
Jewish involvement in WWI commemorations had been 'virtually nil'

UK lottery money funds digital memorial to British Jewry's WWI fallen

Groundbreaking website sheds new light on the 30,000 Jewish casualties of the Great War, and the civilian community that lost them

BY JENNI FRAZER | July 9, 2016, 8:53 am |

LONDON — Their names are scarcely known these days, often not even by their descendants. But an extraordinary project launched this week marking the centenary of the Battle of the Somme — one of the defining battles of World War I — aims to put that right.

For decades the contribution of those British Jews, both men and women, who fought in the 1914-18 conflict has been largely ignored or forgotten, with more emphasis put on the legacy of the Holocaust. However, two years ago, as Britain began to mark the centenary of the start of WWI, a group of historians at the London Jewish Cultural Centre (LJCC) realized that the Jewish involvement in the commemorations had been “virtually nil.”

Alan Fell, Mandy King and Paula Kitching, all staffers at the LJCC, knew that an estimated 30,000 Jews had served in WWI, but the information was sparse and diffuse. The historians all had vast experience in assembling Holocaust-era educational material. Now the challenge was, could they do the same for WWI?

“The idea grew on paper,” Fell told The Times of Israel. “We knew the timing was right in terms of securing funding. We heard that the Heritage Lottery was interested in funding projects which would focus on WWI, ethnic communities, and a digital platform.”

The team took their “Holocaust Explained” material to the Heritage Lottery, which was impressed, and gave them a grant of £400,000 to create the project [We Were There Too](#), a multi-level website which aims to tell the stories of London Jews who lived during WWI, both civilians and combatants.

The website has a variety of functions. People are encouraged to upload their personal family histories, with pictures where possible. The team has also successfully persuaded many archives not previously open to the public to allow their material to be digitized and put online. These records include the British Jewry Roll of Honour, the 1914-18 Jewish Chronicle archives, and Judaica material from the Bishopsgate Institute, an important London city archive.

Relevant issues of Kelly's Directory, a trade and business directory created in Victorian times and used by generations of reporters to track people and addresses, will also go online, helping to build up the picture of life for London Jews during the war.

And there will be an “electronic *yahrzeit*” function which for a one-off payment will allow users to set up — often for the first time — a virtual candle and memorial prayer for their family members who died in battle.

“If you know the date of their death,” Alan Fell explained, “the software converts that to the Hebrew date and you will get a reminder both before, and on the day of, the *yahrzeit*.”

A window into personal family history

The website is also intended to help people trace their families and find out more about what their antecedents were doing during WWI. Special in-depth “history windows” give intriguing snapshots of subjects such as Jewish life in the German and Austrian forces — an estimated 100,000 Jews served under the Kaiser during the war — or pictures of the East End’s famed Petticoat Lane market, where it was boasted you could buy “anything from a bootlace to a building.”

There will be a particular tie-in with the Jewish Lads’ and Girls’ Brigade (JLGB), created in 1895 by Colonel Albert E. W. Goldsmid, a British Jewish army officer who wanted to provide activities for children of the poor Jewish immigrants who had flooded into the UK, predominantly from Eastern Europe.

On February 16, 1895, the first company of boys was enrolled in what was then the Jewish Lads’ Brigade. During the course of WWI, 535 JLB members — often drummer boys or messengers — died in battle. The present-day JLGB members will receive credits for the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme for research they do on their WWI counterparts.

Already, people’s personal stories are being put on to the site. One “living bridge” is the former naval lieutenant commander Alan Tyler, now 92 and living in southwest London. Tyler’s father, Bertram Maurice Cohen Tyler, was — like a number of British Jews — already involved in the military before the outbreak of the war.

As his son recalls, “My father had joined the 4th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers (the cyclists corps) in 1906, the predecessor of the Territorial Army. He was a lieutenant in those forces and served from 1906 to 1914.”

Cohen Tyler had resigned his commission before the outbreak of the war because he and his two brothers, William and Douglas, all the grandsons of a rabbi, Manasseh Cohen, were running the family firm, importing textiles from the Far East. In August 1914, Bertram was in India and — aged 28 — volunteered.

“He joined up,” says Tyler, “as part of the 5th Indian Cavalry. But when he got to France with his regiment there was no need for the cavalry, so he was transferred to the Supply and Transport Regiment.”

Cohen Tyler was stationed in Marseilles “dealing with reinforcements and supplies coming in from the Mediterranean and the Far East. Then he transferred to the Egyptian Expeditionary Force in 1917 and was there during the invasion of Palestine. At the end of 1918 he was appointed military governor of Homs, in Syria.”

In Homs, says Alan Tyler, his father was essentially an administrator.

“He was the recipient of endless letters, all written by the local public letter-writer, asking for compensation from the British government for various things. One man’s donkey was knocked over the cliff by a British army truck. My father received a letter asking for compensation ‘in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom your honor so closely resembles.’”

Like Cohen Tyler, Frank de Passe was in the military before the war. He was commissioned into the Royal Horse Artillery in 1906 and became aide to the Chief of Staff of the British Army in India. De Passe landed at Marseilles on October 2, 1914, and was killed on the western front just one month later, becoming the first member of the Jewish community to be awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery in action.

One London man, Jeremy Jacobs, has been involved in researching his family for the website together with his cousin. Their grandfathers were among five brothers — the Jacobs boys — all of whom served in the forces and survived the war. Jeremy’s grandfather, Jack, was the eldest and served in the Royal Army Medical Corps. His son was born in 1916 while he was on leave.

Samuel Jacobs joined the King’s Royal Rifles in 1916, but was medically discharged in 1917. Myer Jacobs was 27 when he joined up, serving in the early Royal Air Force. Benjamin was a sapper in the Royal Engineers and was 21 when war broke out. And Maurice was a gunner in the Royal Garrison Artillery, emigrating to America after the war.

A British Jewry united through memory

It wasn't only men who were involved in the war. One of the best-known names in Anglo Jewry, Florence Greenberg, became famous as a cookery writer and adviser to the Ministry of Food during World War II. Generations of British Jewish homes grew up on the Florence Greenberg cookbook.

But in WWI the young Florence Oppenheimer, as she then was, served as a VAD, or nursing auxiliary. As a young nurse she kept a wry diary, from which this is an extract:

"26th July 1915... The very atmosphere makes people very sentimental. What with moonlight nights and nothing to occupy one, even staid and steady men seem to go a little bit mad. After chatting for a couple of days to an apparently quite serious Doctor, he was foolish enough to propose to me this afternoon. I wanted to laugh at him, however he really seemed in earnest, so I thought the best way out of the difficulty was to tell him my religion, in any case that hurt his feelings the least. I cannot think what made him do it, I certainly had not encouraged him at all. He is a Roman Catholic, his name is Brenner and he comes from Newcastle, Oh me: it is a funny world."

On June 30, London Jews came together to commemorate the Jewish contribution to WWI in a special cross-denominational service at Bevis Marks, Britain's oldest synagogue, built in 1701.

At the front of the candlelit synagogue is the roped-off seat belonging to the Victorian philanthropist, Sir Moses Montefiore. Young British Jews serving in today's armed forces read out the names of 34 young men who had died on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. It was not hard to conjure up the ghosts of the young men who had, perhaps, taken part in one last Shabbat service before going off to war.

And many of the congregation, old and young, were in tears, mourning the contribution of the young men they never knew. But now there is a new determination to remember them and create a permanent record for future generations.

"The website," says Alan Fell, "will help remind us all — we were there, too."

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