forces had attended the school.

First published in 1900, the *Magazine* chronicled the day to day life of the school. At that period it was a primary school, with students able to stay on until the age of 13. One should remember that secondary schools for all did not come to the UK until the end of the Second World War. From time to time some of the more comical mistakes included in essays made their way into the *Magazine*. It ran until the outbreak of the Second World War and then appeared as Evacuation News, as the children were evacuated to East Anglia.

In late 1914 and early 1915, the war is mentioned, but it does not appear to be all encompassing. In the 1915 editions there is mention of a Joseph Rosenbloom who at 13 years 9 months, was one of approximately 250,000 underage boys who joined up. In March that year he was noted as missing, but by the March 1916¹ edition Joseph's story is told as he, like many others, had visited the school.

Throughout the war time and immediate post war editions a record was kept, as far as possible of those boys and teachers who volunteered to serve, as well as some obituaries. Those pages, in every edition, give ever lengthening lists of those wounded or killed. The earliest edition, March 1915², explains that at that time there were 275 old boys serving and a full list is given; subsequent editions add to the list. We are very fortunate in these pages to be given the list of wounded, something which is very hard to find.

According to the *Magazine*, published in March 1920³, 1229 members of the school had served. This is borne out by the British Jewry Book of Honour which gives 1210 men and 19 Officers as serving. Indeed this book probably took the evidence from

¹ Vol 3 No 19 P153

² Vol 2 No 16

³ Vol.4 No 31

LONDON JEWS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

We Were There Too

the JFS magazine. The true numbers are probably higher as in December 1918 the Magazine says 'We are convinced there is a large number of old boys who voluntarily enlisted and who have not yet 'reported' themselves. When the 'boys' return we hope that every old Free School lad who has served will pay us a visit and thus ensure that his name is inscribed in our Roll of Honour.'⁴ At that time the School's list had 1158 names. A further problem for recording the exact number who served comes from a decision made by the school, to not include the names of old boys that were conscripted rather than enlisted voluntarily. The edition of March 1916 states 'It should, however, be noted that in the case of unmarried men who joined the Army after March 1st, it would not be appropriate to include their names in our Roll of Honour, as such men are serving under the Compulsion Act.'⁵ As though those forced to take part were not to be valued in the same way.

As time went by, and certainly after the Battle of the Somme in July 1916, the effects of the war began to permeate school life. A Cadet Corps was run which was affiliated to the Jewish Lads Brigade, JLB, which had actually started life as an after school activity, at the School in the 1890s. In July 1916 the Editor states that someone had asked the magazine to advertise the Cadet Corps, but they were refused as 'mothers will be alarmed'⁶. In the same 1916 edition (ibid P184) there are reports of boys leaving school to do war work, which they were legally entitled to do, but was considered 'unfair to the school', as it affected the attendance figures. By March 1918 the Cadet Corps was part of the school and was proudly proclaimed to be 'the first (Corps) to join JLB and a credit to the Battalion'⁷.

By December 1916 the war was affecting school sports. In the local inter school football matches several schools had been compelled to withdraw from the league due to lack of staff and pitches were being used for military purposes. The cricket competition was also cancelled⁸.

By July 1917 the Head Teacher of the Girls School, in her piece about her journey to school which used to be idyllic, describes 'Nothing is changed, yet all is different. An observation balloon, hideous in shape, reminding one of many such on the line of battle, hangs constantly over 'Seats for the wounded soldiers' line

⁴ Vol 3 No 27 P 290

⁵ Vol 3 No 19 P 160

⁶ Vol 3 No 20 P 184

⁷ Vol 3 No 25 P 279

⁸ Vol 3 No 21 P199

LONDON JEWS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR *We Were There Too*

the sides of the common ... and always are seen men without limbs, trying their new crutches made nearby.’⁹ After the war, a School Peace Prize was created in the name of Claude Bowman, a son of the Headteacher, killed in the fighting.

In the December 1917 edition the *Magazine* mentions that some of the children who were ‘sent away from home’¹⁰ or evacuated, to use a more modern explanation, because of Zeppelin raids, were now returning to their homes and school.

In the same edition the magazine celebrates the Balfour Declaration, the letter to Lord Rothschild from Lord Balfour on behalf of the British Government promising to look favourably on a Jewish homeland in Palestine, saying how the children and the school applauded this event. At the same time it carried the warning ‘It is of course common knowledge that there are at least three Jewish views on this subject, that of the Jew who desires to make his national home in Palestine that of the Jew who does not desire to do so, and that of the Jew who in addition does not want any other Jews to do so.’ (ibid P223)

Throughout the war the school also raised funds for charity, from both the children and staff, for War Relief Funds, National Union of Teachers War Aid Fund, Blinded Soldiers Fund as well as Comfort Soldiers Fund. In addition funds were raised for Jewish charities, some in Russia as well as the Palestine Fund¹¹.

The July 1918 edition references the Spanish Flu Epidemic and states that 40% of the children have been affected¹². It is reported that ‘never before’ has the school been so affected by so many absences. Boys were returning from France and asking if the school could help them to be trained as Officers¹³, as many wanted to remain serving in the Army. The Headmaster said that as much as he would like to help, most of them had left school at 14 and that they had therefore not reached the required standard and there was nothing he could do.

At last by December 1918 the *Magazine* talks about a return to normality, ‘One of the earliest signs of the return to peace as it affects the school, is the release

⁹ Vol 3 No 23 P222

¹⁰ Vol 3 No 24 P223

¹¹ Vol 3 No 25 P 257

¹² Vol3 No 26 P 265

¹³ Vol3 No 26 P 266

LONDON JEWS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

We Were There Too

from work of our instructors in metalwork and woodwork'¹⁴. The school is still supporting the Palestine Fund and injured boys are still returning home and visiting the school¹⁵.

These magazines form an amazing social history not just of Jewish involvement in the First World War, but provides a voice for the whole of London during those years. Unfortunately the school does not have a complete set of issues but has been able to let us copy all they have during the First World War years. 1914 is missing as is all of 1919, but it is a wonderful record of what school life was like during those years. What we have should be read and treasured.

Lola Fraser

¹⁴ Vol 3 No 27 P281

¹⁵ Vol 3 No 27 P282