



Digital archive will showcase forgotten heroes

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The importance of keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive is the mantra of survivors, politicians and educationists. But the contribution of London Jewry to the First World War is often overlooked.

Next week, *We Were There Too* - an online educational resource created by the London Jewish Cultural Centre and supported by a GBP408,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund - will be formally launched at the historic Bevis Marks Synagogue in the City.

The digital archive and website will highlight both Jews who fought for their country and Jewish life in the capital during the war period. Thursday's launch will precede a ceremony to remember the 34 Jews killed on the first day of the Somme Offensive, fought against the Germans 100 years ago.

Alan Fell, the project director, hopes that community members will come forward with information about their ancestors' contribution to the war effort. However, the reality is that many families will not have detailed knowledge.

"People can tell the story of their grandfathers. But once it goes further back, it's unlikely they can. And yet Jewish participation in the First World War was massive.

"The whole of Jewish history is overshadowed by the Holocaust. It dominates our psyche and educational projects. This story was untold."

Mr Fell says that London's Jewish population at the time was 200,000, "largely but by no means exclusively concentrated in the East End. They were overwhelmingly tradespeople and self-employed artisans - tailors, cabinet makers - people who worked with their hands. There was also a core of professional people and a very vibrant musical and arts scene." For many Jewish residents, English was not their first language.

And the East End then was not necessarily "a nice place. There was enormous density of population and a need to get out."

It is estimated that 30,000 London Jews served in the war, of whom 2,000 were killed. *We Were There Too* will draw from archive material to create a large and fully searchable

database of Jewish Londoners and their lives.

Research falls into three categories -those with military connections, those on the home front and women. The former has been easier to explore through service records and publications such as The British Jewry Book of Honour.

Edited by the Rev Michael Adler, HM Forces' first Jewish chaplain, and published in 1922, it covers Jewish enlistment, casualties, military honours, Jewish units and Jewish hospitals. People are listed by service and regiment and there are some indexed photos.

An "electronic yahrzeit" facility will allow users to pay their respects to their forebears. "If you know the date of their death, the software will convert that to the Hebrew date," Mr Fell explains.

"That date will be carried to the current year and you will get reminders before and on the day of the yahrzeit."

He adds that not only were the Lottery funders "very excited" about this tool. "All 20 people who have tried it have gone dewey-eyed. This is a feature which makes it uniquely Jewish."

The project stems from the 2014 events marking the centenary of the start of the war, Mr Fell adds. "A group of historians at LJCC recognised that the Jewish involvement in all the 2014 commemorations was virtually nil. We decided we would not miss 2018."

The challenge for him and his team has been creating a record of thousands of people, none of whom are still alive.

A key source of information has been Adrian Andrusier, a 72-year-old Londoner who has built up a large collection of memorabilia from the period.

"Items from [this time of] British Jewish history are very hard to find," he says. "British Jews were swept up in volunteering to fight as Britain had become their haven after fleeing Eastern Europe. Jews in many ways became more British than the Brits with a very strong concept of loyalty."

He hopes the project will enable the current generation to learn more about their background. "It's fundamental for us to know what happened to our parents and grandparents.

"We've been here for a long time in Britain and there are those who still talk about us as foreigners. So we need to know how to present our history and how we belong here." In addition, "the British intervention in the First World War is something we can be proud of because it led to Palestine and Israel".

He points out that German Jews were also on the battlefield, "100 per cent committed to their country if not to the antisemitic Kaiser". Russian Jews also fought for the Tsar, "who they hated because of the pogroms".

Among early contributors to We Were There Too is Alan Tyler, a 92-year-old Wimbledon Synagogue member, whose father Bertram finished the war as a military governor in Syria. "He joined up in India in 1914 with the cavalry. He was transferred to France and then on to Palestine and ended up as acting major in Homs [western Syria].

"He was also looking after the Armenians because a lot of them were dispersed in Syria after the massacres. He helped the community a lot."

Mr Tyler - who himself served as a naval officer and whose son was in the SAS - adds that

among his father's wartime memories was a story about a Syrian man's donkey being knocked over a cliff by a British military truck.

"He implored my father to help 'in the name of Jesus Christ', who the local said he so closely resembled."

But this was one of just a small number of stories passed on, although Mr Tyler did inherit a ceremonial sword monogrammed with the initials of King Edward VII. "You never think about asking your father these things."

We Were There Too is a legacy project for LJCC, which closed its Ivy House premises in Golders Green last year following the merger with the JW3 community centre. The Lottery money has allowed LJCC to recruit a team of five and it is now looking to add some young volunteers, building on the link with strategic partner JLGB. More than 500 JLGB members died in service.

The JC's archive between 1914-18 is also being made freely available as part of the project.

Some 800 stories have already been collated, although Mr Fell concedes that many are "very patchy. We want it to be a website that tells stories and loads you up on your family history," he says.

"By Armistice Day 2018, the Jews will be there in the story big time".

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