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'There is much we can learn from children if we look at life through their eyes'

## WWI archive shows children's view of wartime London

Two volumes of drawings, songs, and writing, digitized for the first time, allow observers a glimpse at what kids were feeling during the war — a surprisingly universal message

BY JENNI FRAZER | March 3, 2017, 5:36 am |

**L**ONDON — It was just a routine follow-up call to 120 British synagogues — but in one of those calls, a non-profit organization found buried treasure.

The long-dormant lives of London Jews during World War I are hardly a blip for the majority of Brits. But "[London Jews in the First World War](#)," funded by the UK's Heritage Lottery, aims to highlight Jewish contributions between 1914 and 1918 under the slogan "We Were There Too."

On the website, people can read about the lives of their ancestors, learn what was going on in Austria and Germany — where there were thousands of Jewish combatants — research via the digital archive, and even post family histories.

The site has been expanding since its launch this past summer, so the organization, which also goes by the name We Were There Too, began phoning around synagogues that were around during WWI to see if there was any material that could be digitized and added to the project.

And, as marketing manager Mandy King recounts, "We struck gold."

The [Liberal Jewish Synagogue](#) (LJS) turned out to have a unique archive — two bound volumes of stories, poems and drawings, done by the children of its religion school in 1915 and 1916.

When the synagogue asked the organization if they would like to see the books, the team, says King, was over the moon.

What makes the LJS archive so different is that children's impressions of WWI are a rare find. There are any number of war poets and other literary ventures, but very little survives showing what children thought and cared about a century ago.

The LJS was founded in 1911, and during WWI its premises were located on Hill Street, in central London. It moved to its current site in St. John's Wood in 1925 after the congregation grew too large for Hill Street. But during the war, LJS operated a well-attended religion school for children aged four to 16.

Along with teaching Judaism, the religion school gave its pupils an artistic outlet through writing and drawing assignments some about their lives and how they reacted to the war, some reflecting

the wartime propaganda, and other pieces giving a strong flavor of the attitudes of the day.

It seems that once the creative work was put into the proudly titled bound volumes, the books — only two of which survive — were largely forgotten by LJS. They were boxed up and put in storage when the congregation moved to St. John's Wood.

In the 1980s Sharon Lewison was part of the education team at LJS when she found the children's work tucked away in some old boxes on top of a cupboard during a major renovation. The books were rehoused in a damp basement, and when Sharon became the synagogue's honorary archivist in 2014, she successfully applied for funding to have the volumes restored.

Now they have been extensively preserved and digitized, but only became open to the public when the We Were There Too project offered the ideal platform for the stories, songs and drawings to reach the wider world.

"Hostilities, whether between warring gangs, adults or countries, inevitably impact on children," said senior LJS rabbi, Alexandra Wright. "These extraordinary volumes reveal the views and thoughts of young LJS Londoners experiencing hostilities a century ago.

"We should listen to their voices and recognize 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."

"This discovery exceeded all our expectations and we feel privileged to be able to provide the vehicle to bring it to public view," said Alan Fell, We Were There Too's project director.

The nearly 200 contributions to the bound volumes offer a piquant snapshot of children's lives at the time. Very little is known about the boys and girls who were members of the religion school, and LJS is currently trying to discover if any present-day members of the congregation are descendants of the WWI-era children.

A couple of contributors stand out.

E. Yeatman Woolf is probably Eileen Yeatman Woolf, an extraordinarily talented artist whose work seems to be influenced by William Blake and Aubrey Beardsley. But, sadly, she died at age 20.

And there is the pugnacious 11-year-old poet "J.G. Links," who addressed the German emperor:

*"Kaiser Bill, Kaiser Bill, you must really take a pill.  
For your ways are really getting quite annoying,  
You are clucking like a hen and dismissing all your men,  
And with the whole wide world, you are toying."*

This tough little schoolboy may well have grown up to become Joseph Gluckstein Links, a self-taught art historian who became a world expert on Italian painter Canaletto.

In his 1997 obituary he is recorded as having said, "I have had a very private life and I hope to go on being private for what's left of it." So unfortunately, though the dates of birth match, there is no

conclusive proof that the future Canaletto expert once wrote angry doggerel to the Kaiser.

The opening of the annual report, below a drawing of a group of children lighting a menorah (one of Eileen Yeatman Woolf's sketches), makes clear what is acceptable behavior in the religion school classes.

"There has always been a tendency towards levity which has need to be abolished, though of late there has been improvement," it says. "We by no means infer that it is wrong to laugh, on the contrary it is decidedly right, but we should always put constraint on our liberty of using it."

Leslie Israel, of an unspecified age, writes another poem dedicated to Kaiser Bill, illustrated, as wartime propaganda must have suggested, with German dachshunds — or "sausage dogs" as they were known — together with a rosette of sausages decorating the Kaiser's portrait.

Doris Ries, aided by the ever helpful E. Yeatman Woolf, provides a poem about "Molly" and "Tom" in which Tom gets shot through the head and Molly looks after him.

Sybil Izbicki offers a crying little girl wondering "Why wasn't I born a man?" in front of a poster saying the King and country need 10,000 men.

And there's the recruiting officer duck, drawn by Ernest Baum, telling a would-be recruit — a duckling — that he is too small to join up, to which he responds "I'm a big quack when I'm roused."

Dr. Tim Powell of Britain's National Archive, which says the bound volumes are "of exceptional importance... a crucial source for the history of modern Judaism in London, the United Kingdom and internationally," believes that the work "offers a glimpse into the young people's spiritual sensibilities and religious understanding.

"Of course, WWI 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 work can be viewed [here](#), on the *We Were There Too* website.*