

Community marks Somme centenary at Bevis Marks

Unique opportunity to remember those who fought and died for Britain in the First World War.

BY JENNI FRAZER | July 1, 2016, 2:21 pm |

They died exactly a century ago — and it is doubtful if any present knew who they were.

But as the names of the 34 young Jewish men who had died on the first day of the Battle of the Somme — a battle which raged for four months and eventually claimed more than a million lives — rang out in a candlelit Bevis Marks Synagogue, there were tears; and more tears as the Last Post echoed through the congregation.

For London's Jews this was a unique opportunity to remember those from this community who fought and died for Britain in the First World War. And since there are no longer living survivors of that conflict, it was also an occasion to mourn the fallen, and, perhaps, apply those lessons to the rapidly approaching situation of the Second World War.

We Remember Them was an emotional event put together by the “We Were There Too” team, a group of volunteers and historians who have received a grant from the Heritage Lottery to create a permanent digital record of London Jewish lives during the First World War.

In a densely packed evening opened — ironically — by two American rabbis, Bevis Marks' Rabbi Shalom Morris and the minister of the S&P community, Rabbi Joseph Dweck — the British Jewish contribution to the armed forces of 1914-18 was movingly described in prose and poetry. Fifty-five thousand Jews enlisted in the armed forces, of whom an estimated 2,500 were killed in action.

A serving British officer, who cannot be identified, took part in the commemoration, as did Rabbi Danny Rich, Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner, Lord Sterling, and representatives of Ajex and the Jewish Lads' and Girls' Brigade.

Five hundred and thirty-five JLB members died in the First World War, many of them probably just teenagers. Their present-day counterparts took part in the Bevis Marks event, carrying standards and reading First World War poetry. Ajex, the congregation were reminded, had been created in 1928 with the initial mission of looking after the families of those who had died 10 years and more earlier.

Children in the congregation, rapt with attention, listened to details of the origins of the war and of

the men and women who gave their lives for their country.. The digital project is a unique way of putting family stories on-line, preserving letters, anecdotes, and photographs. Alan Fell, the We Were There Too project director, said it was a largely untold story which it was hoped would unfold over the next months as more information comes to light.

“Our own sons and daughters were the heroes and heroines of the Great War,” said Rabbi Dweck. As he spoke, it was easy to conjure up the ghosts of the young men, resplendent in their new uniforms, sitting with their fathers in the well of Bevis Marks for one last Shabbat service before going off to war, as their mothers gazed proudly and anxiously from the ladies’ gallery.