

## Heritage Lottery Fund project brings previously unseen archive into public view. A unique insight into the First World War through the eyes of London's Jewish Children

The Heritage Lottery Fund 'London Jews in the First World War - *We Were There Too*' project team<sup>1</sup> have brought a unique, virtually unseen archive from the 1914-1918 period, belonging to The Liberal Jewish Synagogue<sup>2</sup>, into public view for the first time in a century, on their new website [www.jewsfww.london](http://www.jewsfww.london) .

The primary aim of the HLF project, which has been made possible thanks to National Lottery players, is to uncover, capture and preserve London's First World War Jewish stories on a newly created digital platform. Project Director Alan Fell said: 'This discovery exceeded all our expectations and we feel privileged to be able to provide the vehicle to bring it to public view'.

In the late 1980s, Former Honorary Archivist at The LJS, Sharon Lewison, discovered two bound manuscripts of stories, essays, poetry and drawings compiled by children and young people from their Religion School<sup>3</sup> during 1915 and 1916. After the war, the books had been placed in storage boxes and lost for decades until she found them<sup>4</sup>. Eventually, having been restored, the volumes were returned to secure boxes where they have remained until now<sup>5</sup>.

The books are part of an archive<sup>6</sup>, which, in 2013, the National Archive at Kew had already deemed 'of exceptional importance. ... a crucial source for the history of modern Judaism in London, the United Kingdom and internationally'.

The two rare volumes show how the war influenced Jewish children and young people of the period. Attention is often paid to those who fought or who served in auxiliary medical and military roles but the war had a huge impact on civilians too - and particularly children whose voices are rarely heard.

Children and young people of the period were exposed to regular reports of what was happening in the various theatres of war, published in the press. These, combined with personal letters from relatives serving at the Front or the arrival of dreaded War Office telegrams bringing official news of the loss or injury of loved ones, created a general sense of unease. Some of that unease and their impressions of the war are reflected in the books; opinion pieces, poems and pictures, which show what they witnessed and how they responded to the precarious and dangerous world they were living in. Some of the written pieces reflect on 'what it is to be Jewish' at the time or contain a Jewish reference, making the books of even greater significance as a record of the Jewish experience of time.

Dr Tim Powell, Senior Adviser: Independent Archives, Archives Sector Development, The National Archives said;

'These lively and engaging volumes were created a century ago to showcase work of young people of the synagogue. They do that splendidly while also offering a glimpse into their spiritual sensibilities and religious understanding. Of course, the First World War features prominently in the pages and through the contributions we get 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.'

LJS Senior Rabbi Alexandra Wright, commented: 'Hostilities, whether between warring gangs, adults or countries, inevitably impact on children. These extraordinary volumes reveal the views and thoughts of young LJS Londoners experiencing hostilities, a century ago. 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.'

Stuart Hopley, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund London, said: "It is very rare to get an insight into what children thought, felt and experienced during the First World War, and this archive opens a window into how the war affected the lives of young Jewish people. It is great to see such interesting discoveries coming about thanks to the support National Lottery players<sup>7</sup> have given this project".

To view these unique volumes, in their newly digitised format, visit [www.jewsfww.london](http://www.jewsfww.london) and click on 'The First World War through the eyes of London's Jewish children'. The *We Were There Too* project team continue to search for family stories and hitherto unseen materials relating to the First World War. If you have a story you would like to preserve on the site, email [contactus@jewsfww.london](mailto:contactus@jewsfww.london)

#### Editors Notes

1. London Jews in the First World War - *We Were There Too* is a unique cross community project created to capture, record and preserve the impact, experience and contribution of London's Jewish communities during the First World War era. At the centre of the project is a digital archive and interactive website, [www.jewsfww.london](http://www.jewsfww.london), which will become a permanent record of the lives of Jewish men, women and families, 1914-1919, with details of their military and Home Front activities, ensuring that their stories are not lost for future generations.
2. The LJS was founded in 1911 and its original location was in Hill Street, Park Road. Over the course of the First World War the congregation grew and new premises were sought. In 1925, LJS moved to the current site in St John's Wood.
3. An important part of the LJS concept was a religion school that held sessions for children and young people aged 4-16. During 1915 and 1916, pupils attending the religion school created pieces of work that were collated into books, two of which have survived.
4. During a rebuilding programme at The LJS, Sharon Lewison, then part of the education team, found the books in old boxes on top of a cupboard. They were rehoused in a very damp and unsuitable place in the basement. When Sharon became Honorary Archivist in 2014 she 'rediscovered' them and obtained funding to have them restored.

5. In the last three years, the books have gone through an extensive preservation process and been digitised. However, neither the books nor the digitised versions were open to the public until the '*We Were There Too*' project offered the ideal platform for them to reach the wider world. Visit [www.jewsfww.london](http://www.jewsfww.london) and click on 'The First World War through the eyes of London's Jewish children' to view.
  
6. The full LJS archive consists of sermons, talks, building history, congregation history, theological development as well as the two volumes from the Religion School.
  
7. Heritage Lottery Fund - Thanks to National Lottery players, we invest money to help people across the UK explore, enjoy and protect the heritage they care about - from the archaeology under our feet to the historic parks and buildings we love, from precious memories and collections to rare wildlife. [www.hlf.org.uk](http://www.hlf.org.uk). Follow us on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram and use #HLFsupported.

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Images from the books can be downloaded from [www.jewsfww.london/media-centre-198.php](http://www.jewsfww.london/media-centre-198.php)

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